

Negotiating Indigenous Language Narratives from Canada and South Africa:  
A Comparative Approach

Judy M. Iseke  
Lakehead University

Bekisizwe S. Ndimande  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Author Contact Information:

Dr. Judy Iseke  
Faculty of Education,  
Lakehead University,  
955 Oliver Road,  
Thunder Bay, ON, Canada  
P7B 5E1

[jisekeba@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:jisekeba@lakeheadu.ca)

tel: 780-460-6096

**Abstract**

Indigenous cultural and language negotiations ongoing in the contexts of South Africa and Canada are documented in two studies, one sharing narratives from Black parents in South Africa and the other sharing narratives of Métis Elders in Canada. Black parents perspectives on language and role of education in post-apartheid South Africa in suppressing Indigenous language and culture are explored. Métis Elders' perspectives examine the negotiation of identities through Indigenous languages in Métis contexts, importance of sharing stories in Indigenous languages, and understanding Michif and language negotiations in colonial and neocolonial times. We compare across these Indigenous contexts their complex and evolving language histories, racial categorization and repression of identities, demographics and impacts on languages, roles of languages in relationships to self and culture and roles of English dominance in relation to Indigenous languages. Conclusions suggest the importance of nurturing and respecting Indigenous languages in both nations.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon (1967) reminded us that "a man[/woman] who has a language, consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language" (p. 18). Indigenous languages are under pressure due to the influence of colonizing languages like English and Afrikaans and unequal and biased education systems (Iseke-Barnes, 2008; Kallaway, 1984; Nkomo, 1990). Residential and public schools in Canada and mission and apartheid schools in South Africa have been instrumental in colonizing Indigenous/Black<sup>1</sup> peoples through four distinct educational methods: disrupting Indigenous knowledges (Battiste, 2000; Iseke-Barnes, 2005); imposing a colonizing mindset on Indigenous students (Christie & Collins, 1984; Christie, 1985; Hartshorne, 1992; Iseke-Barnes & Danard, 2006; Iseke-Barnes, 2007); maligning Indigenous cultural understandings and traditions in the minds of students (Iseke-Barnes & Sakai, 2003; Iseke, 2009; Dei & Kempf, 2006); and, devaluing and disrupting the acquisition of Indigenous languages and ways of knowing (Alexander, 1989; Brock-Utne, 2000; Calliou 2001; Iseke-Barnes 2004; Odora, 1994). This final theme is the focus of this article as is the negotiation of linguistic realities for both Indigenous peoples in South Africa and Canada.

Sharing narratives from two research studies, we explore the importance of Indigenous languages in the education of children in schools from the perspective of Black parents in South Africa, and Métis Elders' perspectives to examine the negotiation of identities through Indigenous languages in Métis contexts, importance of sharing stories in Indigenous languages, and understanding Michif and language negotiations in

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term Indigenous to signal an international sense of experiences, issues, and shared struggle for peoples colonized across the globe (Smith, 1999). For the South African context the terms Black and Indigenous will be used interchangeably.

colonial and neocolonial times.. After this introduction we introduce the comparative approach used in this paper, then introduce the authors to locate their Indigenous positions in relation to community-based research. We next provide a context for the South African study followed by a discussion of the research approach to the case study of South Africa. We then provide parent accounts of Indigenous languages and cultures in schools followed by a discussion tying narratives from parents to literature. We then turn to the study by Author 1 providing discussion of histories and languages of the Métis in Canada followed by a discussion of the research approach with Elders. Next we introduce the Métis Elders. This is followed by four sections in which their narratives are examined with literature to explore the meaning of N’hiawuk language in Métis communities, negotiating identities through language in Métis contexts, the importance of sharing stories in Indigenous languages, and Michif language negotiations of the Métis. Following the discussion of the Canadian case study is a comparative analysis that draws parallels between Canada and South Africa and the experiences of colonialism and language negotiation We compare language histories, racial categorization and repression of identities, demographics and impacts on languages, languages and relationships to self and culture, and relationships to English. Conclusions suggest the importance of nurturing and respecting Indigenous languages.

### **A Comparative Approach**

A comparative approach to Indigenous research allows us to complicate our understandings of Indigenous languages by comparing to other Indigenous groups. While our histories are distinct, we share histories of colonization and continued neo-colonial struggles to recover from the colonial condition and to regenerate our languages.

Comparisons between South Africa and Canada allow the problematization of the complexities of living in different neo-colonial spaces while working to Indigenize the education systems in our respective countries. We are at different places in these linguistic, educational, and political processes but the processes in each Indigenous location inform each other. By thinking about narratives from parents in South Africa and Elders in Canada, we focus intensely on community engagements with education and ways communities can and are taking actions to interrupt the persistent neo-colonial ideologies. By recognizing the complexity of language politics in Indigenous communities and the pressures to adhere to English dominance, we disrupt it in order to sustain Indigenous languages, and take action to address the very real challenges in Indigenous communities.

In both these countries the marginalized communities are calling for the recognition of our languages, identities, and cultures. Will these calls for cultural recognition be listened to by the governments, policy makers, and systems that marginalize Indigenous languages and cultures?

Valuing Indigenous linguistic practices can enable the continuation of long Indigenous literary traditions and can support the growth and development of communities for the future as suggested by the findings in these two studies. The challenge, as seen in the Canadian and South African research, is to create opportunities to honor the gift of Indigenous languages and knowledges.

### **Introducing the Authors**

Given concerns about who, how, and why research is conducted (Swadener & Mutua, 2008; Denzin, Lincoln, & Smith, 2008), and insider/outsider research discourse

about relationships to Indigenous communities in conducting research (Smith, 1999; Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000), the authors—both Indigenous scholars who work within their local communities—locate themselves and their relationships to their communities, in order to begin a discussion of their research studies. They further describe the communities and the research practices in the sections about the research to address this important issue in Indigenous research.

Judy M. Iseke, is a Métis woman, researcher, and scholar from St. Albert, Alberta, Canada, that was once a strong Métis community but it has changed over the years into a mixed urban center. Judy is a descendant of the Métis families that founded this community. In her academic work she has been working with Métis Elders to explore storytelling traditions. She is a Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Knowledge and Research and Associate Professor and teaches academic courses at the graduate level on Indigenous Education in the Faculty of Education, Lakehead University. Her ongoing work on is to study the Michif language – the language of Métis peoples – to aid in generating interest in the Michif language and to provide supports to Métis peoples who wish to learn the Michif language and about Métis culture.

Bekisizwe Ndimande, is a Black South African researcher who was educated under apartheid education. He later attended graduate school in the United States to study curriculum and education policy. He is currently assistant professor of Curriculum and Instruction and faculty affiliate at the Center for African Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He teaches courses on teacher education, curriculum studies, and global multicultural education.

### **Indigenous Language, Educational, and Cultural Histories within South Africa**

We begin the discussion of research in South Africa by contextualizing it within Indigenous perspectives of colonial history. We provide a history of Indigenous languages and their suppression under colonialism and apartheid. We critique the oppressive policies of the British and the Dutch that marginalized Indigenous languages in this nation. We also highlight Indigenous communities' ongoing struggles as they speak out against the linguistic marginalization their children experience in schools.

