Language, Land and Belonging

Poetic Inquiries

Edited by
Natalie Honein
and
Margaret McKeon

Series in Literary Studies

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Foreword

John J. Guiney Yallop

Silence is a Death

Silence is a death
I will not have.

Words are my sword
into the night.

I crawl into
Earth's uterus.

Heat releases colonial memories
from my body.

Sweat is a cleansing gift
from the Ancient Ones.

Outside the Lodge,
my ancestors welcome me back

to who I am.

I Didn't Notice

I didn't notice
my mother's dark skin
nor the skin her sisters wore,
gifts from their mother, my grandmother.

While I played cowboys and Indians
with the other boys,
our own bodies a playground,
I didn't notice that I was one of them.

Words not spoken
or not heard.
Voices silent
or ignored.
Were we ever
who we were?

Now, language is my playground.
I (re)claim identities
and communities
I didn't know I had.

Introduction

Margaret McKeon and Natalie Honein

In October 2019, the Seventh International Symposium on Poetic Inquiry (ISPI) was held in Halifax, Nova Scotia (also known as Mi'kma'ki[1]) in Canada. Participants were invited to perform, present, and create poetry on the theme of Indigenous languages, based on the United Nations Declaration of 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages. The symposium gave participants an opportunity to reflect on the Indigenous languages of the lands where they live or have lived, and their relationships to those Indigenous peoples and languages. Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants inquired into their relationships to ancestral languages and lands, with Indigenous participants speaking of the reparative importance of their languages and cultures in the face of ongoing colonial violence. As with every previous ISPI, in 2019, there were presenters from various ranks and fields of academia and from outside academia—scholars, professors, doctoral students, artists, activists, performers, poets, and authors—coming from the United States, Canada, South Africa, Lebanon, and New Zealand.

This book, *Language, Land and Belonging*: *Poetic Inquiries,* takes up themes emergent from the 2019 symposium and widens the scope to include, more generally, languages, lands, and belongings. Situated in diverse global contexts, the contributing authors in this book reflect on many aspects of relational, ancestral, and community repair through poetic inquiry (Faulkner, 2009; Prendergast et al., 2009)—itself a relational research practice concerned with the self and self-in-relation (Graveline, 1998). They offer relational understandings of, and articulate obligations for, their environment and communities. Their submissions are grouped into the overlapping categories of language, land, and belonging. Each of the (overlapping) relational repairs the authors convey is an affirmation of their relationships and their responsibilities to honor the connectivities that serve their lives. Through the creativity of writing, each author brings us, as readers, into their world of learning and growth, and offers this same possibility to us through an experience of their poetic inquiry.

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[1] The traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq.

Colonialism and Relational Repair

This publication is very timely as the year 2022 began the United Nations International Decade of Indigenous Languages, which "aims at ensuring Indigenous peoples' right to preserve, revitalize and promote their languages" (UNESCO, 2021, para. 3), and endeavors to "help promote and protect Indigenous languages and improve the lives of those who speak them" (International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032, 2022).

The international need to preserve, revitalize, and promote Indigenous languages is necessarily entwined with global legacies of colonial violence. Cree scholar Dwayne Donald (2021) describes colonialism as an ongoing process of denying relationships and relational responsibilities. For Indigenous peoples, but also for settler and other diasporic peoples, relational violations include severing relationships with languages, lands, and cultural and community origins (belongings). Colonialism is a system of violence based on claims of superiority that manifest in the denial of relationships and relational obligations. It stands in contrast to a relational way of being. Cree scholar Shawn Wilson (2008) describes relationality as a common Indigenous understanding that reality is composed of relationships and that being ethical is being accountable to these relationships.

Colonialism "erases the pasts of its victims" (Ifowod, 2013, p. ix). It strives to foreclose on Indigenous peoples' futures by severing their perseverance and presence as rightful stewards of their traditional territories. The erasing of Indigenous peoples' connections to their territories is needed for colonial powers to generate wealth and power, and to make way for prosperous settler communities (Absolon, 2016).

Colonialism also requires the erasure of the pre-colonial pasts of settlers and, for many, their relationships with their original cultures and lands. A striking early 20th-century example in the United States was the "Melting Pot" as David Dean (2018) describes,

> Upon graduation from the Ford Motor Company's Americanization program, tens of thousands of European immigrant employees would walk into this large "Melting Pot" wearing their traditional ethnic attire, their teachers would stir the pot with large oars, and they would change into suits, grab American flags and walk out of the pot "Americanized." (fig. 10)

"Schooling for belonging" in colonial societies and within colonizing societies is largely schooling into foundational myths of colonial superiority. These myths manifest variously as racial, moral, cultural, linguistic, and epistemic

superiority (Santos, 2014; Smith, 2012) and they enforce denial of pre-colonial values and relationships for all. For all peoples, including Indigenous and settler peoples, reclaiming origins and origin stories can disrupt colonial myths, which are the foundations of colonial violence.

