

Wiisaakodewikwe Anishinaabekwe Diabaajimotaw Nipigon Zaaga'igan

Lake Nipigon Ojibway Metis Stories about Women

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Les savoirs autochtones découlent des histoires issues de l'intérieur des communautés Anishinaabe et Wiisaakode du nord-ouest de l'Ontario et représentent une vision particulière du monde. Cette collection d'histoires est à la base de la création de ces savoirs et du changement social.

I was raised on my mother and father's stories of Lake Nipigon. Although other old people shared stories in Macdiarmid, Ontario where I lived, my parent's stories were my baseline. In the community of Kiashke Zaaging Anishinaabek, I was presented with the rich tradition of oratory in my summers spent there. I was blessed with listening to the stories told. Anishinaabe Diabaajimotaw Nandagikenim—stories are the mainstay of Anishinaabe knowledges. They speak to us of our life. Stories told me how to deal with the world, how to learn and how to behave. Stories told me who I was, where my territory was, and who my people were. Other worlds were described to me in stories, worlds that could only be reached by sacrifice and vision. Stories talked to me about community, featuring our relationships to one another as being paramount for our survival. Stories told me about emotions such as love, loss, and grief but also the importance of laughter. Stories detailed how our society changed but described what our foundations were. Stories challenged us to look and think other ways and to remember who we are. Stories give us memory. These ideas about stories are the subject of this discussion.

Wassaygijig was my mother's grandfather. Just before he died, my mother watched him building a sweatlodge. It was built to fit one person. He worked on making the frame, collecting the rocks, and preparing the fire. He did this all day, she said. She watched him go in, heard him singing and waited for him to come out. When he came out, she saw him smoking a pipe. He then called her to him and said that when he was praying he saw what she would see in her life. She would have many different experiences. In the future, she would witness significant changes in the

Anishinaabe society. The last substantial change was that the women would be the leaders. The women are known as the Anishinaabekwe in my language.¹ Stories about women in Indigenous communities offer awareness of our current historical and contemporary context as Anishinaabe.² Anishinaabekwe Ogimakaanag—women are the leaders and we need to remember this.

There is paucity of information available that discusses the experience of the Anishinaabe populations in Northwestern Ontario. The dearth of information about the Wiisaakode Anishinaabe, Métis, is even more pronounced and there is none about Anishinaabekwe. What is available is generally from western academic traditions. These perspectives studied populations perceived dead and/or dying and static. These perspectives do not capture the spirit and beauty of the stories from this area of Ontario, and missed the tenacity and strength of women's stories. Western traditions resulted in the misreading of the social standing of women in the societies they studied.

Women in Anishinaabe societies were thus misrepresented and misinterpreted in the historical record (Morrisseau and Dewdney; Vanderburgh; McGuire; Geystick and Doyle; Johnston). In texts written by European missionaries, traders, folklorists, and academics, women were viewed as either absent or invisible or portrayed in a stereotypical manner reflecting western ideas of women (Hungry Wolf; Cruikshank et al.; Accoose). Instead, Anishinaabekwe had authority and power within our societies that was equal to that of men. A more egalitarian relationship existed between men and women in Anishinaabe society. This authority, power, and egalitarianism in Anishinaabe societies were not apparent to representatives of European patriarchal societies. When this social reality became evident, Anishinaabekwe were targeted in other ways.³ Anishinaabekwe occupied a central position in society. They had many responsibilities ranging from sacred duties to leadership to distribution of resources. Anishinaabekwe had a sphere of influence that included

the feminine but did not make that the central force. A discussion of land begins my retrospective of the stories I have heard from various members of my community. My context informs my stories much like my parents' and other's stories were influenced by the social and political environment in which they lived in.

My mother and father told me stories about Lake Nipigon. The community of MacDiarmid, Ontario is on the shores of this water. The lake is spring fed and it is beautiful cold water. It is said that when the Creator gave Nanabush his job of naming all of creation, he stopped in this area. He was tired and so he sat down while placing his axe at his side. It is from the hole created by his axe that this spring water erupted and became Lake Nipigon. This lake is the feeder lake for all the waters that flow into Lake Superior.

