

“They Have Arrived”: Restoring Indigenous Languages and the Balance of Nature

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“The Earth is still following the original instructions...humans are the only species breaking the initial directions. Earth needs to be honoured daily not only one day a year...how human of us!

. . . It is like telling the Creator(s) that what they placed here isn't good enough...we are arrogant humans who have the right to alter Creation¹.”

- *Wolastoqewi Grand Chief, spasaqsit possesom (Ron Tremblay)*

Introduction

Currently, there is much emphasis on individuals becoming aware of their contributions to climate change. I believe there should be collective awareness. Still, there needs to be more emphasis on large corporations and governments that benefit most from resource extraction.

The *Weather Collection Project*, orchestrated by contemporary Canadian artist Lisa Hirmer, creates space for artists, elders, writers, and thinkers to consider new possibilities for addressing climate change through our experiences with the weather. I have investigated weather stories through two paintings from the Beaverbrook Art Gallery's permanent collection and one tapestry for the University of New Brunswick's Mi'kmaq-Wolastoquey Centre that was loaned for the Beaverbrook's 2022 *Wabanaki Modern* exhibition. Perhaps an unfavoured form of weather, my attention gravitates to rain and thunderstorms. Ever since I was a child, I was mesmerized by lightning. When the electricity went out at home, my mother would lay my sister and me in front of the big picture window to watch the flash through the glass. Sometimes, we would drive around in the storms.

In many regions of Canada, it is considered polite to talk about the weather – partly because it is an easily identifiable part of everyday experience. I have noticed lately that the conversation has drifted from the typical "Nice day we're having," to something like "This is very strange weather in mid-December." As global temperatures warm, it would seem that weather increasingly opposes its typical meteorology for specific times of year. The drastic weather changes signify a world out of balance.

The alarm bells have been ringing for some time now. Mother Earth is distressed and communicates her poor health through various environmental devastations, including flooding, earthquakes, and high winds. My grandmother taught me that the earth is self-reliant, and she will continue to live beyond our years. One consequential aspect of a changing planet and ecosystem is the loss of Indigenous languages worldwide. The devastation of Indigenous homelands will inevitably alter our languages, shifting an inherent relationship to the land. This essay considers the links between Indigenous language loss,

¹ Ronald Tremblay (Spasaqsit Posseson), Wolastoqey Grand Chief, email to author, November 20, 2022.

climate change, and Colonialism through a Wolastoqiyik worldview. It uses rain storms as a metaphor for the impending doom of further environmental and linguistic devastation(s).

As the Indigenous Climate Hub explains:

“Many Indigenous languages stem from a relationship to the environment and are passed down through oral traditions through the generations. As climate changes the environment and in turn traditional activities, there is a threat to the survival of Indigenous languages. Indigenous languages are associated with action – with traditional activities. Once action and traditional activities decrease, the use of language will also decrease. If traditional activities cease, it is only a matter of time before the language is also lost. A conscious effort is required to save Indigenous languages in the face of climate change.”²

Wolastoqey latuwewakon (our language, as well as its dialects and accents) is directly influenced by the land. The word “Maliseet”³ is thought to come from a Mi’kmaq word meaning “slow speaker,”⁴ mainly because our dialect is spoken softly and gently. Our speakers stretch out the vowels of certain words. We can understand this aspect of our language as influenced by activities on the land, such as hunting and gathering. Wolastoqiyik historically inhabit lands in the forests and along the Wolastoq (i.e. “the beautiful river”). Our people moved silently and cautiously through the trees to detect any threats in the distance; they spoke quietly, not to scare any animals away. These land-based activities inform our speech. Should our relationship with the environment and natural resources alter, we may lose collections of words associated with being on the land.

My nation, the Wolastoqiyik, has known this threat of language extinction for several generations. Despite recent extraordinary efforts to restore and revive our sleeping language, we realize that few fluent speakers remain, and most are elderly⁵. Wolastoqey social anthropologist Dr. Bernard Perley observes that the passing of every elder means a loss of language lexicons. Language is not transferred to younger generations because all social and economic interactions have been conducted in English since the 1950s and 1960s⁶.

In this instance, the downfall of globalization is that English and French are dominant, accessible languages that receive support from provincial and federal governments.