The British and Dutch colonizers implemented colonial education systems to subjugate Indigenous communities for the purpose of building their colonial empires (Christie, 1985; Hartshorne, 1992; Kallaway, 1984). According to Christie, the British used “education as a way of spreading their language and traditions in the colony—and also as a means of social control. They declared English to be the official language, and attempted to Anglicize the church, the government offices and the schools” (p. 34.) This imposition of English first trampled over the Khoikhoi and San languages,<sup>2</sup> Later on the colonizers had contact with the Nguni population. The Nguni people speak four Indigenous languages, including IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, IsiSwati, and IsiNdebele. Alexander (1989) states that the British's usurp of Cape colony and later of the Natal colony in the 1800 intensified the suppression of the Nguni languages, as well as the Sotho languages

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<sup>2</sup> The Khoikhoi and San are the Indigenous peoples of the sub-Saharan Africa who are mostly hunter-gather communities. They had the first contact with the British and the Dutch at the beginning of colonialization of the Cape colony, which later become South Africa.

(Sotho languages include South Sotho, SePedi, and SeTswana).<sup>3</sup> These are many Indigenous languages to be suppressed by just one—English.

Apartheid, institutionalized in 1948 as an extension of the colonial project, was deeply imbedded within the hegemonic politics of White supremacy and the importance of whiteness (Motlhabi, 1985; Mandela, 1994; Vestergaard, 2001) that promoted and practiced the subjugation, objectification, and denigration of the Indigenous people and Indigenous identity in South Africa. Education under apartheid created segregated education based on racial lines and an inferior schooling system for Blacks (Nkomo, 1990). Under apartheid, for example, Black students were not allowed to learn critically about their history and their identity let alone use their language in schools.

Afrikaans, an official language of apartheid, was imposed on the Indigenous peoples of South Africa. There are different views about the origins of Afrikaans. One of the views is that it originated and developed in the Cape colony as a combination of languages spoken by East Indians, African slaves, and Indigenous KhoiSan (Alexander, 1989). Other views point to Afrikaans as a derivative from Dutch as early as the eighteenth century. Du Plessis (2003) argues that while Afrikaans has some influences from other languages, for example French, Khoe, German, English, and African languages, it is largely an influence of Dutch. Like the British who subjugated the Indigenous peoples with English in the earlier contact in the Cape, the Dutch also subjected the Khoi-San communities and the Nguni into Dutch as a language of communication between these communities. Du Plessis documents that because of the

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<sup>3</sup> There are other Indigenous languages in South Africa. For the purpose of this article, we mentioned the Nguni languages that had direct contact with the British and Dutch colonizers during early conquest.

difficulty of the language amongst the Indigenous groups as well and the enslaved peoples, two inter-language forms of Dutch developed with different dialects and this language was later known as Afrikaans.

Unlike English during the British colonization of South Africa, Afrikaans proved to have caused more havoc under apartheid. In 1953, apartheid education system was implemented in South African schools and all Black schools were mandated to use Afrikaans as a medium of instruction. Indigenous communities, however, did not like the imposition of Afrikaans. As a result Black students started sporadic protests. The resistance gained momentum in the 1960s and 70s when students demanded their rights to quality education, including the rights to language of their choice. Because Black students perceived Afrikaans as the language of the oppressor, they protested until these protests culminated into the well-known 16 June 1976 Soweto Uprisings, where Black students burned down schools and demanded the abolition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction as well as equality in education for all. When apartheid was abolished in 1994, both English and Afrikaans were included as part of the eleven official languages in an effort to reconcile a nation that was deeply divided by race.

With the dismantling of apartheid in 1994, all social institutions including education, were reformed in an effort to establish equal opportunities for all. Despite these democratic changes, the education system emerged with dilemmas and challenges. For example, in desegregated schools Indigenous languages were once more left on the margins because most desegregated schools emphasized English as a medium of instruction (Ndimande, 2004; Vally & Dalamba, 1999). This practice has retained English as a dominant language in schools. It is in this context of post-apartheid South

Africa that a discussion of Black parents' negotiations of educational opportunities for their children and the implications of language in these schools is examined.

### **Case Study of Indigenous Parents in South Africa**

This was a qualitative study to explore the ideological beliefs and assumptions that inform the school choices of Black parents in the Gauteng Province, one of the nine provinces of South Africa. South Africa has a population of approximately 51.8 million and Gauteng is the most populated province, with 12.3 million people (Statistics South Africa, 2011). It is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse provinces. After 1994, the Constitution legislated that South Africa should have eleven official languages and recent statistics show that more than a fifth of the population speaks IsiZulu at home and just over 11.5 million use IsiZulu as their first language, followed by IsiXhosa spoken by 8 million people. Afrikaans is the third most popular language in South African households. There are approximately 4.9 million South Africans who speak English as first language (Statistics South Africa, 2011).

In this article, Ndimande focuses on parents' perceptions on language experiences in South African schools. He conducted focus group interviews with 122 Black parents. Languages of the parents mainly included IsiZulu, SeSotho, IsiXhosa. Although the interviews were mostly conducted in these Indigenous languages, the participants could also speak English and Afrikaans. He purposely sampled based on those parents who chose to send their children to formerly White-only schools (examined in this article) and those who did not choose to do so and sent their children to Black township schools. He accomplished this goal by recruiting participants from wealthy suburban neighborhood and from poor Black neighborhoods.

Ndimande conducted four sets of focus group interviews with parents who live in the suburban areas and send their children to desegregated suburban public schools (formerly White-only schools); parents who live in the suburban areas, yet send their children to segregated (Black) township schools; those who live in the township but transfer their children to desegregated public schools in the suburbs; and finally those who live in the township and did not transfer their children to desegregated public schools in the suburbs. The participants in focus groups comprised an average of five parents per group. The interviews were conducted at the homes of the participants over the weekends and/or in the evenings. The parents who participated were mostly women with children in both elementary and secondary public schools.

The interview questions were open-ended and semi-structured, asking about a range of issues about why Indigenous parents chose to send their children to schools outside their neighborhoods; the good and bad qualities of the schools; the implications of culture; tuition costs; transportation; racial challenges; and hopes for their children's future. Some of the questions were:

- a. Why did you choose to send your child to a formerly White-only school rather than a township school (or vice versa)?
- b. What do you see as good qualities of formerly White-only schools and of township schools?
- c. What do you see as some of the limitations of the formerly White-only schools and of township schools?
- d. Some people say that when Black children go to formerly White-only schools, they lose their own culture and language. Do you agree?

- e. Does your child experience any problems at a formerly White-only school (or a township school)? How do you deal with this?

In summary, the interviews centered around the positive and negative experiences of the parents' children in whatever schools they attended and the rationale for sending them to the respective schools. This article focuses on the questions of culture and language.

### **Parents Accounts of Indigenous Languages and Cultures in Schools**

The overall study shows that parents' choices and views of public schools are complicated and complex (Ndimande, 2012). A major theme which emerged in the analysis of parents' views includes the importance of dismantling the apartheid education system that segregated schools by race, caused grave inequalities in education, and has adversely affected the Indigenous communities.