My sisters and I often return home for community events, mostly funerals. Once, when I was home, my sisters and I went to the water by the big dock. It was a clear day with the sun shining down on the remnants of ice that were still on the lake. As we were talking, I unwrapped a cigarette. I placed this tobacco in my hand as I silently prayed. My sisters asked me what I was doing. I told them I was offering tobacco to the water because it was springtime. One of my sisters told my mom what I had done and my mother asked me why. I told her that same thing that I told my sisters. She started telling me a story about my maternal grandmother, who the French called Queen Anne. The French called her this because my grandfather, (who was a leader in the community), would not allow any meetings to take place without her being there. My grandfather deferred to her. She was bossy. Nii Nokomis—my grandmother—was asked to go to Fort William Indian reserve on Lake Superior to conduct spring ceremonies. These ceremonies involved her performing the water dance and giving offering to the water for safe journey for the Anishinaabe. She was the keeper of this ceremony and was called upon frequently to conduct it. It was Anishinaabekwe responsibility to perform this ceremony before the ice left. I did not know this story before I placed an offering in the water. When you are where you are supposed to be, the land that countless generations of your ancestors have occupied, you are told what you are supposed to do. This offering was needed for the water spirits.

Chi niibii, water, is women's responsibility. In one of the Anishinaabe creation stories, water was given to the women to care for because only women have the ability to create water and sustain life within our bodies. It is this ability as well as the ability to nurture spirit and interact with the spirit world that women have. Spirits choose to live and be cared for within women. The respect that was accorded to women due to these abilities has been forgotten in some communities. Our biology is who we are and we have the ability to give life. Women have been honoured by the Creator to do this. Women are at the center of

creation. These and similar teachings have been attacked by government and religion ferociously for a long time. The consequence of these continued assaults is that even Anishnaabekwe are forgetting what their responsibilities are and who they are. The stories I present here concern social issues that we must talk about openly so that they can be stopped.

Anishinaabe in many communities in Northwestern Ontario are oppressed and in turn behave in oppressive ways toward one another. A couple of years ago, one of my students interviewed me about Indigenous women issues. We talked about how the collective spirit of women needed to be nourished and nurtured like precious seeds. The week before I had heard about another rape of a young girl in one of our communities. Sexual assaults are a common feature of life for many women in communities in Canada, not just Aboriginal women. Hearing that Anishinaabe men and boys are doing this is like an open wound on my spirit and I grieve for our past respect as Anishinaabekwe. My student talked about the recent rape of a young girl in her community, and it appeared that she and others in her community were not only blaming the victim but blaming the mother of the victim. Talk about evading community responsibility! She mentioned that a woman who lived next to the house where the girl was raped took note of the fact that this young girl was the only girl at this party with lots of men, and what do you expect? I asked what this woman did to prevent the rape. There was no answer. I told my student that gossiping is not a response to rape, and it is not an Anishinaabe response to rape.

If we did not accept responsibility for girls and women in our communities, no one will do it for us. For too many years gossip has been used as a social control mechanism, especially when the gossip is directed at the wrong parties. Gossip is not directed at the men who commit the sexual assaults. There is a lack of community responsibility that is disturbing. The violence that is directed at our girls and women has its roots somewhere else. The disrespect that is shown to women and that we show to one another is a form of self loathing and hatred. It is a part of intergenerational trauma that we all have to deal with. Colonialism is still in force in our communities. This is apparent when you explore the treatment of Anishinaabekwe.

At numerous cultural gatherings, I always find girls and women outside of circles. I always lightheartedly tease them and ask why—although I know the reason: they are “on their time.”²⁴ Their biology is used to exclude them. I am told that it is a sign of respect for womanhood. It is funny how exclusionary practices are deemed to be respectful. When I was a young girl, I was told that there are certain times of the month when women cannot step over certain objects such as guns, axes, bundles.... I was never told that I could not participate in meetings, spiritual gatherings, and ceremonies because of my biology as a Anishinaabekwe. Sometimes, at gatherings women are

not allowed to touch the traditional foods and be near the Sacred drums. They are centered out.

Many gatherings talk about women's "time of the month." Oftentimes, it is men who are talking about "women's time." Men and women have separate teachings that belong to their Sacred bundles. When this is going on, Anishinaabekwe practice our so-called cultural norm of non-interference. This means silence on this practice by women. Apparently, this non-interference is a culturally tradition that cannot be tampered with as there will be dire consequences ... like maybe change? This is why I

am I really being taught here? There are fundamentalist ideas at work here that are disturbing to me.

A number of years ago, I was invited to go to a women's circle. This was early in my learning and it was one of the first women's circles that I attended. Only Indigenous women would be talking and giving teachings that were specific to women. I was so excited! I knew that if it were all women attending, we would be respected. Was I ever wrong. Women were being told what to do and how to do it. We were given a verbal rule book that told us how we were supposed to act as women. We were talked down to

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believe the interpretation of the value of non-interference came from outside of our communities. Anishinaabe were very comfortable with change.