Entrenched colonial superiority continues to impact Indigenous communities. Ktunaxa scholar Michele Sam (2019) explains how "since contact, nation-state-sanctioned research, policy, and practice has erased Indigenous Peoples' original ontologies and cosmologies" (p. 3). This enduring legacy stems from "a premise of colonialism… that Indigenous Peoples' systems were once inferior to… Eurocentric systems and now to mainstream Western ones" (p. 3). In Canada, the terms "reconciliation" and "resurgence" are used to describe relational recovery and renewal. Asch et al. (2018) describe an interconnection between transformative reconciliation, Indigenous resurgence, and relationship with land, whereby

> Resurgence refers to practices of Indigenous self-determination and cultural renewal. Reconciliation refers to practices of reconciliation between Indigenous and settler nations as well as efforts to strengthen the relationship between Indigenous and settler peoples with the living earth and making that relationship the basis for both resurgence and Indigenous-settler reconciliation. (p. i)

As several authors in this volume show, the protection, revitalization, and promotion of Indigenous languages is vital to notions of reconciliation and resurgence. So too, is the recovery of relationship with the living earth foundational to relational repair between and among human communities. Blackfoot scholar Leroy Little Bear (2000) explains the relational understandings and obligations coded into Indigenous languages:

> Language embodies the way a society thinks. Through learning and speaking a particular language, an individual absorbs the collective thought processes of a people. Aboriginal languages are, for the most part, verb-rich languages that are process- or action-oriented. They are generally aimed at describing "happenings" rather than objects. The languages of Aboriginal peoples allow for the transcendence of boundaries. For example, the categorizing process in many Aboriginal languages does not make use of the dichotomies either/or, black/white, saint/sinner. There is no animate/inanimate dichotomy. Everything is more or less animate. Consequently, Aboriginal languages allow for talking to trees and rocks, an allowance not accorded in English. If everything is animate, then everything has spirit and knowledge. If

> everything has spirit and knowledge, then all are like me. If all are like me, then all are my relations. (p. 2-3)

Relational repair is rooted in personal and communal transformations (Meyer, 2008). Inspired by scholars like Little Bear (2000) and by the United Nations International Year of Indigenous Languages, the authors in this book reflect on many aspects of relational, ancestral, and community repair through poetic inquiry. As a research practice concerned with particularity, complexity, and transformations, poetic inquiry offers an important window into this vital work.

Poetic Inquiry

The twenty-three testimonies and journeys in this book come from across geographical borders, each identifying with one or multiple languages, lands, and cultures. At the heart of each offering is poetic inquiry. Poetic inquiry is a method of study that incorporates poetry into academic research in the social sciences. This method has existed for many decades, but was formalized into a research community during the first ISPI in 2007, and in the multiple publications that have since materialized (see lists of ISPI meetings and publications below) (Faulkner, 2009; Prendergast & Leggo, 2007; Prendergast et al., 2009). It is a method of investigation that invites us, as inquirers, to more closely examine and engage with the knowledge we seek while communicating and conducting research. It is a continual process of questioning, of welcoming, of awareness. Poetic inquiry makes qualitative research data more visceral and evocative by helping us as a community of inquirers identify what may have been pushed to the periphery of our minds. With time, poetic inquiry enables the seeker to reach the essence of what they, or their participants, may be trying to access; or as Mary Weems (2017) expressed, poetic inquiry invites speaking from "the womb in one's mind." Such depth of inquiry facilitates exploring what is left unexplored and unvoiced. And thus, it allows space for the voice that refuses to stay quiet; the soft voice of resistance. As a research method, poetic inquiry is an act of defiance—a way to learn to unlearn. It can produce research that is unambiguous, transparent, sometimes controversial, and often powerful. Kedrick James (2017) asserts that,

> The further an inquiry goes, the more surprises we encounter; compare this to other research practices, which might be expected to do the opposite, to become predictable. Prediction is foretelling, and we cannot entirely expel the notion that if we want to remain open to discovery in any particular field, the language we use to communicate and investigate a subject might have a big influence in the knowledge we generate about it. If the language we use in our work is unduly

> generic and predictable, it might just be that our research will also turn out to be generic and predictable. (p. 23)

Along the way, poetic inquiry reinvents the author and shapes their voice. The narrative voice of a poetic inquirer is not only about what is out there, but about revealing the process of how to engage with relationships, places, and ideas on a personal level, and how the mind, body, and spirit process experience. This is done by showing the reader the author's struggle, the method, the pain, and the joy that got them there during the research. In this sense, poetic inquiry lures in the reader, disturbs the traditional experience of reader-receiver/reader-observer, and brings the reader in to engage with the text and the experience. Not only does it allow the author to find their voice, but poetic inquiry also teaches us, as readers, to listen. It allows the reader to test the limits of their empathy, especially when reading other works that they may not agree with. At the core of poetic inquiry is the necessity to breathe and take the time to look carefully, to be able to truly see.

