

Deanna Reder. *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition: Cree and Métis âcimisowina*. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2022. 179 pp. ISBN: 9781771125543.

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My father has always been enthusiastic about his children's post-secondary education. He was dismayed when, between the first and third grades, I was steadfastly determined (in the way only a six-year-old can be) that I would never to set foot in a university. But I changed my mind—and, over the years, he has collected an array of T-shirts and sweaters emblazoned with the logos of all the universities my sister and I have attended. My mother has been more guarded in her support. Shortly before I left home and my community, the Georgian Bay Métis, for an undergraduate degree in English literature, she was quietly sorting through the things I was to take with me, and she surprised me by saying, “Don’t you learn to be ashamed of us.”

Cree-Métis scholar Deanna Reder's *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition: Cree and Métis âcimisowina* (2022) reminded me of this pivotal moment in my life. It did so not only through the resonances with Reder's own post-secondary experiences—the tensions she describes between being “an academic and a Métis woman” (126)—but also through the challenge Reder poses to Euro-Western approaches to literary studies in her assertion and application of Indigenous autobiography as methodology. She writes, “Instead of considering my experiences as a deficiency, I began to consider my life story as method, as a tool to rely upon when evaluating texts by Indigenous writers” (8). In her introduction, Reder describes how she “was raised listening to my mother's âcimisowin” and how, because of this familial narrative background, she “was not surprised” to find that “Indigenous authors integrated autobiographical detail” into their writings (7). Given the importance of such autobiographical detail, however, she was “surprise[d] ... that this archive has been understudied and undervalued” in academic contexts (7), and she critiques common, culturally-uninformed interpretations of Indigenous autobiographical writing that trade on Euro-Western preconceptions of Indigenous cultural values as well as the publishing industry's dismissal of or harmful engagement with Indigenous autobiography.

At one point, Reder mentions listening to renowned Métis writer Maria Campbell “share[] a Cree concept, kwayaskwastâsowin,” meaning to “put things to right” (55). In *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition*, Reder herself sets out to put things to right. Pivoting from an initial “plan[] to draw on the techniques developed by autobiography theorists,” Reder decides to focus her research instead on a vital component “lack[ing]” in the study of Indigenous autobiographical writing: “Indigenous perspectives” (8). In analyses of autobiographical writing by James Settee, Maria Campbell, Edward Ahenakew, James Brady, and Harold Cardinal, Reder considers how these Cree and Métis writers “all draw on similar worldviews—ways of knowing or ways of seeing (nêhiyawitâpisiwin [Cree worldview])—that emerge from a common language spoken in similar parts of the world” (11-12). In a style that is both highly accessible and critically engaged, Reder generously—and I think bravely—interweaves her scholarly study of these writers' âcimisowina with her own and her family's stories, revealing not only their interconnections with some of the writers but also how her life story and community perspective offer a culturally-specific frame for interpreting these writers in new ways that are more complex, rigorous, generous, and ethical. Reder's contributions are essential and manifold. Besides those already mentioned, she frames her book as an intervention in language revitalization by structuring each chapter around “a concept expressed in nêhiyawêwin,” the Cree language (11), and she forgoes the academic terms and

frameworks of postcolonialism and autobiography studies in favour of a focus on “Cree paradigms,” values, “understanding[s] of history, pedagogy and relationships” (121). In other words, *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition* not only brings Indigenous perspectives into an ongoing academic discourse about Indigenous autobiographies but also reframes that discourse through “nêhiyawimâmitonêyihcikan, translated as nêhiyaw thinking or Cree consciousness” (19).

The intellectual beauty of *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition* is reflected in its cover, a painting by Plains Cree artist George Littlechild, who listened to Reder’s family story “about how [her] kôhkum cured a man from blindness, and translated the story into an image that celebrates kôhkum’s power, intelligence, and beauty” (139). Reder refers to this story recursively throughout her text, meaning that she returns to it multiple times but from different angles that continuously add to the complexity and significance of her literary analysis. I loved these narrative acts. They reminded me of listening to my family’s own stories and how the meaning of these stories depends on the teller, the listener, and the time and place—or, as Reder puts it, how narratives “shift[] ... based on who is telling the story, and when and in what context” (128). Reder’s retellings of this story serve as examples of the importance of community knowledges and how stories speak to different cultural values and personal responsibilities for listener and teller (131). Reder emphasizes such community knowledges not only through the Cree concepts that structure each chapter, but also in pages prefacing each chapter—written in both nêhiyawêwin and English—that share a lesson central to understanding the literary analysis that follows. Although Reder critically responds to discourses within English literary studies, these prefatory pages signal the (re)focusing of her analysis around nêhiyawî-itâpisinowin and family and community knowledges, lending to the overall impression that *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition* is a book with a great deal of heart.