The idea of non-interference may be related to forced education practices of the various colonial governments. My parents told me stories about the strictness of the nuns. They described how the sisters in boarding school obeyed the priests without question. Boarding schools were a form of residential schools. I wonder how much of the negative attitude toward, and disrespect for, women that I see at gatherings is result of the residential school system. If women were at the center of creation in the Judeo-Christian worldview, maybe women would have been respected, instead of being blamed for the downfall of mankind with the mark of the "fall from grace" apparent every month. This was not our way to treat one another as Anishinaabekwe. A woman's time of the month was considered sacred. This notion that women are responsible for "original sin" is the underlying factor for much of the turmoil in our societies, and its worst impacts are seen on our spiritual beliefs.

I was traditionally adopted by a couple from Cree territory when I was in my twenties. They have taught me much over the years and I must admit that I am not an easy person to teach. The one lesson I always remember is to use your commonsense. One that I remember but always intentionally forget is always wear a dress or skirt to cultural gatherings. Skirts are assumed to be respectful apparel for women and girls. There are no such restrictions on either men or boys apparel. This practice is frequently announced at cultural gatherings and sometimes enforced by shaming. You must be strong to ignore what is being said to you. I have seen women asked to leave gatherings. I have seen women get up and leave. I get up and leave-sometimes. I use my commonsense and ask myself what

and deliberately made to feel inferior. Many women were crying in this circle. I think that they too were looking for a welcoming and nourishing place. I was filled with disgust that women would be doing this to other women. My anger served me to see clearly. Being in that circle felt like being in a revival meeting for a fundamentalist sect where the first thing to break down are the psychological defenses and then you re-build from there. This was not how I was told to do things and like no stories about Anishinaabe practices that I had ever heard of.

There are degrees of fundamentalism in every spiritual practice. A conversation with my son about Muslims illustrated to me how people manipulate spiritual understandings. Women are centered out for control when orthodox mentalities interpret spiritual understandings. Women become the symbols of how respect and honour are interpreted, even when they are not treated in either a respectful or honourable manner. When I am asked, "where is your skirt?" I reply, "Oh, I forgot that the spirits can only recognize me with a skirt on ... I wonder if spirits wear skirts?" A spiritual practice that relies on rules of behaviour is motionless like stagnant water. It does not have to be this way. Our stories can create social transformation(s) in our societies. *Mindimooyeg*, older women in our society have abilities that we need today. These stories have to do with tenacity and strength amidst the challenges of life and living. There is grief and loss but it not so overwhelming that laughter isn't also heard.

My mother and aunts were talking. I was upstairs listening to them. They are now all widows. They were talking about family violence. One of my aunts was invited to speak at a gathering where this would be the topic. One of them asked what this was about. My aunt who was speaking at this gathering replied, in Anishinaabemowin, that it was about fighting within and between family

members. My other aunt replied, "Then we wrote the book on family violence." I could hear their laughter upstairs. My mom is the eldest sister; she is 85. They have seen a lot in their lifetimes. These women raised children—my mother sixteen children, my youngest aunt eleven children, and the other aunt five children. My mother used Anishinaabe midwives for eleven children, with only five children born in the hospital. There are similar stories about my aunts.

My father's sister, my aunt Agnes, died a couple of years ago. In the last five years of her life, my aunt had buried three sons, all unexpectedly. I really do not know how she was able to cope. My mom told me a story about my aunt, who was married to a farmer outside Nipigon, Ontario. She was pregnant and alone on the farm with just her kids. When the baby came, something was wrong and the baby died. This happened to my aunt twice. Both times she was alone. This meant that she had to prepare her babies for burial and bury them herself. My mom and dad visited her after one of these deaths. She told my mother what happened and showed her the little graves that were on either side of the garden. My aunt worked hard her whole life even when she was finally able to leave that farm. These women had tremendous strength and tenacity. They did what they had to do in spite of all of loss and grief they experienced. They met their responsibilities. In Aboriginal communities across Canada, loss, grief, and trauma are prevalent. The impact of government policies on education and child welfare that resulted in the taking away of children will be with us for a long time.

I was about seven when my friend was taken away by the Children's Aid Society in MacDiarmid in 1967. MacDiarmid is a small Wiisaakode Anishinaabe and Anishinaabe community on Lake Nipigon. Lots of children began to disappear around that time. When my friend was taken, I cried. My father found her by accident as her foster home was close to Fort William, now called Thunder Bay, Ontario. We were reunited. Nothing but death would do this again to us. She had been my friend since childhood. Life was not the same without her there. She remembered when we were small kids. She said that she held these memories close to her when she was apprehended. When she was in care she thought of me more than her own family. We were together than much when we were children. My friend, Ramona Nobis, died of an accidental overdose in 2005. This death is still difficult to talk about. She and her family were still looking for their baby sister at the time of her death. This child was the last one who disappeared. The federal and provincial policies that enabled this to happen across the country have much to answer for.

