
Tshaukuesh Elizabeth Penashue. *Nitinikiau Innusi: I Keep the Land Alive*. Edited by Elizabeth Yeoman, University of Manitoba Press, 2019. 280 pp. ISBN: 9780887558405

<https://uofmpress.ca/books/detail/nitinikiau-innusi>

In *Nitinikiau Innusi: I Keep the Land Alive*, Tshaukuesh Elizabeth Penashue shares the intimate details of her lifelong activism, advocacy, and deep love for Innu people, lands, and culture. In my estimation, there really is no better name for the memoir than *Nitinikiau Innusi* because it captures the extent of love, respect, and reciprocity that a steadfast and challenging journey of protecting lands, waters, and peoples requires. The memoir illustrates the range of experiences and emotions that Penashue confronts and endures while advocating for Innu lands; at the same time, the memoir also makes clear that these lands form the author's sense of identity. The most salient theme throughout the book is the conception of land not as an object or commodity but as the central being through which all is connected and made possible. Indeed, Penashue's activism and advocacy for Innu culture is intimately wrapped up with how the land is identified and what the land does. People are not separate from the land; rather people work either for or against the land, which makes Penashue's memoir and activism a touchstone text for land protection and Indigenous resistance.

To understand how Penashue's advocacy works with Innu culture and land protection, it is important to examine how she understands the impact of settler colonialism and land development. Many of Penashue's entries both touch upon and also rely on an understanding of the importance of *nutshimit*. Early on, editor Elizabeth Yeoman flags the importance of *nutshimit*, as well as the complications in adequately translating it. *Nutshimit* has been translated into English as "in the bush," which may also recall words or concepts in English such as "wilderness." However, Innu leader Tanien (Daniel) Ashwini understands these translations as reductive and unable to capture what the word actually means in Innu, which is more expansively an expression of being-at-home-in-the-world or land (xxvii). The understanding of the world *land* in English faces the same issue, with land largely being reduced to its noun status and not as a site or process of becoming—a verb—as it is within many Indigenous philosophies, including Innu. Other conventions of English also pose issues in understanding land or *nutshimit* precisely because English relies on inanimate nouns to refer to animate and agential beings, such as land (Kimmerer). This often imposes an understanding that humans are the beings that *do* things to land and land is a passive recipient of human action. This could not be farther from the truth and from the

understanding that Penashue so consistently expresses. Keeping the land, the people, the culture, the Innu alive is a reciprocal process of all the beings living on the land.

Penashue describes *nutshimit* as home, as the place where she and Innu culture, custom, and being are most alive and most authentically related. *Nutshimit*, in some ways, is the lifeline and lifeblood of what it means to be Innu and protecting *nutshimit* is the possibility of continuance for Innu peoples and culture. In describing pressures from dominant Canadian society to have Innu children formally educated in Canadian schools instead of spending time in *nutshimit* learning the land, Penashue writes,

yet they learn so much there: how to find their way, how to use an axe and a gun, when it's safe to walk on ice, so many things. Innu-aitun and Innu-pakasiun—Innu ways of doing things, independence and survival. The women teach the girls how to fish and get boughs for the tent and set snares. The men teach the boys to canoe and hunt. We have to teach them our culture—they need to know who they are (7).

Penashue's concern illustrates simply and clearly the complex entanglement of who the Innu are with the land itself. The land is not just a resource for survival, but also the basis for a particular way of being-in-the-world *through relationship*. What is more, Penashue resists the dominant Canadian culture's imposition of ways of knowing or being-in-the-world by advocating for what Innu children need to know—how to survive on the land. What it means to be Innu cannot be separated from what is necessary and useful to know to be able to exist and flourish in *nutshimit*.

