

The Sacred Nature of Language: Unwritten and Being Written

John Hupfield's *Becoming Unwritten*¹

Ezhi-manidookaadeg Inwewin: Wezhibii'anzig dago Wezhibii'ang

John Hupfield imaa *Becoming Unwritten*

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

Imaa *Living Our Language: Ojibwe Tales & Oral Histories*, wezhibii'ang Anton Treuer wiindamaage gii-gaganoonaad gichi-anishinaaben Joe Auginaush izhinikaazonid. I'ima, ogii-gagwejimaan inn Auginaush-an aaniin ge-izhisegiban wanichigaadeg *Anishinaabemowin*, *Anishinaabeg* odinwewiniwaa'. Mii gaa-izhi-igod:

"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."
"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. Daabishkoo bezhig akiwenzi ekidod,"Gaawiin giwanitoosiimin gidinwewininaan, giwani'igomin gidinwewininaan."

Treuer translates the passage as:

Treuer odaanikanootaan owe izhi:

"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).

Treuer ikido apii wezhitood owe mazina'igan gaa-ishkwa “wiikoshkaad” gii-noondang, “[a] ji-gagwe-miigaadamang ji-ganawendamang Anishinaabemowin ji-bimaadag. Niigaan ji-inaabiyang gaawiin eta gidinwewininaan eta gikendaasowin gegising imaa, aaniin enaabanjigeyang, aaniin igaye enendamang, Anishinaabeg odoodaanaamiwaa', aki zhigwa giniigaaninaan”(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.³ *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,⁴ the number of speakers is reducing with each generation.⁵ And, though there are dedicated and skilled individuals fighting to stem the tide,⁶ there is a question of whether or not *Anishinaabemowin* will continue to be spoken in the future.

Gaawiin eta Auginaush zhigwa Treuer gii-bi-ikidosiiwag. Miziwe ayaawanoon ezhi-dawaagin owe izhi, endananokiing ezhi-daang miziwekamig Anishinaabenaang. Anishinaabemowining ate aweneniwiayang, ayizhitwaayang, gigikendaasowinaan zhigwa gigikendamaawizi'igomin aweneniwiayang. Mii-go gaye gaa-bi-izhiseg gii-bi-oninamaawindwaa Anishinaabeg omaa odakiimiwaang, nawach ani-bangiinowag ani-anishinaabemowaad eni-aanikoobijigewaad Anishinaabeg. Aanagii-ayaawaad nebwaakaawaad ji-nagaanamowaad owe ezhisenig, gaawiin gikendaagosiin giishin Anishinaabemowin ji-inwemong ani-niigaan.

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.

Ji-ayaangwaamiziyang ani-niigaan, inwewin maawanj gichi-inendaagwad ji-ani-bimitwaad bemaadizid. Inwaajigewin zhigwa izhigiizhwewin, mii iwe wenjiseg inwewin, mii iwe endaso-giizhig gibimaadiziwinaang, gaawiin idash niibowa awiya omanisaadanzin imaa wenjiseg “enaabishiyang.” Geget idash, memindage maamawikigaadeg waawiji’iding. Gaawiin gaye ji-waniikeng bizinjigewin, ningoding ako waniikem gitendaagwak owe giigidowining. Miziwekamig enishinaabewiwaad zhigwa gaa-niigaanishkamowaad wiindamaagewaad ani-meshkwaji-izhiwebak aki gimaamikawimimigonaanig: awesiwag, netaawigingin, zhigwa manidoog gigaganoonigonaanig ji-gii-bizindawaawangidwaanig. Ji-onenimaasiwag Gayatri Spivak, eyaawaad “giigidowag” gaawiin gaye eta gaagiimiwesiwag.

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.