According to the parents, there are no supportive structures to represent all languages and cultures in desegregated schools. Parents bemoaned the increasing loss of Indigenous languages and cultures by their children in these schools. Asked if children who transferred to formerly White-only schools lose their Indigenous languages and cultures, the overwhelming response was 'yes.' Most parents said that their children had lost culture because they no longer wanted to speak IsiZulu, SeSotho, or IsiXhosa at home. Because of the school influence, they are prone to speak English. One parent said:

They lose touch [with our culture] because ... even when they speak to their friends in the township, they converse in English instead of speaking our language, IsiZulu. Even the movement [i.e. how they carry themselves] has changed. You know, the style of talking changes completely even at home. As a mother you get treated as a person who doesn't know English.

Asked if losing culture was a bad thing, most parents agreed that this was the worst thing they could imagine. One parent referred to Ubuntu in their statement so it is explained before the parent quote. Indigenous people of South Africa are rooted in the concept of Ubuntu, which means affirming to others with whom you live. It is an Indigenous way to show humanity to each other as people; a belief that people coexist and are not threatened by their neighbors. It is a sense of belonging and it can diminish if some groups were oppressed in the community. The parent stated in regard to losing culture that

I don't want my child to change. Our family structures are different from White family structures. How do you handle a situation where your child is unable to talk to her grandparents because she doesn't know SeSotho and speaks English only? There won't be any communication in the family. We don't want them to lose 'Ubuntu.' 'Ubuntu' is their identity. Do you want to tell me that if White people can learn to speak SeSotho, then they would change their culture to that of BaSotho? It won't happen. We don't want to be Whites either

This parent quote suggests that the suppression of Indigenous languages in schools might jeopardize the spirit of Ubuntu in their communities and not only threaten Indigenous language but explicitly undercuts these children's learning their cultural values and from knowing who they are. Another parent commented about the general loss of cultural beliefs.

let me give an example-- about manners. Our children who attend White schools can speak to anybody anyhow they want, but in our culture this is taboo. You have to show respect to adults, for example, a child is not supposed to look an

adult in the eye. But with our children, they do all these things, that is the reason we try to teach them correct manners at home. Another example, in our culture, when you pass something like money, we don't use the left hand. It is disrespectful.

Parents say that if the schools valued the Indigenous cultures equally to that of the White culture, their children would know their culture and value the Indigenous ways of doing things. This parent was also concerned about the loss of culture in these schools:

Yeah...the fact that our children go to school in the city results in problems for them and all of us. I see it as them losing us or us losing them. You know, sometimes you don't even know how to stop it. It gets too late. If these children can enter the house just now, you would see, they don't even know how to say, "dumelang' ka go iketla [good morning in a patient way], ...ke Botho. He would just enter and immediately start talking to you and interrupt you even if you have old people around you. They don't know an adult anymore. White children call their mothers by first names. We don't have that in our culture.

Another issue raised by the parents in relation to Indigenous languages was the messages they receive from schools about the correlation of academic success and English. This message suggests that English, as a colonial language, should be preferred and encouraged to Indigenous parents because the school structures believe that is only through English that their children could be successful in schools and in higher education as they develop their careers. In this regard, one parent said:

They [schools] usually encourage us to use English at home in order to improve our children's vocabulary. You will find now that our mother tongue gets

neglected because everybody at home has to speak English. We feel obliged to speak English just because we want our children to improve their vocabulary.

Some parents questioned this message that values English to an extent that Indigenous languages are neglected. While they agree that their children need to know English in order to be successful in school, they do not believe this should trample over their Indigenous languages and cultures. This is how one parents stated it:

This language issue... it is up to the parent to decide if she wants her child to retain the language. They talk about this issue on the radio and on television. They say we should teach our children our languages. The eleven languages that they talk about simply means if you are Venda, be proud and teach your children Venda and be fluent in it before they start concentrating in English. I view English as just a language of communication. You can find a job with English—that's fine, but you still need to know your identity.

These voices show that Indigenous parents' choice to have their children attend formerly White-only schools comes at a cost. Based on the parents' narratives, white schools do not value Indigenous knowledge's and suppress Indigenous languages and cultural ways of knowing. These are ongoing struggles in postapartheid South Africa; Indigenous languages and cultures in public schools are still marginalized.

The role of English in the suppression of Indigenous languages and cultures is of grave concern. But there have been recent discussions at the government level about the dominance of English in the education system. The Minister of Basic Education is engaged in discussions that can provide possibilities for a mother tongue instruction along with English (Masombuka & Monama, 2010; Masombuka, 2011). This suggests

that Indigenous peoples of South Africa have continued to wage a struggle that is beginning to be noticed by the government about their languages that have been excluded in public education. The ruling party in South Africa, the African National Congress, has just concluded its 53rd Convention in Mangaung on December 20, 2012. At this convention, the party proposed a new language policy that will allow the teaching of an Indigenous language to be mandatory in all schools. Whether these language policy discussions would be successful in this Eurocentric education environment in post-apartheid South Africa is another issue that we need to pay attention to.

### **Discussing the South African Research**

Parents' concerns about racism in formerly White-only schools focus attention on the one-way process of desegregation that has resulted in the mistreatment of Black children in these schools; that is, desegregated schools have not embraced the presence of Black students nor their culture. Most Black parents said their children experience different kinds of racism and discrimination in these schools. Further, parents' concerns about acculturation and cultural prejudice in formerly White-only schools include curriculum and promotion of English language and dominant culture at the expense of Indigenous language and cultures.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o (1986) describes language as a carrier of cultural values and beliefs, "moral, ethical and aesthetic values" (p. 14), and collective experiences and history. Language is "a set of eyeglasses" through which people "view themselves and [their] place in the universe" and through which a people know themselves "as members of the human race" (p. 14). Further Ngugi argues that colonial alienation "on a larger social scale, it is like producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies" (p. 28).

In the discussion of parents concerns these children are made to be the “bodiless heads and headless bodies” that Ngugi (1986, p. 28) warned about. They are required to leave their language and cultural selves at home and take on the language, values, and beliefs of the schools, teachers, and White peers.

Parents describe schools that value only English, where Indigenous languages are completely marginalized. Parents are instructed to abandon their languages and cultural instruction at home to encourage their children to succeed in the Eurocentric schools. English-only language policies, with their tacit values and cultural expectations is posited here as the expression of imperialism. “In South Africa, over the past forty to fifty years, Korana, Nguni, Seroa, /Xam, //Xegwi, Xiri have become extinct” (Prah, 2003, p145) through policies of imperialism and English language dominance. “Imperialism presents itself as the cure” (Ngugi, 1986, p. 3) for the ills of Indigenous culture and language. But these parents are not content to accept the neo-colonial mindset that tells them to forget their culture and language. They are questioning and challenging these practices by teaching their children language and culture at home.

Ngugi explains that “the biggest weapon wielded and actually daily unleashed by imperialism” can be understood as “the cultural bomb” which “annihilate[s] a people's belief in their names, ... languages, ... environment, ... heritage of struggle, ... unity, ... capacities, and ultimately in themselves.” (p. 3). He contends that this cultural bomb makes people want to distance themselves from what they come to understand is the wasteland of non-achievement of the past and to want to associate with other peoples’ languages, cultures, histories and realities rather than their own. While these parents

describe white-only schools that are cultural bombs for their children, these parents are not accepting this bomb.

