100 DAYS OF CREE

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NEAL McLEOD

WITH AROK WOLVENGREY

University of Regina Press

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To the memory of Freda Ahenakew,
Charlie Burns, Ida McLeod,
and Jermiah McLeod

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that everything, while interesting and creative at times, was also grammatically sound. I am also grateful to Arok for producing the Guide to Cree Pronunciation.

Last, I thank all of our ancestors, who kept our language alive through very difficult times. It is now our job to take care of it, for future generations.

INTRODUCTION

The book *100 Days of Cree* emerged organically, much of the material initially appearing as a series of Facebook posts. I was a latecomer to Facebook, and after being on it briefly, I began to post in Cree. Living away from my homeland of Saskatchewan, I found Facebook to be a very powerful way to connect with other Cree-speaking people and people interested in the Cree language. As I began to get more and more responses from my small posts in Cree, I had the idea of a large, ongoing project, wherein I would post at least ten words a day on a concentrated theme for one hundred days straight.

When I started this book, I remembered an Old Man at a round dance who said if we learned some Cree every day for a stretch of time, we would eventually know a great many words. There were times when I was working on this project that I felt I might stop, but the words of this Old Man, Mel Joseph, from the Whitefish Reserve in Saskatchewan, inspired me to finish.

In the middle of the project, on April 8, 2011, Freda Ahenakew entered the spirit world. She was one of the strongest living links to nôhkomipan ('my late grandmother') Ida McLeod. Together these two Cree woman helped standardize our writing system, leaving a great legacy for us to retrieve our language.

And so this book attempts to make a small contribution to the continued vitality of the Cree language, and to help provide

people interested in the language to be able to use it to describe the world around them. The book tries to not only gather some of the classical vocabulary of the Cree language—for instance, three days are dedicated to horse terminology—but also to coin and develop words for contemporary life.

With respect to the classical vocabulary, I would like to acknowledge the important work of Leonard Bloomfield. Bloomfield collected stories of Cree speakers on the Sweetgrass Reserve in the Battlefords area of Saskatchewan in the 1920s and published these as *Plains Cree Texts* (as part of the Publications of the American Ethnological Society) in 1934. What makes these narratives important is that they were recorded with a great deal of accuracy, capturing the voices of our ancestors. They open a window in time, illustrating how the Cree (nêhiyawak) saw the world nearly a century ago. In *100 Days of Cree*, we look at words and phrases from several of these narratives, as they give us a way to study the terms in the context in which they were spoken rather than in isolation, as simply words on a blank page devoid of much of their meaning. As such, I have also been working on a retranslation of the narratives in *Plains Cree Texts*, hoping that this will contribute, at least in a small way, to the revitalization of the Cree language. In *100 Days of Cree*, we also look at words and phrases from David G. Mandelbaum's *The Plains Cree: An Ethnographic, Historical, and Comparative Study*, originally published as a dissertation in 1940, then reissued as a new edition in 1979 by the Canadian Plains Research Center (CPRC) at the University of Regina. CPRC has since become the University of Regina Press, and Mandelbaum's *The Plains Cree* remains in print.

With respect to the revitalization of the Cree language mentioned above, there was much discussion throughout this project about the use of Cree to describe the world in which we live today.

Terms were developed for things such as Internet use and computers, demonstrating the great flexibility and adaptability of the language. It is hoped these gathered terms will offer something to the new, large, emerging generation of Cree speakers, in whose minds and bodies the future of the language now rests.

Of course, there are some key differences between the original Facebook posts and this book. While the Facebook exchanges allowed for much conjecture (but also a lot of fun), I felt that to sharpen the material for a book, any terms of questionable accuracy should be dropped. I also felt I should expand upon the dialogue that introduced each theme discussed. So, I began to edit the lists again with my friend Arok Wolvengrey, adding words through additional research to help fill in any gaps we identified.

The work on this book demonstrated a few things to me. First, the Cree language is built upon a collective process and effort. I believe that the more we assist and help each other with learning the language, the stronger the language will be. Second, I was struck by the elasticity between the written and the oral forms of Cree—these forms complement each other, strengthen each other, and exist simultaneously with each other. Last, I learned there is a strong interest among younger people to learn and use Cree in their daily lives.

With this in mind, I have decided to donate all royalties received from the sale of this book to a student scholarship fund.

I am a poet, and in this book I have attempted to push the Cree language to its limits. To quote the old Cree expression, kâya pakicî! âhkamêyimo! ('Don't quit! Persevere!').