Miziwe gizhibaayaa’ii eyaamagad inwewin. Zhigwa, daabishkoo awiya ziibiing naabawid, bizhishig giwiji’igomin dago gigiwitaashkaagomin. Gegoowan gigaanzikaagomin, gigaanzikawaadaamin gaye gegoon. Ono waawijiwesemagakin naanigoding minosewan gemaa wiiji’iwesewan gemaa daa-naniizaanadomagadoon gemaa abooshke bigo daa-izhise. Gegaa igo daabida aaniin ayizhisegwen. Mii dash iwe wenji-gikenjigaadeg awegwenag bemaadiziwaad omaa giishkaadong. Eyaamagak gaa-bi-izhiwebiziwaagwen gaa-bi-bimitoowaad, inawendaasowinan, gekendaasong abooshke maawanj egaasing izhigiizhwewinensan imaa wenjisegin. Aapiji odaa-zanagi’igon awiya ji-gikendang giishkaadong inwewin ayaasig. Giishpin ayaasiwang daa-gwiinawendaagwad.

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.

Giishpin ani-niigaan Anishinaabeg eni-aanjitwaawaad zhigwa ani-wanitoowaad odinwewiniwaa', gonage Anishinaabeg da-ani-mamino-bimaadiziwag ji-bami'idizowaapan. Mii owe dezhindang John Hupfield odoozhibii'iganing *Becoming Unwritten* ezhinikaadenig. Mazinibii'ige zhigwa ozhibii'ige Hupfield enind. Anishinaabewi Wasauksing onji ishkoniganing. Gaawiin gegoo gagiikwesii owe miigiwed – gaawiin gegoo gechinaawin gagaanzongesii nawach idash ji-ganawaabanjigaadenig apiich wiin ji-wiindamaaged gegoo. Omazinaatebijigewin mamaaji'itood gegoo, maagoniganing odaatebidood zhigwa mazinaatebijigewining, zhigwa gaye gaa-noondaagomotood, genawaabandang/bezindang odizhiwinigon awiya endazhitwaang zhigwa ayizhinaagwadinig. Iwe *Becoming Unwritten* ekidong, gaawiin ji-waniikeng, noongom gemaa ani-niigaaniwang.

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.

Iwe *Becoming Unwritten* gaa-ijigaadeg ozhibii'igaadewan Anishinaabe izhigiizhwewinan mazinaakiziganan, odaminong igaye eshkwa ayaang omaa giishkaadong. Gekenjigaadeg endaso-ondaanimag (zhemaag onenjigaadeg gwayakochigewin zhigwa izhichigewin), mii owe maadaateseg – mezinaatebijiged aagaawaateshin gaapishkawaad goonan – daabishkoo bimi-ayaawin, mii iwe dangaya'ii ji-inwaajigaadeg. Gaa-ikidod Hupfield, owe giizhichigewin “ganawaabanjigaade gegoo wanising gemaa gegoo ondinigaadeg, gegoo odaapinigaadeg gemaa moozhiginigaadeg, gidaa-gashkitoomin ina neyaab gegoo ji-odaapinamang jibwaa omaa izhi nitaawigiyang?” Naagajitooyan ani-niishtana bemisingin ikidowinan anishinaabebii'igaadewan wiindamaagemagak aaniin ezhi-zanagak ezhibii'igaadeg

inwewin. Zhemaag gikenjigaade gegwe-giigidootamaaged gegoo gagwe-izhichiged Hupfield odikidowining: Gibabaami-ayaa bimitooyan, inwewining owe babaami-ayaawin.

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.

Epiichi-gitendaagwak inwewin bimaadiziwining, mii iwe ezhising imaa *Becoming Unwritten* mazina'iganing, ezhising wiinzowining. Inwewining gidizhi-nitaawigimin, aazha gwaawaandate zhigwa gidayaawigomin. Gimiinigoowizimin inwewin mii dash imaa ji-onji-naagadawenjiganiyang. Aazha gigiizhaakonigoomin jibwaa nitaawigiyang omaa izhi akiing. Gigibii'odizomin idash gichitwaawining izhi. Maagizhaa dash da-wiiji'iwesemagad owe ji-bagidendaman daabishkoo enendamowaad Ferdinand de Saussure zhigwa Michel Foucault, gaawiin gaagiigidowin iwe izhisesinon. Nashke owe: ikwewid gemaa ininiiwid awiya, wiipengewin, ondaadiziwini, aawiwian, zhigwa weninamaawaad wiiji'iwese imaa inwewining. Jimichi-ganawaabandaman Zhaaganaashiimowin aaniin owe ezhiseg.