Ndimande (2005) argued that these parents are not duped by a neo-colonial system but are cognizant of the implications. They are faced with the hegemonic social discourse that elevates English over all Indigenous languages. This discourse assumes a lack of literatures within Indigenous languages suppressing that there is a strong storied tradition, Indigenous languages are considered too numerous to use for education, and creating instructional materials and resources in Indigenous languages are a waste and draw funds away from English instruction (Qorro, 2009; Seepe, 2001).

Parents have to make choices within the limited options provided by a neo-colonial education system. All parents wanted their Indigenous languages and cultures to be recognized and valued in schools. Brock-Utne's (2006, 2007) studies showed that when students and teachers spoke Indigenous languages students were actively engaged in asking and answering questions but when students were taught in English there were silent classes where students did not engage. Brock-Utne's studies show that using an unfamiliar language of English is a barrier to acquiring subject matter knowledge. Galabawa (2004) further shows that English forms a barrier to students moving on to higher levels of education. According to Alexander (2007)

we should not resist the completely understandable—and justifiable—desire of African, and other, people, to become proficient in English, but we should not let this desire undermine the value and the potential of the indigenous languages. We should formulate and implement counter-hegemonic strategies at all levels of our societies (p. 7).

Bokamba (2007) debunks the myth that says English is better situated to be the language of communication and governance in Africa. According to Bokamba's analysis, Indigenous languages too can accomplish this task especially in African countries where the majority of the people speak them.

Seepe (2001) argues that societal development would never be achieved without placing Indigenous languages and cultures at the heart of development. In one of his compelling arguments, he characterizes reliance on a foreign language as the medium of instruction as a neo-colonial ideology that still lingers in post-colonial nations such as South Africa. Seepe calls to our attention that second language instruction in schools is actually counter intuitive because it slows down the process of acquiring knowledge as well as the depth of the knowledge acquired. While studies have shown that multilingual instruction is a better method in diverse African communities, most postcolonial nations have been reluctant in promoting African languages in their educational institutions (Seepe, 2001).

Studies about language instruction in Tanzania (Brock-Utne, 2006, 2007; Galabawa, 2004) suggest that education in Indigenous languages actively engaged students while instruction in English was a barrier to student involvement and learning. Ndimande's study likewise suggests that Indigenous parents are aware of the inequalities brought by English-only instruction and the suppression of their languages and cultures in formerly White-only schools. They add another dimension to this discussion of language. They are clear and informed about the marginalization of their children through language in schools. They are also aware of the long term implications of this experience to their cultural identities as Indigenous communities. However, they navigate these struggles in

ways in which their children can be successful in attaining education to better their lives within this marginalizing socio-economic and political system. We turn next to discuss another social, political, and cultural system, that of the Métis in Canada.

### **Indigenous Language, and Cultural Histories of the Métis in Canada**

In this section we focus upon the research by Iseke with Métis Elders in Canada. It begins with a brief overview of the history and languages of Métis in Canada. We then provide a methodology including cultural and research protocols for the case study of Métis Elders in Canada. We then introduce the 4 Elders whose stories appear in the paper. This is followed by four sections that introduce the stories from Elders and analysis of these stories within each section. The sections 1) introduce the meaning of Nêhiawuk language, 2) the negotiation of identities through language in Métis contexts, 3) importance of sharing stories in Indigenous languages, and 4) Michif language negotiations of the Métis.

### **History and Languages of Métis in Canada**

The colonizers enacted and institutionalized colonization in Canada and created the Indian Act that currently makes a distinction between Indians and persons such that even today within the Indian Act Indians are not persons (Iseke-Barnes, 2008; Lawrence, 2000, 2004; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). It created and continues to create a control mechanism that legislates identities in order to systematically but arbitrarily control who is and is not ‘an Indian’. It further designated Métis as outside the confines of the Indian Act. But Métis are still considered Indigenous peoples by Canada’s 1982 constitution (Anderson, 2000). Section 35 of Canada’s constitution of 1982 recognizes 3 groups of Indigenous (Aboriginal) peoples in Canada – the First Nations, the

Inuit, and the Métis. Anderson (2000) explains that this distinction is more a fiction than a reality as distinctions between Métis and First Nations, both historically and today, are not, nor have they ever been, so clear.

The First Nations in Canada are considered the first peoples to live in the territories that eventually became Canada. One of these groups that spreads across a vast territory from Quebec to Alberta are known as the Crees or in their own languages some refer to themselves as N’hiawuk. The Métis National Council (MNC) – a national governance body for Métis peoples – describes the Métis as descendents of First Nations peoples of the prairies, often of Cree women, and European fur traders, often French men (MNC website <http://www.Métisnation.ca> under the heading The Métis Nation – paragraph 1). The unique Indigenous Nation emerged “the Métis people—with their own unique culture, traditions, language (Michif), way of life, collective consciousness and nationhood“ (MNC website under the heading The Métis Nation – paragraph 1).

The histories of the Métis are complicated by the vast geographic region in which Métis lived, worked, travelled, and oversaw the land of the historic Métis homeland that includes the 3 prairie provinces (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta), parts of Ontario, British Columbia, the Northwest Territories, and northern United States (MNC website under heading The Métis Nation; Iseke-Barnes, 2009). Métis “patterns of land settlement and relocation in the United States and Canada ... [document] kinship ties [that] bound these communities together as borders and government policies worked to sever or at least strain them” (Iseke-Barnes, 2009, p. 84).

Many linguists particularly focus upon Michif, the languages of the Métis people, spoken in Western Canada that combines Cree and French with additional borrowing

from English and other First Nations languages including Ojibwe and Assiniboine (Rhodes, 1977; Bakker, 1997). There are multiple variations of Michif spoken across this vast homeland – some emphasizing more the original Indigenous language (in many cases Cree), some focused more on French.

Ethnologue (2009) is a reference work that catalogues, what it claims to be, “all of the world’s 6,909 known living languages”. This is opposed to the more than 40,000 names for languages in use today (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007, p. 11). Ethnologue estimates that there are only 600 Michif speakers scattered across Canada, with some speakers residing in the northern United States. Michif is considered highly endangered. Métis peoples in Canada continue the work to sustain their languages (LearnMichif.com).

In Canada, Métis Elders tell stories of the colonial past and create hope through their ongoing work of nurturing understandings of cultural traditions, spiritual healing practices, and language education (Iseke, 2011; 2010; Iseke & Moore, 2011; Iseke-Barnes, 2009). Their work in Indigenous communities supports the ongoing education of community members. Narratives about the work in communities in relation to issues of Indigenous language are shared in this article.

### **Research with Métis Elders in Canada**

Iseke’s larger research program involves working with 7 Elders from various communities in Canada. A sub-study worked with 3 Métis grandfathers and 1 Métis grandmother who share their understandings of storytelling and focus on “Métis storylines, histories, cultural contexts, and pedagogies” (Iseke, 2010, 83). Their roles as Elders are based on their knowledge and the way they use their knowledge for the

collective good (Iseke, 2010). The term Elder describes a person who is the cultural and knowledge keeper in communities (Iseke, 2010).

This research program involves Métis Elders as collaborators in order to better understand the sharing of stories and histories through Métis pedagogies. The intentions of the research were: (1) to respond to the need for Indigenous interpretations and representations of culture, history, pedagogy, and curriculum; (2) to provide increased research opportunities and publicize the work of Indigenous Elders; and (3) to generate better understandings of the relationships between Métis peoples' knowledges and mainstream education and research practices.