As scholars navigating the space between insiders and outsiders on the margins of one or another community, poetic inquiry informs our teaching and our learning. As teachers and guides, we need to ask ourselves, how can we teach our students, and others, to find their voice, if we haven't yet found our own? And how can we make the time to find our voice when the tensions between creative practice and critical discourse continue to be high. If we teach without doing our own research/writing/poetry, we deprive ourselves of something deeper, more meaningful, and, in the process, we deprive our students. Poetic inquiry helps us to make space for pedagogical transformations in academia and beyond. At the heart of merging poetry with scholarship, we need to do as Leggo (2016) generously did—"seek to see with the eyes of the heart and to hear with the ears of the heart" (p. 351).

Language, Land, and Belonging

Within the pages of this book, poetic inquiry enables the authors, situated in diverse global contexts, to reaffirm relationships and examine the intersectionality of their languages, their identities, and their sense of belonging. They do this through family stories and through discourses of belonging and relational obligation that tie them to a place, a land, a genealogy. Through stories of shared generational pain and suffering, poetic inquiry helps to honor languages and histories taken for granted; it allows looking back in order to reexamine, redefine, comprehend a past, to make sense of the present and its shortcomings, and to reimagine a different future. This process allows us, as inquirers and readers, moments of pause to examine and re/connect with the difficult and reparative stories that support our existence in the world, and to

find personal meaning behind our longing to belong and contribute to a land, a place, a language, and a people.

This collection stems from an initial invitation for authors to reflect on the importance of honoring, revitalizing, and promoting Indigenous languages. In response, some authors reflect, each from their own location, on their relationships with Indigenous languages, lands, and experiences. Other authors in this book take up broader themes of relational repair to inquire into their ancestries, their ancestral languages, and their relationship to our vibrant living earth. Situated in North America, Potawatomi ecologist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2014) describes the prophecy of the Seventh Fire as offering guidance for these times. Our time now was forecasted as a time when both Indigenous peoples and newcomers would need to re-walk the roads of our ancestors to find the teachings they have left to guide our way into the future. She explains, "It is the wisdom that we reclaim that will allow us to renew the world" (Kimmerer, 2014). This is the work of this book. It is the work of reclaiming, through poetic inquiry, wisdoms of language, land, and belonging.

We offer the poems and essays in the book through three overlapping themes. Sitting at the intersections of the personal and the global, under **Language**, authors inquire variously into relationships of loss, repair, and renewal of ancestral and Indigenous languages. Authors meditate on the relationship between languages and identity, sovereignty, intergenerational continuity, and connection to land and place. Indigenous and ancestral languages can be a reparative balm on wounds of colonial violence and other relational traumas. In **Land**, through stories, cultural teachings, and poetic creativity, authors situate themselves in relationship to particular lands and to the more-than-human, and consider the responsibilities that come from these relationships. Some important themes addressed include honoring Indigenous territories, reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and setters, colonial histories, and honoring spirits of the land and ancestral relationships with land. In this section, we are reminded that lands flow through voice, language, and responsibilities. Finally, in **Belonging**, authors consider the complex gifts and burdens of (un)belonging to family, community, culture and place. Authors here trace ancestral roots and traumas, confront entrenched racism, and invoke speculative fiction as a way to confront that which "is" and call forward more just visions of what could be.

As editors, we invite you to read this book with an open mind and an open heart, allowing yourself to feel, to question, to imagine, and to be provoked into action.

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Robert Nellis (Red Deer Polytechnique) lives in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada with one human and two more-than-human family members. He commutes to Red Deer Polytechnic, 2 to 2 ½ hours south (depending on traffic), where he teaches in the Teacher Education program. He has done so since 2009 and completely loves the work—feeling thrilled and honored to be some small part of the stories of the student-colleagues with whom he is privileged to share the journey. He also loves being a small part of the Poetic Inquiry movement. He first attended the International Symposium on Poetic Inquiry at Bowling Green, Ohio, USA in 2017.

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Will Morin is a multi-disciplined educator, artist and cultural consultant. He is of Ojibway / Scottish / French Canadian ancestry, a citizen of the Michipicoten Anishinaabek First Nation. Will works in Northern Ontario, Canada, offering courses in Indigenous Studies at Laurentian University. He lives with his Anishinaabe-Kwe ndikwemi / life partner, Robin, and their four children.

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