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.

Mii iidog Hupfield gaa-onji-ganawaabandang *Anishinaabewichigewin* eta. Aayaabajitoo anishinaabewigiizhwewinan ji-waabanda'iwed owe enendang. Gakina onjisewan gikinawaadagiizhwewining daapin gegoo ji-odaapinigaadeg. Mii imaa gaye ningoding gegoo anookiwining ikidowinensing daapinan daabishkoo nitam giigidowining *Daapinan ezhi-maadizimgak ki* (“Odaapinan aki obimaadiziwini”). Mii dash owe, inwewin aapiji zoongaadad, gaagiiwaamising gaye. Gimaamakaadendaan waabanda'iwigoziyan, noondaman gegoo –

inwewinan gewiinawaa. Ezhi-waabanda'ig Hupfield, gaawiin eta ini ikidowinan gaa-dibaajimomagakin, gakina gezhiiwemagakina gakina ini bezhigon inwewin.

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.

Omaa wiin, Hupfield aaniin ekidod zoongaadad. Ji-odaapinaman gegoo ji-babimaadizing. Odaapinaman ikidong daabishkoo wiijiweyan gegoo ozhichigaadeg zhigwa biigwanigaadeg. Zhemaag inenjigaade ji-aabadak. Maagizhaa daa-minose gemaa gaye daa-naniizaanad, gegoowan gemaa anishaa, ginwezhekamig gemaa ajinens. Hupfield wiin, gegoo odaapinigaadeg daabishkoo gegoon dazhiikigaadeg, gegoon agaawaa nisidawinigaadegin inwewinan abooshke bemaadiziwaad zhigwa izhigiizhwewinan: Enwed, gaakaapishkodeg, zoogipong, makade manidoominensag gegoo giboshinoog.

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.

Da-gikendaagwad owe noondamang zhigwa waabandamang, Daapinan ezhi-maadiziimgak noodin (odaapinaman noodin obimaadiziwin) dago miinawaa anishinaabemong ji-odaapinamawadwaa awesiwag, ishkode, nibi zhigwa noodin manidoominensag waabanda'igaageng mazinibii'iganan. Giishin iwe noongomichigewin – namekoniwi-manidoominensag – mii owe ji-gikenjigaadeg akiikamig inwewining degosing. Mii owe na'iid waabanda'iwed Hupfield. Aanind inwewin odaapinan, ji-bizindaman ji-gikendaman igaye, wiijiwen mii izhi nanaakondan gichitwaawini-ozhichigan.

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.

Gegoon gaye ji-odaapinaman bebakaan wiijiwesemagad gegoo anishinaabenaang gaa-bi-izhiwebiziwaan. Ji-bimaadiziyang, daabida gigii-bi-odaapinaamin gegoo akiing onji zhidigwa gegiinawind onji. Bizhishig gii-bi-ayizhise, gaawiin dash daabida. Apane igo gii-bi-gikenjiganiwiyang gidoodaanaaminaan, endaso-anishinaabewiyang, zhidigwa gaa-bi-izhiseyang gidakiiminaaning. Gegoon gaye gigii-bi-odaapinamaagoomin: gidizhitwaawininaan, wekogamigiziyang abooshke giniijaanisinaanig. Aanind abooshke ikidowag (memindage naanwaak daswaaki odaanaang) gidinwewininaan zhidigwa giniigaaninaan. Gegiinawind idash gigii-bi-odaapinigin. Gizhaaganaashiimomin, gidanami'aamin zhidigwa waabishkiwe aabajichiganan ji-gikenjigaadeg geyaabi omaa ayaayang. Giwaabangaagemin gaye ini (apii baakinaad manidominensa' Hupfield ji-ganawaabamaad goonan) ji-waabandamang owe aki aaniin gaye ge-izhichigaanidiyang.

