

## The Sacred Nature of Language: Unwritten and Being Written

### John Hupfield's *Becoming Unwritten*<sup>1</sup>

In *Living Our Language: Ojibwe Tales & Oral Histories*, editor Anton Treuer recounts an interview with *Anishinaabe* storyteller and elder Joe Auginaush.<sup>2</sup> In it, he asks Auginaush about the impact of the potential loss of *Anishinaabemowin*, the traditional language of the *Anishinaabeg*, to which he responded:

*"Haa, ganabaj giwanitoomin," ikidong. "Anishinaabe-izhichigeng giwanitoomin." Gaawin ganabaj-i'iw anishinaabemowin geyaabi ayaamagad. Mii go giinawind eta go; giwanishinimin, akina gegoo giwanitoomin. Anishinaabe-izhichigewinan miinawaa go anishinaabe gaa-pi-izhichigewaad mewinzha, geyaabi imaa ayaamagad. Like I heard one old gentleman say, "We're not losing our language, the language is losing us."*

Treuer translates the passage as:

"Well, maybe we are losing it," they say. "We are losing the Indian culture." But maybe not – the Indian language is still here. It is only us: we are lost, and [therefore] losing everything. Indian traditions and what the Indian came to do long ago, it's still there. Like I heard one old gentleman say, "We're not losing our language, the language is losing us." (156-57)

As Treuer claims in creating his book after being "haunted and driven" by these words, "[a] battle now rages to keep Ojibwe alive. At stake is the future of not only the language, but the knowledge contained within the language, the unique Ojibwe worldview and way of thinking, the Anishinaabe connection to the past, to the earth, and to the future" (5).

The sentiment and words of Auginaush and Treuer are not new. They exist in many spaces and places, from board rooms to living rooms across the Anishinaabeg nation. Nor are these two important activists and advocates incorrect.<sup>3</sup> *Anishinaabemowin* is a crucial part of who we are as a people; it contains vital cultural and epistemological elements and teachings central to who we are as a people. At the same time, and due predominantly due to a long and enduring history of colonialism in the Americas,<sup>4</sup> the number of speakers is reducing with each generation.<sup>5</sup> And, though there are dedicated and skilled individuals fighting to stem the tide,<sup>6</sup> there is a question of whether or not *Anishinaabemowin* will continue to be spoken in the future.

At stake here is no less than the future, for there is perhaps no issue more important to human survival than language. Perception and expression, the building blocks of language, are forces so woven into our everyday lives most don't even think about how it frames things

such as “worldview.” But they do, particularly when done collectively and in collaboration. This is not to ignore listening either, a crucial and often forgotten communicative process and practice. As Indigenous cultures across the world and advocates of issues like global warming remind us: animals, plants, and spirits communicate messages all the time and should be listened to as well. With all due respect to Gayatri Spivak, entities do “speak” and not solely in a whisper.

Language is simply a force all around us. And, as if one was standing in a river of language, we participate with and are immersed in it all the time; forces influence us as well as are influenced by us. These interventions, of course, can be respectful or responsible or harmful or dangerous or sometimes all of these: it is virtually always a matter of agency. In the end, language is what ultimately signifies presence for entities in the universe, containing evidence of histories of experiences, relationships, and knowledges even in the tiniest syntax and semantics of its makeup. One would be hard pressed to imagine a universe without language; without it there would be absence.

In a potential future including *Anishinaabeg* cultural change and *Anishinaabemowin* language loss, the question of whether a meaningful and sustainable *Anishinaabe* life is available is the subject of John Hupfield’s new media creation *Becoming Unwritten*. Hupfield, an *Anishinaabe* visual and spoken word artist from Wasauksing First Nation, gives no easy answers in this important contribution – choosing to suggest rather than prescribe, provoke instead of provide. Through a mixture of stop-frame animation, digital images and video, and an overwhelming set of sounds that send the viewer/listener into intimate ceremonial locations and aesthetics, *Becoming Unwritten* is a statement not sure to be forgotten, both now and into the future.