Stories can help us heal from tragic losses. Stories can help us with our grief. My stories of loss and healing are from another source than the ones that I grew up hearing. The social and political context is different. The province started stealing children from their families and commu-

nities in the late 1950s and 1960s. Communities were coming back to life and healing from residential school policies government when this child welfare policy took effect. The Children's Aid Society, under the guise of protecting children, aided in creating overwhelming loss in community. Yet, the children who survived were able to effect social change in their communities once they discovered who they were. An example of someone who was able to do this is Sandra Kakeeway.

I first met Sandra Kakeeway in 1974. Her sister, Sam,⁵ invited me over to meet her. Sandra looked at me and asked Sam, "What are you doing bringing Indians around here?" I looked behind me but realized that she was talking about me. We laughed about this for years. It became a way for Sandra to introduce dialogue on cultural identity and the consequences of cultural displacement in her workshops across Canada and the United States. When I met her she said that she saw an Italian woman when she looked in the mirror as she was raised by talians. She was Anishinaabekwe.

Her expertise was in child welfare, sexual abuse, substance abuse, and Aboriginal healing practices. This story about identity became her way to talk about Aboriginal children in child welfare. Sandra and her siblings were apprehended when she was five years old. Sandra was a survivor of child sexual abuse that occurred when she was in foster care. The government paid for this foster care for her, and for her brothers and sisters. She attempted to file charges and initiated a lawsuit after she had dealt with and began to cope with this abuse.⁶ This attempt at charges and a lawsuit went nowhere. Unfortunately, her case is not unique in Canada.

Some Aboriginal communities lost all the children in communities in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of these children are still trying to find their way home. Sandra helped foster children not only find their way home but find their way back to themselves. She was responsible for finding and reuniting all her brothers and sisters, except for one, Grace. Sandra was still searching for her little sister at the time of her unexpected death. This was the motivating force behind her many activities aimed at educating Canadians about child welfare policies and the effect they had on Aboriginal communities across Canada.

On Rat Portage Indian reserve, there is a place by the poplar trees where the eagles dance in the sky. It is wood tick season and I was on the lookout for their little ugliness. This is the place where Sandra wanted to be buried and this is the place where her wishes were followed. She wanted to be by her father, Sandy Kakeeway, who was from this territory. Sandra always talked about her dad. She had just missed meeting him; he had committed suicide before she tracked him down. Alcohol abuse extended to other family members as well. This hopelessness was a consequence of child welfare policies in the 1950s and 1960s. The despair and despondency parents felt after their children were stolen and they, the parents, could do

nothing to stop it, caused the intergenerational trauma that we have to overcome today. Many communities are still struggling because of these colonial policies and genocidal practices.

Sandra helped her people overcome oppression and internal colonization. She refused to be a victim. Her life was a testament to the tenacity of the human spirit and the power of forgiveness. I was awed that she was able to forgive people who behaved horrendously towards her. Her mission in life was to help our people, especially the youth of our communities, live in a strong and responsible manner.

My friend's gift and medicine were her laughter and her smile. This was her bundle. It is hard to put on paper the power of laughter; the healing that results in honest laughter. We talked many times of Indigenous communities that had forgotten how to truly laugh and celebrate life no matter how challenging. These were communities we worked with that experienced record high suicides and lateral violence. There was no humour in their laughter. Sandra and I used to talk about how do you help people and communities to heal from generations of pain and suffering? How do you get secrets out in the open so that they lose the power to hurt? How do you heal the hidden? How do you get people to speak the unspeakable?

When you heal, you help others too. You show that some things are just not worth carrying anymore. These things lose their power when they are confronted and spoken about. As Anishinaabekwe, we have a responsibility to make our stories heard. Our stories are about how we are viewed in our societies. It is up to us to ensure that these stories are told the way that we want them told.

In Indigenous worldviews, knowledge is collectively based and is active. Knowledge is a dynamic process. It is not based on experts and does not proceed in a linear fashion. The western tradition of linear and expert based knowledge is as foreign as the idea of owning knowledge. The Anishinaabe who are keepers and custodians of traditions of storytelling do not admit to knowing everything or owning the knowledge that they safeguard and transmit. There is an openness and willingness for knowledge creation. It is this openness that enables collective generation of new knowledge.