This is further addressed when Penashue begins her campaign of advocacy for the land, and *nutshimit* in particular, against the military campaigns of bomb testing and low-flying jet drills. These war games include the excursions of other European powers that essentially rent the air space/land from Canada for these destructive purposes. Yet, as Penashue explains,

[t]he military don't understand what they're doing to us. They're destroying everything we have—our land, our rivers, our animals, our happiness. Don't they care? So many people are crying in their hearts. We can never relax [...] They just point at the map—with one wave of a hand they decide where to go. To them it's an empty space. They don't care about the people hunting here, teaching their children how to live, or about the animals. They have no idea what this means to us or even whether anybody is here at all (17-18).

Central to the conflict between the Innu and dominant Canadian society are conflicting worldviews and conceptions of land. Penashue describes explicitly the way the land is viewed and understood by the military as a means to an end, an "empty space" as she puts it: something uninhabited by people who matter (including animals and the land

itself that suffer from the same stresses as their human counterparts), something that can be used for the purposes of practicing and perfecting war-making.

This understanding of land and *nutshimit* as the heart of Innu culture and people is also reflected in the types of resistance and activism that Penashue and other Innu women craft in response to the threats to their existence and their lands. Penashue writes repeatedly of her campaigns to demonstrate to others—Canada and the world—what the land means to Innu peoples and to the future and continuance of Innu culture. This activism largely took the form of walks and marches, mostly composed of Innu women, to demonstrate the love of land and the unity of purpose in defending Innu lands and *nutshimit* from the destruction of dominant forces.

When I walk in *nutshimit* with my people, I'm showing how much we respect Innu culture, the natural world, and all the living things. I want people to know we won't give up our land. We won't allow the government to damage it with mines and dams and bombs. If I was elected to the Innu nation or the band council, I'd put all my energy into this and I'd look after the people walking in *nutshimit* (130).

Throughout her writings, Penashue demonstrates an expert understanding of resistance to the dominant forces of destruction that the Canada government poses to Innu existence. Her campaigns of marches represent and demonstrate a counterpoint to the disrespect the military levels upon *nutshimit* through awareness of and attention to the peaceful ways Innu coexist with and live with the land. Penashue's marches reinforce the fact that the Innu culture and *nutshimit* are mutually co-forming as well as mutually endangered. Penashue understands the severity of the threat of the military trainings: they are blowing up the land to destroy the Innu. As the land and Innu are not separate, a threat to the land is a threat to all that the land encompasses, all that the land is.

A final observation about the memoir is the honesty and vulnerability that Penashue shares in her exhausting fight and advocacy for her people, her culture, and her lands. Penashue does not just tell us the stories of her and her community's victories, but of the everyday challenges and exhausting struggles of doing this work. She shares her tears, her sorrows, her anxieties, her frustration, her anger, and her fight to hold on with all of her responsibilities as a relative, a mother, a grandmother, a sister, a caretaker, a provider, and so much more. She speaks of the delights in being with her family and the exhaustion that care work requires. She speaks of the isolation and depression she feels by being unsupported in much of this work by her friends,

comrades, allies, and her own band council as well as the supreme joys of coming together when it works out.

I cannot really express what an honor it was to journey with Penashue through her diaries and entries. I felt like I was listening to a friend and learning such incredible wisdom from a dear elder. As Esselen writer and scholar Deborah Miranda states,

[c]ulture is ultimately lost when we stop telling stories of who we are, where we have been, how we arrived here, what we once knew, what we wish we knew; when we stop our retelling of the past, our imagining of the future, and the long, long task of inventing an identity every single second of our lives[...] Culture is lost when we neglect to tell our stories, when we forget the power and craft of storytelling (xiv).

Here, Miranda argues that culture is cradled in our stories and kept alive through the steadfast telling and retelling of our stories. In her own story, Penashue chronicles her life and advocacy for Innu land, life, and culture. In doing so, she keeps the land, which is bound up and interwoven with Innu culture, alive. For readers, her stories can kindle the flame of hope and resistance in many the hearts of other land and water protectors. We need everyone to fight for the life of the land, for the future of earth, and for the flourishing of all peoples, who—whether they acknowledge it or not—are land.

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Works Cited

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