Neal McLeod

WORKING TOGETHER

One of the key things about learning a language is that people assist each other in the process. Unfortunately, there have been many ruptures and breaks in the threads of our language through time: residential schools, collective trauma, and the influence of television and mass communication. Some of us no longer have grandparents—mosômak and kôhkomak—who can guide us in the process of learning language and stories. We need the stories and philosophy to drive and fuel our understanding of the language. It is by a collective effort that we can bring the power of the echo of the voices of the Old Ones, and the old stories, into the contemporary age. As such, the theme for Day 1 is "working together," and the words below provide some vocabulary for this process.

wîcihitok 'help one another!'.

wîcihikowisi- 'to be helped by higher powers'. -ikowisi 'by the powers' is an important verb ending in Cree. The way this verb ending works is that it is connected to another verb that describes

what the powers "do for us," or how we relate to the powers. This verb points to the inherently spiritual nature of the Cree language.

ê-mâmawi-atoskâtamahk 'we work on something together': the preverb mâmawi- 'together'; atoskâta 'work on it'.

kiskisomitok 'remind each other': kiskisi 'remember'; kiskisom 'remind him/her'; ito denotes reciprocity in the verb that precedes it.

kisêwâtisitotaw 'be kind and generous to someone': kisê- '(to be) kind'; (w)âtisi 'to be or live in such a way', as described by the stem that precedes.

minowâtisiw (maskêko-Cree) 's/he is generous': mino- 'good' (maskêko-Cree) and miyo- 'good' (Plains Cree); -(w)âtisi 'to be or live in such a way', as described by the stem that precedes.

mâtinamâkêw 's/he shares with everyone' (usually food).

kiskinohamaw 'teach someone': kiskino- 'to point, to guide'.

kêhtin 'treat him/her with respect'.

sîhkimitowin 'the process of encouraging each other': sîhkim 'encourage him/her'; again, the ending -ito, which denotes reciprocity; -win, an ending that converts some verbs into nouns.

The terms listed here can be augmented with additional meanings and dialectal variations. Stories, of course, animate the words and, most important, give a context for the meaning of the words in the language.

DAY 2

SKY

The sky is important in Cree stories and in the Cree language. Especially where I come from, in the land of kisiskâciwan-sîpiy (the Saskatchewan River), the sky is vibrant, full of colour and twisting forms. Many of the beings in Cree stories and beliefs dwell in the sky, such as the piyêsiwak (Thunder Beings) and of course all of the other birds. The sky-forms, such as clouds and developing weather patterns, originate in the sky. Throughout human history much of Cree pimâcihowin 'livelihood' has been derived from the sky.

kîsik 'sky'; has a cool downtown twang in Ojibwe: giizhig.

kîsikâw 'day', 'it is daylight'; literally, 'there is sky'.

payipwât the name of the legendary Cree-Assiniboine leader; literally, 'hole in the Dakota'. He had been captured as a child by the Dakota and was recaptured when he was about 15 years old. He was a 'hole in the Dakota', because apparently people thought that he knew the "playbook" of the Dakota, as it were. His first name

was kîsikâw-awâsis, understood as 'Lightning Boy', but this name actually pointed to the sky. There was lightning the day he was born.

piyêsiw 'Thunderbird', 'Being of the sky'. My ancestor, the first McLeod, was named nîkân-isi 'the foremost being', which metaphorically refers to Thunderbird. I suppose that is why I have always been interested in the words of the sky.

pê-wâpan 'the coming of dawn'; wâpahki means 'when it is dawn', but also 'tomorrow'.

wâsaskotêpayin 'lightning'; wâh-wâstêpaniwin (maskêko-Cree). The ending -payi/-pani denotes sudden action and transformation. In my experience, this is one of the most important elements in the Cree language. The other stems in operation here are wâsaskotê- and wâstê-, both referring to 'light, bright light'; so, when the two elements are compounded, it means 'there is a rapid burst of light'.

pitihkwêw 'there is thunder' (maskêko-Cree). Interestingly, there is a place in Alberta called nipiy kâ-pitihkwêk (Sounding Lake). They say that this is where a Thunderbird was dragged into the lake by a water snake. I have also heard the stem pitihkwê- in reference to the random sounds of fighting.

kâ-šošopêhikanaskwahk 'the sky is full of colour' (maskêko-Cree); literally, 'when the clouds are painted'. This word is a beautiful rendering of the idea of a sky full of life and colour. It really refers to clouds and not the sky itself. This use of metaphor and indirect pointing is common in Cree.

wâsêyâw ‘it is bright, shining’, ‘it is a bright sky’.

wâsêskwâstan ‘the wind has cleared the sky’; -âstan is a verb ending that denotes action by the wind.