In this research program, Elders were contacted based on their previous involvement with a research program. They were contacted by telephone and told of the storytelling research focus and they consented to come to Thunder Bay in Northern Ontario to be with other Elders and to be video- and audio-recorded. Elders were welcomed to the territory by a local Elder through ceremony, given tobacco and cloth by Iseke to ask them to participate through appropriate cultural protocols. This acknowledged that truth would be spoken in the research process and the researcher's responsibility to the integrity of the stories told and to respect and honour the Elders throughout the research process. It was also a commitment to continue to work with the Elders in representing their stories in media productions and written forms.

Iseke provided the Elders a set of research questions to help them think about stories and discussions important for them to share. They were free to respond in whatever way they saw fit. A talking circle format was used to encourage discussion and to ensure opportunities for full participation of each Elder. Elders were audio- and video-

recorded while sitting in circle over a 9 day period. At the conclusion of our time together a feast and ceremony was held. Ceremony was also conducted in the space where the video productions and research work would continue.

All Elder discussions were transcribed and sorted into topics. Follow up interviews of two days duration were recorded in Elders' homes or in Thunder Bay and then transcribed and sorted. Film scripts, articles, and chapters were written based on the transcripts. Iseke continued to dialogue with the Elders via e-mail and telephone as well as at community events and gatherings. This helped to continue dialogue about the stories shared. Iseke has been in contact with the Elders and shared a version of the paper and sought feedback from the Elders. We next introduce the Elders who participated in the research.

### **Introducing the Elders**

Tom McCallum was born and raised in Ile à la Crosse, Saskatchewan and is fluent in Nehiyawewin and Michif – a unique language to the Métis peoples composed of an Indigenous language with French and/or English language words used. Tom has a passion for the language and promotes its use as he explains the way the language has shaped his way of seeing the world. Tom grew up on the land and has a close relationship with it and in working with medicines. Tom uses traditional teachings to work with inmates, youth, men's healing circles, and in cross-cultural workshops. Tom shares stories in this text and has reviewed this text prior to its submission to make any changes he saw fit. We have edited Tom's stories in the interest of space.

George “Lonewalker” McDermott was Métis from northern Alberta and lived in Lumby, British Columbia until his passing in 2009. He travelled throughout Canada and

the United States in order to share his knowledge of traditional medicines. George learned about life on the land, picking medicines, and healing practices from his grandparents and Elders in Métis and Cree communities in northern Alberta. George shared his knowledge of plant medicines and healing, as well as his knowledge of the land, in healing the physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional aspects of people.

Albert Desjarlais was born and raised on the Elizabeth Métis Settlement in northern Alberta and later moved to High Prairie, Alberta. Grandfather Albert learned traditional Indigenous spiritual and healing practices from his grandfather who lived these traditions in the 1800s. Albert has the honour of being the sixth generation healer to receive the teachings passed down in this family. Albert has been married to grandmother Alma for over 40 years.

Alma Desjarlais was born in Frog Lake, Alberta, a First Nations community in Northeastern Alberta. Grandmother Alma's parents were Cree. She was stripped of her First Nations status by the Indian act, upon marrying her husband Albert, a Métis, and so she became Métis. Her son indicated that her children are not being allowed by Indian Affairs to return to First Nations status. Her grandmother and family were healers and helped her to become a healer herself. Alma is fluent in Cree and has become a pipe carrier<sup>4</sup>, works with healing medicines, and is part of the healing lodge that she and her husband Albert have on their land. She also oversees a cultural camp for young people to help them learn Cree traditions.

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<sup>4</sup> Pipe Carriers are spiritual people in communities that use a sacred pipe to pray and ask for assistance and to seek a greater connection with the Creator. One needs to develop a level of spiritual awareness before being gifted a pipe.

### **The Meaning of Nehiyawak Language in Métis Communities**

All four Elders spoke about language and its importance in community. Their stories and explanations take us into an understanding of the importance of language within this political-linguistic context. Tom McCallum shared a story about Indigenous language and its importance in retaining culture and expressing understandings from his Nehiyaw perspective.

This language that we speak is the language that we grew up with. Most people call it Cree but there is no such thing as a Cree. Cree is a French word, and that's what those French people called us ... Now, Cree is a plural. Christineaux is the singular and if you translate it, it means Christ-like because of the habits the people had of ... sharing. ... but the English speaking people could not say ... [it], so they said Cree, and that's how we came to be Cree.

Bakker (2004), a linguist, reports “there are ... two languages called Cree ... the language spoken by First Nations in many Canadian provinces ... [and] the mixed Cree-French Michif language [spoken by the Métis peoples of many provinces in Canada]... also called ‘Cree’ by its speakers” (p. 6). Gingell further describes that Cree speakers use many variations of the language and its variants that are formed in relation to English. Campbell (1995), a prominent Métis scholar and Elder, uses the expression village English to describe the language, “dialect and rhythm of my village and my father’s generation” (p. 2). Bakker (2004) reports that Métis English is the expression used by Métis to describe the language of the Métis. However, Gingell (2010) uses the expressions Creeenglish and Michiflish to refer to Cree and Michif languages as they are mixed with English languages.

Smith (1987) describes the writing of David Thompson (1916) who was the noted explorer and cartographer of the Canadian and American northwest. In Thompson's description the uneducated French Canadians called the people "Krees" which he said came from the name of one group of people referred to as "Keethisteno" but that was mispronounced "Kristeno" and then by contraction Krees. Tom disrupts this entire dialogue of naming of Cree and Michif when he further describes the importance of naming ones own people in ones own language.

In our own language we are Nehiyawak. And that word Nehiyaw, comes from two root words: The Ne comes from the Newo which means four, and the last part iyaw, comes from the word Miyaw, which means body. So we're the four body people, or the four directions people. That's how we see ourselves. That's our connection to the universe. ... That's the difference when we speak our language and when we speak English. The language is dynamic, the language that we speak, Nehiyawewin .... It's got an instant connection, so your worldview is changed right away, everything is changed when you think in Cree and you start speaking that. It's a whole different perspective that you have of life as opposed to English which is a noun-based language and it objectifies things.

The four directions people is a reference to the medicine wheel worldview in which the four directions – east, south, west, north – are integrated into a way of life, and the four states of being (mind, body, spirit, emotions) are connected to these directions and to our understanding of finding balance in the world (Bopp, Bopp, Brown & Lane, 1984; McCabe, 2008; Hart, 2002). The name Nehiyawak connects us to the medicine wheel and to our identity as a people.

George McDermott explained about the Indigenous language

how can you tell ... in any other language but the language it was born? You can't do it. There is no English words. ... You can touch on the surface of it, but not the deep feeling and the way it was given to us. ... If you were going to say it in English and translate it into the Indian language, how many translators would you need?

George McDermott further explains that

When I get into a gathering like this [gathering of Elders who all speak Cree but were speaking English because it was for a non-Cree-speaking researcher], I try to think in English and thinking it out in Cree. So it's a ... strain. ... We can make it into a real huge something ... or just simplify it and say “hm, as long as we understand each other”.