*Becoming Unwritten* is a rich collection of *Anishinaabemowin* phrases interspersed with active images and scenes of play and interaction with the universe. Beginning with a traditional acknowledgement of the four sacred directions (establishing a sense of protocol and ceremony from the outset), the piece’s opening scenes – of the filmmaker’s walking shadow crunching new snow – instill mobility, a trope that runs throughout the piece. As remarked in Hupfield’s artist statement, the work is “an exploration of loss and gain, of taking away and of picking up, can we ever really reclaim the things lost to us before being born into this world?” Considering the fact that the next twenty lines are in *Anishinaabemowin* and all of the accompanying scenes are about the complex processes of language, one cannot help

but see the advocacy and activism in Hupfield's message: life is a journey, and this journey is through language.

The centrality of language to life is the central message found in *Becoming Unwritten*, a point made in the title itself. We are born into language; it both precedes and inherits us. We also inherit language, and in turn forge a relationship with the structures and ideologies that come with it. We are written before we even arrive on this earth, but we also write ourselves into creation as we live. Hopefully, this process is meaningful and freeing, but as shown in the work of theorists such as Ferdinand de Saussure and Michel Foucault, discourse simply doesn't often work that way. For instance: senses of gender, sexuality, economy, selfhood, and community accompany language. One only has to reflect on the nature of English to demonstrate this.

Perhaps for this reason Hupfield is interested specifically in *Anishinaabeg* tradition, using predominantly *Anishinaabemowin* phrases to frame his message. All use derivatives of the animate verb *daapin*, to "take." They are also often in the directive command form *daapinan*, such as the initial sentence: *Daapinan ezhi-maadizimgak ki* ("Take the life of the land"). Here however, language is shown to be dynamic and multi-layered, both inspiring and accompanying image and sound – languages unto themselves. For as Hupfield shows it is not simply words themselves that tell the story, but a cacophony of languages that are one.

In this, Hupfield's word choice is equally dynamic. To "take" something is to engage with the universe, to "take" is to be a part of the processes of creation and destruction. It presumes an often and immediate "use," which can be productive and/or harmful, deep and/or artificial, enduring and/or fleeting. For Hupfield, to "take" includes multiple engagements with the universe at the same time, a palimpsest of layered languages including both human and other expressions: his voice, crackling fire, falling snow, and an intervening pool of black plastic beads that almost fill the complete frame.

This is brilliantly displayed in what we next hear and see, *Daapinan ezhi-maadiziimgak noodin* ("take the life of the wind") and more *Anishinaabemowin* phrases instructing to "take" from animals, fire, water, and air, with several fluid and active accompanying bead illustrations. If the processes of modernity – plastic beads – are humanity's introduction to the world, they are also part of language. They therefore must, deftly demonstrated by Hupfield's artistic eye, take part in the language of the universe too, be both manipulated to listen and learn, partake and honour, creation.

To “take” something also involves a diversity of parts that encompass experiences of Indigenous peoples. To live we have always “taken” from the earth and each other, usually sustainably but not always, building a millennia of histories, nations, and experiences on these territories. We have also had things taken from us: our cultures, communities, and even our children. Some would even add (particularly over the past five hundred years) our languages and our futures. At the same time we have “taken” as well. We use English, Christianity, and technology to assert our continued presence in places where we still reside. We also look through those things (just as Hupfield opens the pool of black beads to look at the falling snow) to see the world and interact with it as we always have.

Language signifies this “taking” in a multitude of ways, a point provoked in Hupfield’s use of syllabic writing, which was both “invented” by missionaries but used by Indigenous peoples to interact with their language in new ways. Writing, of course, was not invented by Europeans but is something Indigenous peoples have always done, signified best by their relationships with trees, or as the artist states: *Daapin ezhi-maadiziwaad mtigook* (“take the life of the trees”). These interactions, of course, have taken a recent, destructive turn – both by Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples – as the forces of capitalism force a “taking” of a different kind.