WATER

Water plays a key role in understanding our place in the world. Throughout our ceremonies, the life-giving power of water is honoured, and we have many songs to hold this importance in our collective memory. In recent years, many Indigenous women have brought attention to the importance of water by walking around bodies of water, including the Great Lakes, to honour the water and its life-giving gifts.

nipiy 'water'.

môskipê- 'to emerge from water'. With this word, I think of the horses that emerged from lakes like mihkomin-sâkahikan (Red-berry Lake).

cikâstêpêsin 'Shadow Lying on the Water'; Chief of a band whose people later came to camp with people on my reserve, nihtâwikihcikanisihk 'at the good growing place' (James Smith Cree Nation). Let's look at this word's components: cikâstê(w) '[there is a] shadow'; -pê, a root meaning 'water' or 'liquid' when

it occurs at the end of a word or is incorporated into the middle of a word; -sin, a verb ending indicating 'lying down'. This is an example of how one Cree word is like a line of poetry.

pîkahin okosisa Oral history from my reserve of this man kâ-kî-kiskiwêhikêt 'who prophesized' what would happen ôtê nîkânihk 'in the future'. He was also from cikâstêpêsin's band. The name pîkahin appears to be a classical Cree word that means 'to stir a liquid' (water implied).

pâwistik 'rapids'.

nâmonipêk 'James Bay'; literally, 'neighbour bay' (maskêko-Cree).

tâwic 'coast' (maskêko-Cree).

kihci-wînipêk- 'Hudson's Bay'; literally, 'the great dirty water', like Lake Winnipeg (wînipêk). Notice how when named in Cree the place and the history come to light in a completely different way. Imagine the kihci-wînipêk Trading Company. cah!

kwâpikê- 'to fetch water'.

kisiskâciwan-sîpiy '(North) Saskatchewan River'; literally, 'the fast flowing river'. I grew up near the place where the river forks.

DAY 4

HONOUR

I always remember the way my late father spoke of things, the way he spoke of history, and the way he spoke of the future. He often spoke of the way in which people conducted themselves, and ways that they should conduct themselves. Embedded within his stories and language was the idea of honour—which is certainly an old Cree idea and concept. Some would say that this is an old-fashioned idea, but I think there is a great deal of power in this old idea.

kistêyimitowin 'honour'. It really means 'thinking highly of one another' and represents the process of reciprocal honour and respect. Let's look at this word's components: kist- 'important, high'; -êyim 'to think of someone or something animate'; -ito 'reciprocal action' as indicated by the adjoined verb; -win 'a general process'. So you could translate this more literally as 'the process of holding each other in high regard'.

k-âsôhakaniyik otatoskêwin 'her/his work passes through generations'. This could be thought of as a way to describe someone's legacy. Once again, a lot of these words/phrases are like little poems.

okihcitâw 'worthy young man'. This word has been mistakenly translated as 'warrior' by anthropologists. It is both a noun and verb, meaning 'a provider' and 'to provide for people'. The implication is that there is a sense of honour in thinking of others. They say that in the old days the okihcitâwak, when they hunted, would eat last. Everyone else would eat first. Good motivation to be a good hunter! Today, I guess that would be like the guy who went to get the bucket of KFC and then had to eat last—he would be sure to come back with more than enough chicken!

kihcihtâkosiwi-nikamowin 'honour song'; literally, 'the high/important-sounding song'. But this one has been tricky; I remember hearing a different word for "honour song," which I can't quite remember. So this is one possibility suggested by a friend; another is askiy-nikamowin 'earth song'.

sôhkêyimowin 'bravery'. The old soldiers lived this value in combat. My mosôm Gabriel Vandall embodied this idea at the Battle of Juno Beach in 1944.

oskâpêyos Dialectically, this is a slightly twangy version of the more uptown oskâpêwis. Literally, 'a young man'—but in practical terms, it means 'a ceremonial helper'. I have often asked about the female version of this word. In *Nationhood Interrupted: Revitalizing nêhiyaw Legal Systems,* Sylvia McAdam (Saysewahum) refers to kâ-omîkwanisicik iskwêwak 'the feathered women', that is, 'feather-carriers; female helpers'.

ê-kwêskît 's/he turns around'. With this word, I was thinking of a way to say 'to regain honour'. We have all made mistakes, but perhaps when we turn our lives around, when we atone, then we

move towards regaining our honour. The more I think about Cree, the more I appreciate its extensive use of metaphors and indirect pointing. This seems to free the language up to create space for symbolism—making Cree a natural language for poetry.

nimihtâtên 'I regret [something]'. From what I understand, there is no way to say "sorry" in Cree—all you can say is "I greatly regret" something. I see this as a relevant concept as we think about recovering honour—that is, by regretting, we move towards transforming our actions.

mistahi kî-okimâwiw 'he was a great chief'. This is how kâ-pîhtokêw-kîsikâw 'Coming Day' referred to wîhkasko-kisêyin 'Old Man Sweetgrass' in *Plains Cree Texts*. This phrase demonstrates the idea of honour through strong political leadership.

ê-âpahot 's/he regains honour'. This is a nice metaphorical extension of âpaho- 'to release oneself', 'to undo or reverse something', or 'to be absolved'.