The link between colonialism, climate change and language loss is fueled by capitalism and globalization. There are alarming statistics concerning the health and safety of Indigenous languages globally. The United Nations Permanent Forum on the Rights of Indigenous

² Indigenous Climate Hub, “Effects of Climate Change on Indigenous Languages,” 2022, <https://indigenousclimatehub.ca/the-effect-of-climate-change-on-indigenous-languages/>

³ An outdated term for our nation name Wolastoqiyik

⁴ Choi, Wonkyoung. "The Path of the Maliseet People: An Anthropological Approach." SocArXiv. November 18 (2017).

⁵ Perley, Bernard C. *Defying Maliseet language death: Emergent vitalities of language, culture, and identity in eastern Canada*. U of Nebraska Press, 2011, p. 56.

⁶ *ibid*, p.57

Peoples estimates that an Indigenous language somewhere on the Earth dies every two weeks.⁷

In Canada, no Indigenous language is considered safe.⁸ Harvard student Kataline Toth observes that Indigenous languages perish due to colonization and the rise of International languages⁹. Based on a report by Canadian Heritage, 75% of Indigenous languages are endangered in Canada. We know that once a language is lost (or asleep), the connection to our worldview falls dormant, too.¹⁰

Threats to the loss of our planet as we know it mirror the effects of colonialism, capitalism and globalization. Suppose climate change is a preamble for an eventual lack of resources – food, water, etc... In that case, language loss symbolizes an equally severe threat of extinction to one of our greatest cultural resources. In Gerald McMaster's words, "For Aboriginal¹¹ people, language originates from the land . . . where Indigenous languages articulate the land and in turn, the aboriginal is articulated by the land"¹²

Our language is integral to our worldview. Our original instructions as caretakers for our environments are reaffirmed through our languages, as they provide the tools needed to heal climate change. For example, "Ewikuwossit nil skitkomiq" in Wolastoqiyik latuwewakon means "the earth is my mother." This relationality – understanding the earth as a living, loving relative – will create a better path forward, away from the kinds of extractions of oil, gas and coal that pollute our water and the air we breathe.¹³ Indigenous sovereignty can heal societies' relationship to the earth and environment, as cross-national Indigenous worldviews align with taking care of Mother Earth.¹⁴

Among many voices in this argument, Dr. Shannon Waters (Stz'uminus First Nation) argues that Colonialism is the root cause of climate change. She explains that settler colonialism historically occupied and exploited Indigenous lands and resources.¹⁵ Indigenous people's relationships with these lands are severed because we have been displaced from our homelands, meaning we no longer have unlimited access to our traditional, unceded territories.

⁷Toth, Katalina, "The Death and Revival of Indigenous Languages," Harvard International Review, 2022, <https://hir.harvard.edu/the-death-and-revival-of-indigenous-languages/>

⁸ Okanagan College Library, "Indigenous Studies," Revised September 19, 2023, <https://libguides.okanagan.bc.ca/IndigenousStudies/IndigenousLanguages>

⁹ Toth, Katalina, "The Death and Revival of Indigenous Languages," Harvard International Review, 2022, <https://hir.harvard.edu/the-death-and-revival-of-indigenous-languages/>

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ The equivalent term used today is Indigenous

¹² Gerald R. McMaster quoted in "Tribe: Critical Perspectives and the New Practices in Aboriginal Contemporary Art," Amsterdam: Academisch Proefschrift, Universiteit van Amsterdam, 1999, quoted in Rickard, Jolene. "Rebecca Belmore: Performing Power." *Rebecca Belmore: Fountain* (2005), p.69, https://www.rebeccabelmore.com/assets/Performing_Power.pdf

¹³ Waters, Shannon, "Opinion: It's Time To Recognize That Colonialism Causes Climate Change – And Repair Our Relationships," 2023, <https://sustain.ubc.ca/stories/opinion-it%E2%80%99s-time-recognize-colonialism-causes-climate-change-%E2%80%93-and-repair-our-relationships#:~:text=Instead%20of%20occupation%2C%20we%20need,driver%20of%20the%20climate%20crisis.>

¹⁴ ibid

¹⁵ ibid

Colonialism in my part of the world can be pinpointed to the arrival of French colonialists under the de Monts-Champlain expedition in 1604.¹⁶ Their near hundred-man crew settled on Île Ste-Croix in New Brunswick that year, only to lose half their men to scurvy over the severely harsh winter. Those who survived only did so through the help and generosity of the local Passamaquoddy Indigenous peoples. The group moved in 1605 to the more hospitable Port-Royal in Nova Scotia to avoid another long winter, establishing Canada's first permanent European colony. I imagine Champlain and de Monts arriving in our territories like dark clouds rolling in. If colonization were a devastating storm – a hurricane, a flood, and a tornado combined - their arrival would represent irreversible damage to Wabanakiyik (the People of the Dawn) social, cultural, political, and economic systems.