*Daapinan ezhi-maadiziwaad bmaadizijig* (“Take the life of a people”), the statement that appears approximately half way through *Becoming Unwritten*, takes the piece in a radical new direction. No longer is the piece signifying where to “take” teachings of history and living from but how to find and assert life itself. This is signified by the flight of an eagle and a heartbeat – forces of power, freedom, and beauty. It is here where Hupfield gets his most prescriptive, invoking *naadiziwin* (“culture”), *mishkiki* (“medicines”), *zhidtwoawinan* (“ceremonies”) for *Anishinaabe bimaadiziwin* (“the Anishinaabe good and balanced life”). Still, Hupfield remains somewhat ambiguous in how these practices are to sought, with a blend of traditional possibilities placed on an urban background, unjudgingly and evident. All of these things, as shown in a scene signified with silver beads (interestingly rather than black, denoting a reflective nature), can have a sacred relationship with *giizis* (a word that means both “moon” and “sun”).

The last third of *Becoming Unwritten* is the beauty of life itself, demonstrated in all of its contradictory complexity and diversity. In it lies the infinite possibilities evident in Indigeneity and *Anishinaabe* experience today; streets, highways, churches, *Anishinaabemowin* with English chattering in the background, and much more. At the same time an animate

plethora of *manitous* (“spirits”) and ancestors are around, sometimes hidden in the clouds and the buildings, but nonetheless there. Presence is found in the presents of creation. As Hupfield beautifully puts it:

*Daapinan ezhi-maadizimgak ki. Nskanan kino gego eteg gaa-zhidchigaadeg kiing.*

(“Take the life of the land. Open it to all of creation.”)

*Daapinan ezhi-maadiziwaad bmaadizijig. Nsakshim miinwaa boodaadan enji bogonesid de’eng.*

(“Take the life of the people. Open them up and breathe into the hole that’s in their hearts.”)

*Daapinan naadiziwin. Nsakanan miinwaa mnaadendan.*

(“Take the life of a culture. Open it up and let it be celebrated.”)

*Daapinan ezhi-maadizimgak nwewin. Nsakanan gda-twaganan miinwaa noondan.*

(“Take the life of the language. Open your ears and let it be heard.”)

It is here, in living life in all of its messiness, that *Anishinaabeg* presence is asserted, spoken, written. In expressive acts (denoted through mobility) that incorporate all parts of the universe, good and bad, language both unwrites and writes selfhood, community, creation. Ending in a traditional song, perhaps the most important “publication” of presence Indigenous people have and still have, *Becoming Unwritten* shows that *Anishinaabeg* life will continue. No matter the constant beliefs that we are living in a time of loss, the many facets of language are very much present, and it is these that make our lives as rich as they have ever been. In language we have the ability to both unwrite discourses of endings and loss and write ourselves into creation. As Hupfield himself demonstrates in joining in with the song, the choice is to take part or allow silence to envelope and erase *Anishinaabeg* presence from existence.

Facing a grim future, where our traditional languages and ways of life could be seen as lost forever, it would be easy to acquiesce to endings, succumb to view that with the loss of language goes a way of life. “We’re not losing our language, our language is losing us” is a powerful and convincing finality, a reminder that loss is one of the enduring legacies of invasion and displacement on this continent. One might even replace “language” with words like “culture,” “land,” and “communities” and make similar arguments. Some have. However, it is the contemporary struggle to understand the meaning, purpose, and relevance of language to *Anishinaabeg* life that makes up John Hupfield’s *Becoming Unwritten*. Through a struggle to understand language, through life as a modern *Anishinaabe-inini*, a beautiful and

complex relationship with an animate universe is forged, and a model for *Anishinaabeg* continuance. This is the sacredness of language, to both understand and determine creation in its multitude of futures available to us. As the Acoma Pueblo poet and writer Simon Ortiz once wrote,

When you regard the sacred nature of language, then you realize that you are part of it and it is part of you, and you are not necessarily in control of it, and that if you do control some of it, it is not in your exclusive control. Upon this realization, I think there are all possibilities of expression and perception which become available. (80)

*Becoming Unwritten* is proof that language is not solely a location of loss but a source of possibilities for the many things we can take from it. Language is still here and among us. We only have to keep working with it.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I say *gichi-miigwech* to John Hupfield for his assistance in translation and providing the script for *Becoming Unwritten* to me as I completed this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Joe Auginaush is from Gaa-jiikajiwegamaag, White Earth Ojibwe Reservation in Minnesota. He is one of ten Anishinaabe elders featured in *Living Our Language*.