Land is the defining and stabilizing feature of the Anishinaabe knowledge systems. Stories about our land compel us to have a personal relationship with it. Land and relationships are central to Indigenous knowledge(s). Relationships and connections to others and to the land inform how we behave. It is this first relationship then that becomes the mirror for our social world. Story telling provides the nuance to our collective selves. Hearing stories is the beginning of establishing our relationships within our societies.

The process of telling a story is very different than the process of arguing that one paradigm about the world is privileged and, therefore, more believable because it is based

on so-called scientific fact. Scientific facts themselves are generated in a social context; they are not neutral (Denzin and Lincoln). In light of this, in contemporary academia, there has been a proliferation of writing by colonial and post-colonial writers that discuss scholarly works written about them rather than by them. New stories emerge that speak to different and varied truths. Colonial stories are being challenged by this more distinctive and balanced telling (Smith). As Ted Chamberlin and Hugh Brody state:

Stories ... give us a sense of who we are, and where we belong. They sometimes go by the name of history, sometimes by the name of myth and legend, sometimes by the name of law and philosophy and politics and economics, sometimes by the name of story and song and dance, sometimes by the name of science. Each story belongs to a tradition, and each tradition has its own criteria of authenticity and authority. (1)

Theories are stories that are told within social contexts for social purposes and from the teller's social standpoint (Denzin and Lincoln; Smith). People who have benefited from the social theory as science viewpoint stand to lose their privileged status (Smith). The view that someone from another cultural perspective can represent Indigenous realities more accurately than we can is disappearing as a scholarly activity.

We maintain that Indigenous ways of life are distinct. Our ontological realities and epistemologies are distinctive (Bastien; Alteo; McLeod).⁷ Our knowledge(s) are not frozen in time. They are robust and active. We have to explore our ways of being and our ways of learning about the world, if we want our stories to continue into our future. The manner in which these stories are told may change but these stories must be told. In our process of theory generation, our ways of making sense of the world will be paramount. Anishinaabe theories will be describing, making sense of our experience, and evaluating those experiences, as they will be embedded in our specific social realities (Mannhiem). In 1996, Mary Rogers noted:

"I" announces a biographical creature whose experiences grow out of and beyond an array of social roles and subject positions. Its presence presses against the traditional boundaries of social theory and raises awareness of the multiple sites of consciousness where theory originates and takes shape.

The Self must be part of this theory creation as this is the site in which Indigenous social theory can imagine a different way of being, one that is rooted in our past but meets our collective future with intellectual rigour. The "I" may be interpreted differently in Indigenous contexts as the collective self may be of more importance, than an individualist view (Smylie). If we are to meet our re-

sponsibilities as Anishinaabekwe, we have to use available contemporary tools to ensure that our stories live on. They can offer a counterbalance to the historical record and add to the development of Indigenous-based written theories and methods. Indigenous theories about the world exist and they are transforming. The idea is not new. Yet, we must exercise care in how and what we do with our stories as we are telling them. Mary Ritchie said,

When we speak the language of the oppressor. We must be aware of how we are being swallowed up by concepts we did not create, and that as members of a non-dominant community, we must exercise caution and restraint in our attempts to develop our communities and enter the multi-cultural arena. (309)

In the social construction of theory, we must be cognizant that our efforts will ensure understanding occurs for both us and our neighbours in Canada. In the varied understandings about the world, our stories offer our understanding. It is time to share them with one another and with people willing to listen. Anishinaabekwe can exercise our leadership this way.

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¹*Niin gaagwe nitaa anishinaabemowin*—I am learning how to speak Ojibway. My mother said that I spoke Ojibway as a child but like all of my brothers and sisters, I stopped one day. She said that something happened at school. Even though, my parents could speak different dialects, I struggle to remember. My parents did not force the language on us because they thought we would have a easier time if we just spoke English.

²My daughter and I often talk about the importance of stories. I see her as an example of Anishinaabekwe Ogimaa. She is a leader and is bossy like her grandmothers.

³This was mainly through legislation such as the *Indian Act*, especially membership provisions. The Native Women's Association of Canada has addressed these issues in many publications over the years (see <http://www.nwac-hq.org/> accessed : October 22, 2008).

⁴"On their time" means female menses.

⁵Jessie Goodchild named this group of children, Sandra, Sandria, and Sandford. Their father's name was Sandy.

⁶The foster mother who abused her was president of the foster parents association for many years. The lawsuit did not go anywhere. Sandra was told that the foster mother was too old when she pushed for charges to be laid.

⁷Bastien, Alteo, and McLeod discuss the distinctiveness of their communities' worldview and how this influences how the world is perceived and acted upon.

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