The following works from the Beaverbrook Art Gallery's permanent collection feature approaching rain and thunderstorms. The approaching rainstorm has symbolized various oppositions throughout the art history canon: life and death, destruction and creation, horror and beauty. Storms can also symbolize arrival, as well as rebirth and renewal.



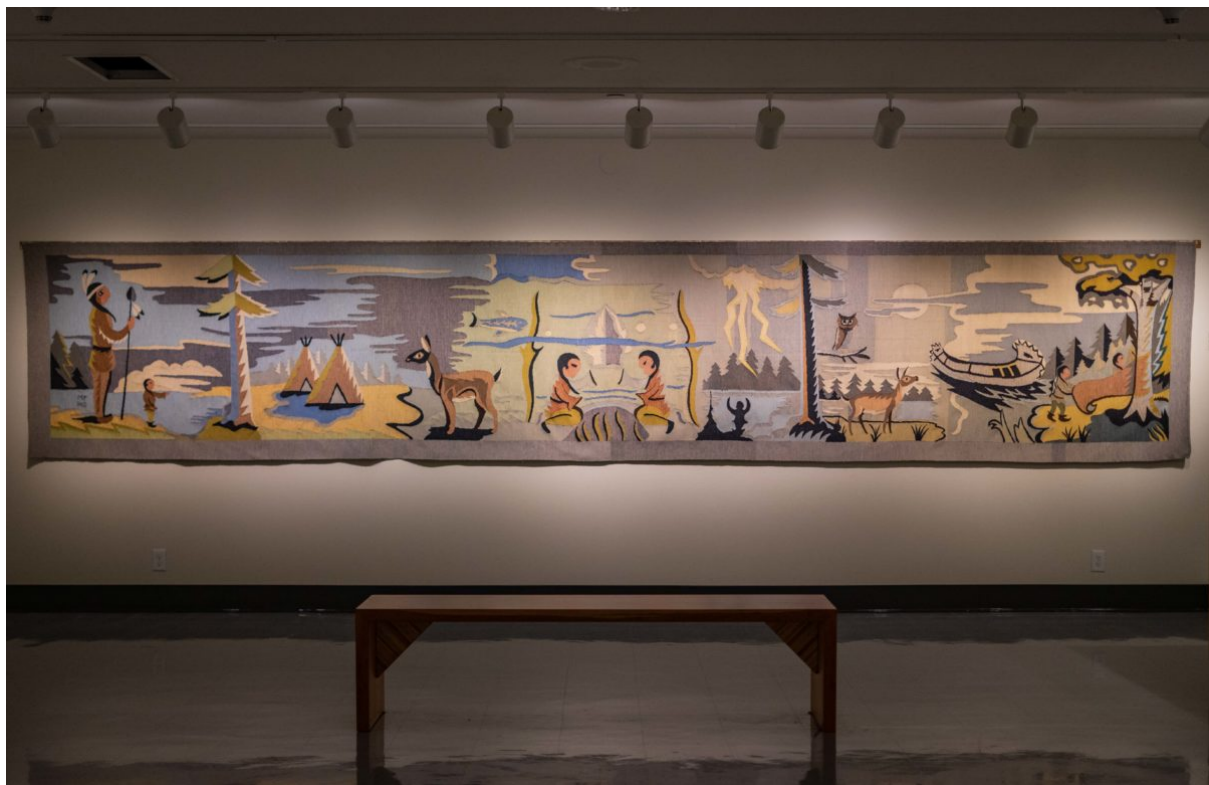
In *Coming Storm at the Portage* (1859) by Dutch-Canadian artist Cornelius Krieghoff, the approaching storm confronts the two figures portaging a canoe. The sky turns dark, and the wind picks up, visibly causing panic among the two figures – one (left) is running towards the

¹⁶ Trudel, Marcel, and Mathieu d'Avignon. "Samuel de Champlain." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Historical Canada. Article published August 29, 2013; Last Edited June 11, 2021.

other, who is clutching their birchbark vessel. Curiously, instead of running for cover or shelter, the figures appear to be heading towards the storm instead of away.