### **Negotiating Identities through Language in Métis Contexts**

Tom describes the ability to understand each other and the lack of conflict between First Nations and Métis peoples.

whether you were Chipewyan or whether you were Cree or whether you were Métis, ... there was no such thing as hey you're not this and you're not that or you're not good enough or this and that. There was not a lot of that because they were still tied very, very close to the land and that kind of lifestyle ... A Cree person trapping is the same as a Métis person trapping ... There was not a lot of difference in terms of one not accepting the other. There was not that when I grew up.

Tom further explains about rivalries today.

Now today there is a lot of controversy. What is a Métis? Who is a Métis? There's so much. When we were growing up we never had that problem. Everybody knew who everybody was. ... The only difference is the Indian act separated us in terms of the administration. But we trap. The treaty guy trapping would be the same as a Métis guy trapping. ... There's no difference in lifestyle. The one difference I really noticed when I was a child, was those [Cree] people from Canoe Lake man could they ever speak Cree. They had a word for everything - to describe everything. It was wonderful to be able to hear them talk. It was like singing. It was so beautiful to hear that.

Tom further explains about Nehiyawak, Cree, and English.

You see before the Europeans came here, we were Nehiyawak. After the Europeans came here we were no longer Nehiyawak we turned out to be Cree. Now who's more powerful the Europeans or the Creator? The Creator gave us a way and a language, but these others that came gave us a different name, and today we use that name. So in our minds we have that belief and that's what gets us into trouble, is our minds. Because of the way we speak is the way we think. ... But when you speak English you're thinking in an English perspective. I know that's the language that we all use .... A lot of us don't know any other language. We know the English language, that's all. And that's not a feeling language. It's not a verb-based language, a feeling language, like the Aboriginal language. ...

Do we need to tell it [our perspective and stories] in Indigenous language? Yes we do. Absolutely we have to. But the first step of course is to share it in English so we have a direction, because that's what we understand. The hope is

that eventually we will venture into the direction of the west of the medicine wheel, the period of great mysteries. The great darkness, we call it. The darkness, which is where we are walking right now. We're walking in a period of darkness of our language and our culture, because we don't know it now.

Again Tom refers to the medicine wheel and our location and identity connecting within it. Language is a key to this understanding. Tom here refers to the western door of the medicine wheel and the very difficult situation of severe language loss and alienation from our culture by younger generations. It also is in reference to the dominance of colonial languages which serve to oppress Indigenous languages.

Alma Desjarlais discussed the importance of sharing and teaching in the language

The stories should be ... told in our language and then translated. ... I always tell my kids, they don't sound as good in English when I tell them something.

Albert Desjarlais explains about language

What I go by is more or less what the Creator has given to us. I have to go that way because that's how I grew up. ... but there again it's hard when somebody else is teaching our kids, grandchildren, ...

There again I think it's up to the people. If they can learn one language, why can't they learn the first language the Creator has given to his people, the first people? I don't think it would be that hard. Some people learn many languages. I know four or five different languages and can speak and I believe that's a good way to be. ... I call this [English a] borrowed language, white man's language. And that's all that it is to me, because I never

learned it. ... It's not the same, they're trying to tell a story in English than in the Cree language.

In discussing the earlier quotes, Tom explains the distinction between naming oneself by words in his own language Nehiyawak and being named in someone else's words – Cree. Smith (1999) in a section called “They Came, They Saw, They Named, They Claimed” (p. 80) describes the colonial project of naming the lands as “the spoils of discovery” (p. 81). Europeans used their languages to classify, describe, and claim the Indigenous world (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007, p. 7). As Tom explains, we have come to accept the colonial naming as Crees and have naturalized English such that our minds are impacted by these belief systems. The Indian Act, another colonial process, created distinctions between close relatives like those in Tom's community and the nearby reserve community, naming and claiming some as ‘Indian’ and some as not. From this defining and controlling of identities, the Métis have come to define themselves in the new colonial agenda of controlling who is and is not Métis.

In 2002 the Métis National Council defined Métis as “a person who self-identifies as Métis, is distinct from other Aboriginal peoples, is of historic Métis Nation ancestry and who is accepted by the Métis Nation” (MNC website <http://www.Métisnation.ca>). The historic 2003 Supreme Court of Canada Powley Case confirmed this Métis identity. Being Métis in Canada is inherently a political reality. But this definition is not without controversy. Brown (2008) suggests that scholars have rejected definitions of Métis based on race and blood quantum. Instead they consider family, community, language, economic factors and identity opinions (Brown, 2008; Makokis, 2008). Belcourt (2006), a Métis from Alberta, echoes Tom's questions about who is a Métis in his experiences the

Métis are misunderstood, often treated in a demeaning manner, and have our Aboriginal status and rights to exist questioned,

The Métis continue to exist and assert their collective identity as an Indigenous nation with a unique history and connection to a Métis homeland and an Indigenous language. But the political controversy of Métis identity continues. On Jan. 8, 2013 a 12-year court case concluded with the judgment that “Métis are ‘Indians’ within the meaning of s. 91(24)” of the Constitution Act, 1867 (MNC website, Press release, Jan. 8, 2013). In this press release the Métis National Council suggests that Canada denied the claim vigorously indicating it was based on definitional difficulties but the court rejected Canada’s assertion that ‘difficulty’ was not sufficient reason to deny the claims of Métis. The press release further indicates that

As the court noted Canada’s own documents admit that Métis are more exposed to discrimination and other social disabilities and that “in the absence of Federal initiative in this field they are the most disadvantaged of all Canadian citizens.”

It is not clear what the implications of the court’s decision might be. However, it is surely to create ripples and have implications at least within political arenas. Being Métis is inherently a political reality. This court case just affirms this reality that Métis have always known.

### **Importance of Sharing Stories in Indigenous Languages**

Each of the Elders asserts that the stories of Indigenous peoples need to be shared in Indigenous languages by Indigenous peoples and from our own points of view (Hill, 2002). This enables the intertwining of identity, history, culture, and worldview

(Grandbois & Sanders, 2009). In encouraging Indigenous storytelling practices to be shared, one needs to consider the context of the story, and how, by whom, and when a story is told such that the integrity of the story is sustained (Eder, 2007). Tom suggests that everything changes when one thinks in the language. It's a feeling language rather than using a noun-based European language. Within Nehiyawak, the storyteller and their audience are not separate from the stories but the stories reflect the people and are situated within the context of community and a knowledge system and medicine wheel perspective which is sustained in storytelling (McLeod, 2000).

Each Elder spoke of the importance of sharing stories in the Indigenous language. The stories encourage understanding that life is sacred and we are part of a whole which can be contrasted with Western thought which separates secular and sacred knowledge (Eder, 2007). Knowing the stories in the language enables a strong foundation in Nehiyaw culture (Makokis, 2008). Given that many Indigenous children, and their parents too, do not speak the language but see English as their usual means of communication it is important to encourage Indigenous language use (Aguilera & LeCompte, 2007; Crawford, 1995; Littlebear, 2003; McCarty & Zepeda, 1995). Tom, George, Alma and Albert recognize this as a reflection of where we are and that we need to go back to the language and culture. A Cree informant for studies conducted by Kouritzin (1999) described his connection to the Cree language that is centered in "The soul or the spirit, the Cree spirit, is sustained by the earth which is sustained by the language of the earth" (p. 213). This medicine wheel perspective, particularly focusing on spirituality and the connection to land/earth, is reflected by Daniels-Fiss (2008, p. 238) who explains

The Cree word for “land” is *okawimawaskiy*, comprising *okawimaw* (mother) and *askiy* (land, country, earth, or world); and *okawimawaskiy* provided everything people needed for their health and well-being, and the people thanked Mother-earth daily through prayer, rituals, and ceremonies using the language *kise manitow* [Creator] gave to them. Their language, *nehiyawewin*, became known to the newcomers as Cree. Although the language is seen as a gift to the people from *kise manitow*, its lexicon comes from *okawimawaskiy*. Just as the land is sacred in the Cree culture, so too is the language. These two, the land and the language, work in unison, creating an ever-deepening relation between the speaker and the environment.