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.

Nanaandok inaabanjigaade “odaapinigenwin”, ekidod Hupfield dazhindang anishinaabebii'iganan. Odanami'aag ogii-ozhitoonaawaa' Anishinaabeg idash ogii-aabajitoonaawaan ji-aayaabajitoowaad odinwewiniwaan. Gaawiin aaniish wiin waabishkiwe nitam ogii-ozhitoosiin ozhibii'igenwin, Anishinaabeg aazha owe gii-bi-izhichigewag gikendaman

aaniin gaa-wiisookawaawaad mitigoo'. Daabishkoo mezinibii'iged ekidod: Daapin ezhi-maadiziwaad mtigook ("Odaapinan obimaadiziwiniwaa' mitigoog"). Bakaan dash owe gii-aninaniizaanise – ezhi-niizhiwaad enishinaabewiwaad zhigwa bakaan awiyag – memindage zhooniyaakewin "maajii-odaapinigaadeg."

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"), *zhidwaawinan* ("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").

Daapinan ezhi-maadiziwaad bmaadizijig (Odaapinamaw obimaadiziwiniwaa' bemaadiziwaad), mii iwe ekidong aabitawaya'ii imaa mazina'iganing *Becoming Unwritten* ezhinikaadeg bakaan odizhiwidoon ikidowin. Gaawiin awashime ji-odaapinamamban gekinoo'amaageng odaanaang zhigwa ondaadiziyan imaa onji, nawach aaniin bimaadiziwin jiniigaanisegiban. Giwaabandaan owe bimaashid giniw zhigwa bapanga'owin – gashki'ewiziwin, gidiskii-ayaawin zhigwa wenzhishing. Mii omaa Hupfield gechi-inwaadang, ikidod naadiziwin ("izhitwaawin"), *mishkiki* ("mashkikiin"), *zhidwaawinan* ("izhitwaawinan") Anishinaabe Bimaadiziwin onji ("Anishinaabeg omino-bimaadiziwiniwaa"). Geyaabi dash Hupfield onaanaagadawendaan aaniin ji-izhi-andone'aman ono izhichigewinan memindage odenaang eyaang gekenjigaadeg gegoo dash inendanziing. Gakina owe waabanda'iwem waashkeyaabikiziwaad manidoominensag aabadiziwaad (maamakaach apiich wiin makadewiziwaad, waabamonikaaniwang), maagizhaa manidookaanidim giizis onji (ikidowin giizis zhigwa dibiki-giizis inwaade).

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 Indigenity 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:

Ishkwaach idash imaa *Becoming Unwritten* aaniin ezhi-onizhishing bimaadiziwin wayaabandaman ezhi-maamakaadak ezhi-nanaandokaadag. Bebakaan gegoon daa-ayaamagadoon Anishinaabewid awiya noongom. Oodekanawan, gichi-miikanawan, anami’ewigamigoon, abooshke anishinaabemong bekish odaanaang zhaaganaashiimong, mii iwe izhi. Mii-go bezhigon ezhi-onzaamiinowaagwen gimanidoominaanig (manidoog) zhigwa gidaanikoobijiganinaanig miziwe. Naanigoding gaaji-aya’iing waakaa’iganikaang, onjida dash imaa ayaawag. Ayaawin atemagad gichitwaawining. Wiinge ogii-minosidoon Hupfield ekidod:

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

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

(“Odaapinan obimaadiziwin aki. Bakinaan gakina gegoo gichitwaawining.”)

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

Odaapinan ezhi-bimaadiziwaad bemaadizijig. Baakin miinawaa boodaadan ezhi-bagoneziwaad ode’ewiwaang.