Today, one can contemplate the approaching storm as a metaphor for climate change and the chaos, terror and uncertainty that follows. As the darkness looms over the subject matter, a dread hangs in the air, or figures panic to move away. “Climate anxiety” or “eco-anxiety” are newer terms that reveal an overwhelming fear around the growing environmental conditions, climate change and sustainability of the planet. The effects of climate change are terrifying and overwhelming, as they pose vast risks to humans and more-than-human beings.

In addition, Climate change can potentially unleash deep changes to traditional crafts like ash basketry in this part of the world. Climate change stresses forests and trees, making them less equipped to protect themselves from predators and more susceptible to diseases.¹⁷ Warmer climate and human ignorance have emboldened an expanding range of the emerald ash borer, an insect which threatens to kill millions of native black ash trees. This would decimate a longstanding Wolastoqey traditional craft as many weavers source ash splints to make baskets. Without ash trees, artisans cannot continue this art form or pass it on to future generations. The language associated with basket-making will become obsolete.



¹⁷Government of Canada, “Adapting to climate change: The story of invasive insects in Canada’s forests,” Revised January 9, 2023, <https://natural-resources.canada.ca/our-natural-resources/forests/state-canadas-forests-report/adapting-climate-change-the-story-invasive-insects-canadas-forests/24152>

Last fall, I was giving a tour of my co-curated exhibition, *Wabanaki Modern*, to the Maliseet (Wolasotiqiyk) Language Program. In partnership with St. Thomas University, the St. Mary's First Nation program immerses full-time students in becoming fluent speakers of Wolastoqey Latuwewakon (our language). The group gathered around the *Legend of the Little People Tapestry*, designed by Micheal Francis of the Micmac Indian Craftsmen (c.1964). The instructor and the class began naming different elements of the work in our language. The teacher pointed to a cloud in the center-right of the tapestry, and the students said: "petakiyik," meaning both thunder and lightning for some speakers.

As I listened to students discuss the descriptive aspects of the language, one student told me that the expanded, traditional definition for "petakiyik" means "they have arrived." In some of the stories I have gathered, "they" are thunder beings described as energies that live in the thunderclouds, making noise. They are shapeshifting, bird-like creatures with humanistic body parts. Thunder beings bring back the rain after long winters of snow and mark the beginning of spring. They mark a celebration of new life and new cycles. One can think of language students as warriors or prophets, especially considering that Wolastoqey latuwewakon is threatened to become extinct over the next few generations. Language learners bring ancestral knowledge back into our daily lives by learning, sharing, and teaching Wolastoqey to others. At the same time, language speakers and learners reject colonial assimilation agendas by reviving a language that was predicted (and forced) to disappear.



Celebrated contemporary Cree-Canadian artist Kent Monkman's alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testicle, is the subject focus of *The Trapper's Bride* (2006). It represents a shift away from the colonial gaze and reverses the role of the Indigenous subject to let the viewer know that she is in control. When the subject holds your gaze, it suggests they are the dominant one, or at the very least, "in the know" about their position and circumstance. She is in charge of her fate.

Miss Chief embodies the trickster present in many Indigenous nations' oral traditions as a two-spirit, third-gender, and supernatural being. She represents decolonial love combined with heroism. She is as much a part of the land as her own, self-determined being. The lighting in Monkman's painting strikes the mountaintop in the distance. A painting inspired by David's famed *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* (1801-05), Monkman's work offers a dramatic effect to the presence of Miss Chief and her supernatural influence.

Storms can bring about significant changes, though often hostile. As the temperature of the planet increases, the intensity and frequency of precipitation does as well. If colonization were a rainstorm, what destruction would fall upon our homes and livelihoods if that storm became a hurricane or pending tornado? The trajectory of colonialism and climate change will not subside without decolonial tactics. If storms represent renewal, it becomes evident that the earth will rehabilitate herself. She will live beyond us.

When I think about the planet's future, I reflect on conversations with my elder Henrietta Black. Mrs. Black is one of the few remaining speakers of what she terms "old Maliseet (Wolastoqiyik)" in my community, embodying the value of language revival by speaking it with her son and teaching those eager to learn from her. Recently, Henrietta said, "Life won't always be this convenient, " referencing the comfort that modern-day technology and electricity bring to our lives. She urges the importance of learning life skills like sewing and growing food.

Our survival in a climate apocalypse depends on our individual and collective skills. Indigenous languages' survival will likewise depend on humanity's collective efforts to right a deep-rooted wrong. For both of these, the quality of our relationships will be essential.