<sup>3</sup> Many excellent linguists and language teachers such as Treuer, Roger Spielman, Basil Johnston, Margaret Noori, Cecil King, Shirley Williams, Edward Benton-Benai, and Patricia Ningewance – just to name a few – have done incredible work in examining the specific structure and philosophies embedded throughout *Anishinaabemowin*. For more on the specific syntax and semantics in the language, I draw attention to their impressive and expansive contributions in print, classrooms, and communities across the Anishinaabeg nation.

<sup>4</sup> The reasons for Anishinaabemowin language loss are multiple, relating almost completely to an ongoing process of colonialism in the Americas: assimilationist governmental policies and practices (most specifically residential schools), imperialist racism regarding Indigenous cultures and languages, and hegemonic global forces that celebrate western languages and discourses. These, coupled with a rapid decline in language speakers, forces undermining intergenerational transmission, and a widespread lack of political and communal will to stem the tide, have left Anishinaabemowin in a drastic situation.

<sup>5</sup> As Whitefish River Anishinaabe academic Brock Pitawanakwat remarks in his groundbreaking PhD research at the University of Victoria entitled “Anishinaabemodaa Pane Oodenang – A Qualitative Study of Anishinaabe Language Revitalization as Self-Determination in Manitoba and Ontario,”:

In Canada, Indigenous language loss is occurring at an even faster rate than the global average. Only 36 of Canada’s approximately 60 Indigenous languages are still spoken today. Of these surviving languages, only four are expected to still be spoken in 2100: Anishinaabemowin, Dene, Inuktitut, and Nehiyawewin (Cree). Anishinaabemowin is the most vulnerable of the four “viable” Indigenous languages because it has the lowest rate of intergenerational transmission to children from a fluent parent or grandparent.... Only 25% of Anishinaabe children learn Anishinaabemowin as their first language directly from their parents and only 16% are raised with it as the main language in the home. Anishinaabemowin is also in decline in the majority (69%) of Anishinaabe communities. (1-2)

<sup>6</sup> I applaud and support the necessary efforts in revitalizing *Anishinaabemowin* in *Anishinaabeg* communities, both as a language advocate and learner myself. As I intend to be claimed in this piece, I assert that *Anishinaabemowin* is a critical part of *Anishinaabeg* nationhood and cultural and political sovereignty. Pitawanakwat makes a convincing argument as well for this, claiming that *Anishinaabemowin* language revitalization is a decolonizing practice and “a process of reclaiming, remembering and restoring a crucial aspect of peoplehood” (258). He concludes that *Anishinaabemowin* language revitalization can “support the restoration of *mno-bmaadiziwin* (good life) for Anishinaabe people” (259). From my experience, I echo their conclusions that *Anishinaabemowin* contains deep philosophies, epistemologies, and principles of central importance to what Treuer calls in *Living our Language*: a “unique Ojibwe worldview and way of thinking, the *Anishinaabe* connection to the past, to the earth, and to the future” (5).

## Works Cited

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**Niigonwedom James Sinclair**'s critical and creative work has been translated into several languages and can be found in periodicals such as *Prairie Fire*, *Canadian Literature*, *The Goose*, *Urban NDN*, *Canadian Dimension*, and *The Winnipeg Free Press*. In 2009, he co-edited (with Renate Eigenbrod) a double-issue of *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* (#29.1&2) focusing on "Responsible, Ethical, and Indigenous-Centred Literary Criticisms of Indigenous Literatures." Other short stories and essays have appeared in *Tales from Moccasin Avenue* (Totem Pole, 2006), *Across Cultures/Across Borders: Canadian Aboriginal and Native American Literatures* (Broadview, 2009), *Stories Through Theories/Theories Through Stories: North American Indian Writing, Storytelling, and Critique* (Michigan State UP, 2010), and *Troubling Tricksters: Revisioning Critical Conversations* (Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2010). Anishinaabe and originally from St. Peter's (Little Peguis) First Nation in Manitoba, Canada, he lives in Winnipeg.