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

(“Odaapinamaw obimaadiziwiniwaa’ bemaadiziwaad. Baakin izhi-boodaajigen ezhi-bagonewizinid ode’ewiwaan.”)

Daapinan naadiziwin. Nsakanan miinwaa mnaadendan.

Odaapinan inaadiziwin. Baakinan miinawaa maminwaadendan.

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

(“Odaapinan enaadiziimagak izhitwaawin. Baakinan ji-nanaakonigaadeg.”)

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

Odaapinan ezhi-bimaadiziimagak inwewin. Baakinan gidootawaganan miinawaa 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.

Mii omaa babimaadiziyan aanagii-naniiskaag, Anishinaabeg andagenjigewin, giigidowag, ozhibii'igewag igaye. Aaniin ayendiwaad (bebaa-ayaawaad) gakina gegoo eyaamagak, abooshke maji-gegoowang gegoo, inwewin boonibii'igemagad, nawach omaajibii'aan aawiwin, wekogamigizing, zhigwa gichitwaawin. Gizhiseg gete-nagamowining, mii iwe maagizhaa wiindamaagewin geyaabi ayayaawaad enishinaabewiwaad. Imaa mazina'iganing *Becoming Unwritten*, gikendaagwad Anishinaabeg geyaabi da-ani-ayaawag. Abooshke inendaagwak gakina gegoo ani-wanichigaadeg. Geyaabi inwewin omaa ayaamagad, mii owe wenoodizi'igoyang. Gigashkitoomin inwewining ji-gaasiibii'amang giigidowinan gegoon wanichigaadegin nawach ji-gigibii'odizoyang gichitwaawining. Mii ezhi-waabanda'iwed Hupfield gewiin ayikidod ji-wiijiweyan gemaa bagidinan ji-wani'igaazod Anishinaabe.

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,

Ayaangwaamizing niigaan onji, maagizhaa gidaa-baakaji-wanitoomin gidinwewininaan, gidizhitwaawininaan gaye. Maagizhaa iwe gidaa-inendaamin, maagizhaa wanitooyang gidinwewininaan, gidaa-wanitoomin gaye gidizhitwaawininaan. “Gaawiin giwanitoosiimin gidinwewininaan, gidinwewininaan giwani’igomin” nawach debwetaagwad. Ji-maamikawiseng wanichigaadeg gegoo, mii owe maawanj gaa-gichi-izhiseg omaa akiing. Maagizhaa awiya oada-naabatoon “inwewin” “izhitwaawin” onji, “aki” “wekogamigizing” onji” mii ge-izhigaabawiwaapan. Aanind geget. Mii owe dash gegwe-gikenjigaadeg aaniin ezhi-wiijiwesemagak inwewin Anishinaabe obimaadiziwining ezhibii’igaadeg imaa *Becoming Unwritten*. Owe ji-gagwe-nisidotamang inwewin, noongom awiya Anishinaabewid, bimaadad gakina gegoo omaa gibimaadiziwininaang, mii owe ge-ani-wiiji’igoyang niigaan. Mii owe ezhi-manidoowang inwewin. Ji-gikenjigeyang zhigwa gichitwaawin ani-niigaan giinawind onji. Daabishkoo gaa-izhibii’ang Acoma Pueblo zhigwa wezhibii’iged Simon Ortiz,

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)\

Naagadawaabandaman ezhi-gichitwaawang inwewin, gigikendaan gigigiz iwe, gaawiin gaye enendamang gidaa-doodanziin, giishpin idash gegoo gashkitooyan ji-doodaman, gaawiin geget gidaa-odaminwaagesii. Gikendaman owe, maagizhaa bakaan gidaa-inwaajige.

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.

Becoming Unwritten waabanda’iwemagad inwewin gaawiin ningoji ji-wanisingiban nawach wegonenan ge-miininangiban. Geyaabi omaa gidinwewininaan gidayaamin. Ji-anokaadamang idash eta.

Endnotes

¹ 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.