Previously we described the vast territory over which the Métis lived and travelled and the connections amongst them forming a historic society based on kinship relations, shared economic and lifestyle choices and that their mobility “was the glue that kept the people connected throughout this vast territory” (Teillet, 2008, p. 38). Today Métis are still mobile, demonstrating connections to large harvest areas and connections to extensive historic Métis trade routes (Teillet, p. 38). Further, Métis equate conceptions of home and community with conceptions of landscape so in Canadian census data questions of ‘residence’ that equate it with ‘your address’ or ‘your house’, and questions about ‘community’ that equate it with ‘town/city/village’ are reductive constructs that Métis do not easily adhere to (Teillet, p. 39).

This is why, when “the Government of Canada attempted to extinguish [land title] through the issuance of “scrip” and land grants in the late 19th and 20th centuries” (MNC website under heading Citizenship) they were unsuccessful in extinguishing the

understanding of a people as Métis. It is embodied in the language, in the culture, and in an ongoing relationship to landscape. It is a strong and continuing bond for Métis peoples in Canada.

### **Michif - Language Negotiations of the Métis**

Michif, as studied by many linguists, is a mixed language with two source languages – French and Cree (Bakker, 1997). Michif is unusual in that “the bulk of the verbs are derived from Plains Cree, while the bulk of the nouns and elements of the Noun phrase such as determiners, numerals, adjectives, and possessive pronouns are derived from French” (Rosen, 2008, 613).

To those who believe that Michif is just a variety of either French or Cree, Bakker indicates that

People who also speak French do not always use a form that is closer to standard French than those who do not know this language. Similarly, those who also know a Native language do not conform more to the Cree norm. In short, knowledge of Cree and French influences the amount of French and Cree use in Michif to a certain extent, especially in the number of lexical items, but it does not influence the quality or the nature of the Cree or French elements. This shows again that Michif must be seen as a separate language, independent of both source languages. (Bakker, 1997, p. 160).

Linguists are intensely interested in mixed languages such as Michif that combine elements from both languages in a unique mixing that draws from speakers of the language who may well have been fluent in both languages (Bakker & Mous, 1994; Matras & Bakker, 2003). There is a common perception in Métis community that the

Michif language first developed amongst the children of French fathers and Nehiyow mothers and that their fluency in both the languages of their parents enabled them to speak to both parents. As adults they taught their children both languages simultaneously and a mixed language emerged. This perception is not universally accepted as it creates the impression that Michif is a children's language which is clearly not the case. Michif was the dominant language of Western Canada for 100 years or more.

There is a negotiation of identity, understandings, language, culture, community, and self within these language engagements that the Métis have long engaged, and continue to engage, ever evolving in a changing political landscape, but emerging as a strong Indigenous nation founded on the strengths of our Nehiyaw and European ancestors. This is not some kind of hybridity – a notion in which identities are separate and fixed – Indigenous and European – but rather a drawing upon the strengths of both Nations in the production of an emergent and ever evolving National identity – the Métis peoples of Canada. This identity, negotiated within the strengths of two parent languages (and other Indigenous language influences), is difficult for mainstream scholars, linguists, and everyday citizens to navigate and accept. But it is the everyday reality of these Elders and the communities from which they come. It is the negotiation of identities that has worked for many years and continues to work for these Elders, despite the fixing of identities and creation of boundaries inherent in the political processes at work in Canada.

Makoni and Pennycook (2007) document the colonial processes through which languages were classified and quantified and assumed to have been “brought into existence from this classification that was invented by the European” (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007, p. 13). As such the process of colonization of languages overlooked

how languages came into existence and created assumptions about language diversity embedded in quantitative and enumerative strategies, “while missing the qualitative question of where diversity lies.” (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007, p. 16). Fishman (2007), Harrison (2007), and Nicholas (2011) document the relationship between language and culture outlining the many ways that losing a language means losing a way of life. Fishman then suggests strategies for revitalizing a language.

### **A Comparative Approach**

Our work through these two case studies is to compare two situations of language and cultural oppression and revitalization in order to understand the ongoing reality of colonial and neo-colonial ideologies. We want to draw parallels from each context to support cultural and language struggles and recovery within both countries. In comparing across contexts with very different histories, one in the global South and one North each with racial categorization and repression of identities, one on the African continent with oppressors as the numeric majority and one in North America with oppressors who are the numeric minority, and comparing relationships to self and culture within the languages.

### **Language Histories**

It is important to consider similarities and differences of language histories. Michif and Afrikaans are both contact languages – languages that are generated when two language groups come into contact with each other. And both languages include a colonial language and an Indigenous language. But the two languages also differ in their genesis and their colonial relation.

Michif is the mixed-language developed by the Métis that draws on historic Indigenous language of Cree/Nehiyawak and French. Michif is a unique language expressing Métis understandings of the world in which they live in both the colonial and the Indigenous languages and was created in the homes and lives of Métis peoples. The complexities of both parent languages are often reflected in mixed languages such as Michif (Bakker, 1997).

A mixed-language like Michif can be distinguished from a pidgin – a language developed when two language groups come together but neither are speakers of both languages and so a basic communication system develops for trade or other contact activities but the people do not develop a full knowledge of each other's languages (Mous, 2003; Thomason, 1997). A mixed language also differs from a Creole language which generally has one clear parent language and diverse language inputs from multiple languages that cannot necessarily be traced to a particular source language (Sebba, 1997; Thomason & Terrence, 1988).

Unlike Michif, Afrikaans was not developed by the Indigenous peoples of South Africa. It is a contact language which is mainly Dutch with Indigenous and other languages added. Afrikaans was developed within the colonial context and is largely a colonial language. Indigenous peoples of South Africa were forced to speak Afrikaans in institutional contexts but continued to speak and use their Indigenous languages in their communities. Michif, in contrast, became the lingua franca of the Michif communities, being used for commerce, trade, community communications, and in everyday life. The relationship to Michif by Métis is like the relationship to any Indigenous language by its

speakers. Afrikaans, in contrast, was largely imposed as a colonial language and was resisted by the Indigenous peoples as it was associated with the apartheid regime.

Both countries were first colonized by a major European imperial power – the Netherlands for South Africa and France for Canada. Both countries were later colonized by the British. The role of English then is a complicated one historically and today. English in both countries was not combined with other languages to form a new language. In RSA English, although a colonial language, was preferred by the Indigenous populations because it was not associated with the apartheid institution. But English amongst the Métis in Canada has been resisted as a colonial language just as Afrikaans was resisted in South Africa. And yet Indigenous peoples in both countries find themselves speaking English more and more.