At the same time, it is a book that is rigorous in its literary analysis. The first two chapters of *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition* consider momentous autobiographies written in what is now Canada. In “Chapter One: âcimisowin: Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition,” Reder reads Cree writer James Settee’s “Settee’s Life” (1891) in relation to Anishinaabe author George Copway’s *The Life, History, and Travels of Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh* (1847). Although “few have had the chance to read” Settee’s “recently uncovered” essay, Settee has the distinction of being one of “the ‘earliest Cree Writers in Saskatchewan’” (Kristina Fagan Bidwell qtd. in Reder 32), and Copway’s autobiography is the first-known “published text by a First Nations author” in Canada (26). Reder interrogates common academic preconceptions about Indigenous autobiography as “derivative of European models,” arguing instead that Indigenous autobiographies are expressions and “continuation[s] of varying Indigenous intellectual traditions” (26, 29). She also demonstrates how “prioritiz[ing] Indigenous perspectives of the historical context when we read Indigenous autobiographies” leads to culturally-sensitive and decolonizing interpretations of these texts (15). “Chapter Two: Interrelatedness and Obligation: wâhkôhtowin in Maria Campbell’s âcimisowin” focuses upon “the most famous Indigenous autobiography in Canada” (15), Campbell’s *Halfbreed* (1973). Reder applies the Cree cultural values of “wâhkôhtowin, the interrelatedness of all things,” and respect “for multiple perspectives” to a reading of Campbell’s autobiography (48). At the same time, she considers how colonial legislation and the publishing industry work against wâhkôhtowin in the narrative and production of Campbell’s text (45, 53). Reder demonstrates how she practiced the value of wâhkôhtowin in her own academic engagement as she and Alix Shield worked to recover and return to Campbell a passage of the text that Campbell’s publisher had “excised without her permission” (54-55, 53).

The following two chapters focus on the autobiographical writing of Cree Anglican priest Edward Ahenakew. In “Chapter Three: Respectful Interaction and Tolerance for Different Perspectives: kihcêyihtamowin in Edward Ahenakew’s *Old Keyam*,” Reder compares the narrative “Old Keyam” in *Voices of the Plains Cree* (1973)—a compilation of two of Ahenakew’s texts edited by settler author Ruth M. Buck—with Ahenakew’s unpublished original version to interrogate contradictions within the text. Although she discusses Buck’s editorial intrusions upon Ahenakew’s narrative and the contradictions that these intrusions entail, Reder also applies “the cultural value of kihcêyihtamowin, respect between people,” to think about how, “[i]n a time of tremendous change and challenges, Ahenakew tried, as an expression of a Cree value, to make peace with the viewpoints of both the Cree and of the colonizers, by trying to hold what sometimes were irreconcilable perspectives” (73, 75). Reder builds on this analysis in “Chapter Four: Edward Ahenakew’s Intertwined Unpublished Life-Inspired Stories: âniskwâcimopickêwin in *Old Keyam* and *Black Hawk*” in her consideration of the final chapters of Ahenakew’s unpublished *Old Keyam* manuscript, which Buck cut when compiling *Voices of the Plains Cree*. She applies the concept of âniskwâcimopickêwin, “the process of connecting stories together” (Neal McLeod qtd. in Reder 80), in her contention that “it is impossible to understand Ahenakew without access to all his work” and ultimately offers a more nuanced and informed representation of Ahenakew’s interconnected writings (80).

While Reder’s personal and family stories are interwoven throughout *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition*, they appear somewhat more central to chapters five and six. In “Chapter Five: How âcimisowin Preserves History: James Brady, Papaschase, and Absolom Halkett,” Reder considers how famed Métis political leader Jim Brady’s autobiographical writings preserve the history of Chief Papaschase as well as how her mother’s âcimisowin preserve community memory of Brady and Halkett, who went “missing without a trace” in 1967 (103). Noting community suspicions of foul play and police ambivalence, Reder discusses how “âcimisowina document stories about people and events that otherwise would be forgotten” (17) and asserts that, through these stories, it is evident “that relatives and communities cared,” despite there being “times that we couldn’t do much” (108). In “Chapter Six: kiskêyihtamowin: Seekers of Knowledge, Cree Intergenerational Inquiry, Shared by Harold Cardinal,” Reder reflects upon her academic journey in relation to a 2005 public lecture by Cardinal, a prominent Cree lawyer, in which “central to his approach are autobiographical questions” (122). Building upon Cardinal’s discussion of “iyiniw kiskêyihtamowin, which means ‘Indigenous People’s Knowledge’” (118), and the teachings about “what it means to be nêhiyaw” (17) that he learned from a Cree Elder and shared with the audience, Reder considers how the Cree “concept of intergenerational and holistic search for knowledge” impacts her relationships to earlier and future generations as well as her own academic work (121). Particularly striking for me, given my mother’s fear that university education might cause me to forget who I am, was Reder’s reflection about the International Feminist Book Fair at the University of Montreal during her undergraduate degree. She remembers attending a “session of about a dozen poets, all Indigenous women from across North America who were giving readings of their work,” and thinking “[f]or the first time” at university, “Yes, my mother would be comfortable here” (126).

I never did learn to be ashamed of my community. And, while my father’s enthusiasm for learning inspired me, my mother’s warning always lingered protectively between me and a curriculum that prioritized Euro-Western literature and ways of thinking about the world. I tell this story out of respect for Reder’s autobiographical methodology and in gratitude for the way her book has encouraged me to rethink the tensions between my identity and education—to see how my community’s intellectualism persisted in Euro-Western academic spaces in ways that I had not previously recognized. By encouraging such personal engagement and self-reflection, Reder effectively creates space for Indigenous scholars and culturally- and community-specific

intellectualism within the academy. She also demonstrates how university education and resources can be mobilized responsibly to support the interests and projects of Indigenous writers and communities. And even as she does all of this, Reder offers a model for respectful and informed literary engagements with archived and understudied Indigenous writers and those who have encountered barriers and harms within the publishing industry. *Autobiography as Indigenous Intellectual Tradition* is a necessary read for anyone interested in the archival recovery of Indigenous literatures, the work of Indigenous language revitalization, and the practice and study of Indigenous autobiographical storytelling.

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