Gichi-miigwech nindinaa' John Hupfield wiji'id aanikanootamaan zhigwa miizhid iwe mazina'igan Becoming Unwritten apii eni-giizhitooyaan nimazina'igan.

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

Gaa-jiikajiwegamaag onjii Joe Auginaush. White Earth Anishinaabe. Ishkonigan Minnesota. Wiin bezhig wezhibii'igaazod imaa Living Our Language mazina'iganing.

³ 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.

Niibowa gaa-niigaaniiwaad inwewin gekinoo'amaagewaad daabishkoo Treuer, Roger Spielman, Basil Johnston, Margaret Noori, Cecil King, Shirely Williams, Edward Benton-Benai zhigwa Patricia Ningewance – aanind ji-wiinagwaa – ogii-gichi-anokaanaawaa' naagadawaabandamowaad anishinaabemowin. Geyaabi noonde-gikendaman enaadag iwe inwewin, andooshkan ozhibii'igaadeg, gikinoo'amaageng miziwe anishinaabenaang.

⁴ 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.

Bebakaan onji wenji-wanitooyang Anishinaabemowin, memindage gaa-gii-oninaamaa' inang waabishkiiwe omaa akiing. Gichi-ogimaa gaa-gii-gaasiyang anishinaabewiyang (memindage gii-makangeng abinoojiiyag ji-gikinoo'amawindwaa), majenimindwaa Anishinaabeg, odinwewiniwaa' gaye. Nawach gaye gaa-niigaan achigaadegin waabishkiiwe odinwewin zhigwa ogiigidowin. Owe ezhiseg zhigwa gaa-ani-anishinaabemosigwaa, ingi gaye niigaan ge-izhiwebiziwaad, gaa-wiji'iwesing owe ji-izhisesinog, mii wenji-izhiseg anishinaabemowin.

⁵ 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,”:

Daabishkoo ekidod Anishinaabe Brock Pitawanakwat Whitefish River onji apii gaa-dazhiikang PhD mazina'igan imaa University of Victoria “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)

Omaa Kaanada akiing, nawach gichi-wanichigaade inwewin omaa apiich wiin bakaan ningoji. 36 eta aabajichigaadewan inwewinan omaa Kaanada ambe 60 dasingin. Ono gaa-aabajichigaadegin, niwin eta da-aabadadon 2100 akiiwang. Anishinaabemowin, Dene, Inuktitut zhigwa Nehiyawewin (Omashkiigoomowin). Nawach dash ayaangwaamad Anishinaabemowin minik endasingin gaawin aaniish gikinoo'amawaasiwag abinoojiyag. ...25% eta nitam izhi-giigidowag oniigi'igowaa' onji zhigwa 16% aabadad endawining. Niibowa ishkonganing odani-wanitoonaawaa' anishinaabemowin. (1-2)

⁶ 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).

Ningichi-inendaan owe neyaab gaa-gagwe-bi-azhegiwewidoowaad Anishinaabemowin ishkonganing geniin gegwe-anishinaabemoyaan. Ninandawendaan omaa ji-ozhibii'igaadeg, onjida ji-anishinaabemoyang gegiinawind ji-anishinaabewiyang ji-bimendizoyang. Pitawanakwat gaye owe ikido, gegwe-anishinaabemoyang gigidiskii'aanaan gichi-ogimaa mii owe gaye ge-izhi-minjimendamang, ganawendamang aweneniwyang" (258). Giishpin neyaab anishinaabemoyang, neyaab "giga-mino-bimaadizimin gaa-anishinaabewiyang" (259). Gaa-izhiseyaan niin, nindebwetawaag Anishinaabemowining ayaamagad gikenimaawiziwin, gikenjigewin zhigwa ini getendaagwakin imaa omazina'iganing Treuer *Living Our Language* gaa-ijigaadenig. Bezhihwewig inenjigewin miinigoowizi anishinaabe, odaanaang, akiing izhi zhigwa ani-niigaan" (5).

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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.

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