### **Racial Categorization and Repression of Identities**

In both South Africa and Canada, colonization created racial categories. In South Africa, apartheid created the racial categories: Blacks, Coloureds, Indians, and Whites. In Canada, the Indian Act created racial categories: First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Whites. The arbitrary but controlling practices of defining people and their identities has created complicated racializations in both countries. In both countries racial categories were contested and tied to white supremacy, control of the land and resources, and a means of segregation of people and denial to equal opportunities.

But in our Indigenous languages, whether Zulu, SeSotho, N’hiawuk or Michif we have our own names for ourselves. We need not rely on racialization from a government official to know who we are. When the categorizations change, as for the Métis peoples, we are aware that we have not changed. Our languages and cultures tell us who we are.

This is why colonial governments suppressed languages through the imposition of a colonial language. They wanted the people to jettison their connections to their culture that were formed through the language. It is why resisting language erasure is so important in continuing neocolonial times.

### **Demographics and Impacts on Languages**

When colonial languages are seen as being natural, neutral, and beneficial in communities then what happens to Indigenous languages and Indigenous peoples in these communities? There are differences here between South Africa and Canada partially determined by the numbers of speakers of the Indigenous language as compared to the number of speakers of the dominant language. In South Africa, with 51.8 million population, 41 million or 71% of the population are Indigenous peoples (SAS, 2011). Indigenous languages are still spoken by the majority of the population in the country but they are relegated to a low status position (Alexander, 2001). It is not so much the dominance of colonial languages but rather disempowering effects on Indigenous languages that is of concern there.

In Canada, with a population of 31.6 million, a total of 1.17 million or less than 4% of the population identified themselves as an Aboriginal person (Statistics Canada 2006 census data, [www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca)). Indigenous languages in Canada are under threat of disappearing with only 4% of all Métis able to speak an Aboriginal language and only 18% of all Aboriginal children able to speak at least one Aboriginal language (Statistics Canada 2006 census data). The younger generations are left to define themselves using the words of the colonizer, words that can imprison (Vizenor, 1978; Blaeser, 1996) and this creates a sense of powerlessness (Maria Campbell in Iseke-Barnes, 2003, p. 220).

Clearly in South Africa the ability to sustain the language amidst the dominance of English is supported by numbers of speakers in communities while in Canada the relative small number of Indigenous language speakers as compared to the dominant population means our Indigenous languages are in sharp decline and in some cases, such as Michif, are considered severely threatened languages.

### **Languages and Relationships to Self and Culture**

Languages are expression of identity and culture – on this the Métis Elders and the Black parents agree. A parent in the South African study shared about Ubuntu – a culturally significant understanding that children need to learn from their families and communities in order to function in their culture. Ubuntu teaches that people coexist and should not threaten each other nor dominate one another, and should have equal access to the land. Likewise, the Métis Elders in Canada discuss medicine wheel teachings that are inherent in the name the people call themselves and in the lives and practices of a people. Medicine wheel teachings teach about balance, interrelationships, and being in relationship with the land. Both Ubuntu and medicine wheel understandings are developed within the Indigenous languages to enable the learner to function well within the community and to understand the culture.

### **Relationships to English**

In South Africa a parent described the situation of Indigenous language erasure due to English dominance and the relationships between children and culture as “them losing us and us losing them”. In the Métis study, Tom referred to the western door of the medicine wheel and “walking in a period of darkness in our language and our culture”.

Part of this darkness is brought by the dominance of English language and the demise of the Indigenous language due to English.

Currently in both countries there is the situation of another wave of colonial impacts on language through the imposition of English. This time the neocolonial condition includes English being the language of instruction in schools, globalization and pressures of international trade as well as the role English in those processes. There may be some who suggest that somehow English could be taken up into Indigenous language practice while still allowing for Indigenous ways of knowing to be “carried” in the language. The Michif case explored in detail an example of the production of a new language that is not the colonial language but rather developed by a people fluent in both the colonial language and the Indigenous language. This new language, Michif, draws upon the strength of the Indigenous language and retains its relationship to a people as an Indigenous people despite its French roots. But the relationship to English is different.

While Métis are now fluent in English they are not creating a new contact language with English. Instead English has come to replace Michif. We have documented that when languages are not on an equal footing, and the people are not fluent in both languages, that language dominance occurs to the demise of the oppressed languages, in both cases the Indigenous languages experience decline. Forces of globalization and internationalization draw upon English and make it dominant to all other languages (Macedo, Dendrinis, and Gounari, 2003).

This political reality of English is as a cultural bomb. So how are communities and educators responding? In South Africa, the government is proactive to include Indigenous languages in schools. For example, the Minister of Basic Education has

promised to make changes so that Indigenous languages are also prioritized in public schools. In Canada, Indigenous Elders and community educators are working to sustain Indigenous languages against the oppressive pressures of English (Blair, Rice, Wood & Janvier, 2002; Daniels-Fiss, 2008; Kirkness, 2002; Makokis, 2008; Maracle, 2002; McIvor, 2006; Richards & Maracle, 2002; Schreyer, 2008; Smith & Peck, 2004).

### **Conclusions**

The research in Canada and South Africa documents parallels between countries that continue to live with the legacy of colonization. The compared colonial and neocolonial experiences are similar and yet different at the same time. During the colonial era language and education were major instruments used to subjugate and colonize Indigenous people in both countries. While there have been partial victories in both countries, this colonial legacy continues today as does the struggle to recover from Indigenous language suppression.

The marginalization of Indigenous languages has come to mean the suppression of culture amongst youth and adults. Parents and community are concerned about this process and are working to counteract it but the process is continuing.

By speaking the Indigenous language one is instantly connected to the language, community, culture and worldview of Indigenous peoples but when speaking English one enters into a noun-based language that objectifies things and one is disconnected from the Indigenous worldview and the people. Indigenous languages are God-given gifts that connect a speaker to the land, the stories of one's people, and to a worldview inherent in the culture.

Indigenous knowledge and languages are continually supporting communities and individuals in meeting the challenges of life and are dynamic and evolving to meet the needs of communities in modern life. Indigenous languages are part of our primary knowledge production and reproduction. They are found in story and narrative forms, in cultural resources and healing practices, cultural and pedagogic practices, social movements, organization of families and communities, and cultural products like music, art, stories, poetry, media, fashion, etc. (Dei, 2011).

Education and community engagement within Indigenous languages brings the spiritual, communal, and relational understandings of life into our understandings. The child and the language opportunities for this child must be cherished, nurtured and respected from within our cultures. Indigenizing (Grande, 2000; 2004) includes valuing our cultures, learning Indigenous languages, representing, valuing, and encouraging Indigenous cultures in children, youth, and adults, condemning a curriculum that assimilates students to the mainstream Euro-centric culture and language, and development of curriculum, pedagogies, and practices that connect Indigenous languages and cultures in substantive ways in schools and communities for the benefits of all peoples in communities.

At the beginning of this paper, Frantz Fanon's (1967) words reminded us that "a man[/woman] who has a language, consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language" (p. 18). We must ask what kind of world we want to live in and what kind of world we want for our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren and for the seven generations in the future? Will we be content to live in a world composed, structured, and controlled by English or are we inherently interested in a world created

within Indigenous languages? If we choose the latter then we need community engagements and supports to ensure the continuation of our Indigenous languages.

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