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# Gramophone, Masinatahikan – Typewriter, Press, Our Mother(s) Tongue Reflections on Indigenous (First Nations and Métis) Literacies and Media

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Article abstract

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**RESEARCH ARTICLE**

# Gramophone, Masinatahikan – Typewriter, Press, *Our Mother(s) Tongue*: Reflections on Indigenous (First Nations and Métis) Literacies and Media

Gloria Jane Bell

McGill University

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This essay discusses a wide range of media—including an 1853 Albion Cree Press, a Cree typewriter, and contemporary Indigenous artworks—to create a sense of the multiplicity of Indigenous technologies available for study today and the vastness of the visual record. While older art historical studies would be limited to so-called high art, namely paintings and sculpture, this essay takes an expansive approach to consider multiple examples of visual culture in the formation of Indigenous literacy traditions. The work considers the importance of birchbark biting and moss in the pictorial record, for example, as a form of Indigenous technology. This essay has also been inspired by recent conversations with my mom and colleagues in the discipline of contemporary art and for that I am thankful and try to reflect a more conversational approach to the media discussed herein as a methodology of upending binaries and tensions of spoken and unspoken and not-as-yet written stories. The research engages in visual analysis of Indigenous literary artifacts and images. By Indigenous literacies I mean the way Indigenous people have engaged and engage technologies and media to move ideas forward, to create art and culture. The essay takes a speculative approach, using some stories about artworks and narrative approaches to honor a history of Métis and Cree paths to knowledge that are based on storytelling rather than definitive histories. As a person of Métis ancestry on my maternal side, I write this essay not as a fluent Cree or Michif speaker, but as one who is in a life-long process of language learning. Analysis of visual imagery expands staid notions and simplistic understandings of Indigenous literacies as solely based on writing.

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**Keywords:** gramophone; Indigenous literacies; Cree typewriter; Masinatahikan; walking with mom; print media

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## T. C. Cannon: Opera, Gramophones, and Revolutionary Media

A psychedelically colored woodprint depicts a seated man and standing woman listening to Italian composer Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca* on the gramophone in T. C. Cannon's *A Remembered Muse* (1978).<sup>1</sup> The gramophone and the standing woman, with her mouth open as if in song or conversation, face outwards towards the viewer, engaging us in a dialogue about Indigenous technologies and upending staid colonial representations of Indigenous people as stuck in the past. The opera *Tosca* debuted in Rome in 1900. The opera is about revolution and about love and loss and the suffering of everyday people. Full of dramatic and emotional intensity, it rocked the world when it came out and it continues to thrill fans. Kiowa and French artist T. C. Cannon taps into that energy with the Indigenous power couple presented before us. The man,

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<sup>1</sup> See the 1994 PBS special *He Who Stands in the Sun: The Paintings of T. C. Cannon* (<https://www.pbs.org/video/colores-he-who-stands-in-the-sun-the-paintings-of-tc-cannon/>), 18:07, to view *A Remembered Muse*.

captured in profile, sits listening with his hand folded under his chin while the woman seems to sing or shout. She wears an elk tooth embroidered dress and, with her hand on her hip, strikes a confident pose. Her dress is emblazoned with four blue stars reminiscent of Plains pictorial traditions. Her waist is cinched with a silver concha belt likely crafted by Diné (Navajo) jewelers. Both have active poses that engage with the drama of the music playing on the gramophone. The stars on the woman's dress suggest the idea of the opera star, the woman as an Indigenous diva and the audience as receptive to a new vision of Indigeneity.

The red of the carpet contrasts with the blues, greens, and purples of the composition. The high-key colors—the whites of the elk teeth in the woman's dress, for example, and the creams and yellows on the man's shirt—are light and bright colors bringing a sense of urgency to the composition. Looking at the couple, both listening intently, we get a sense of the music playing. The close cropping of the composition is like a photograph, a snapshot of Indigenous life in the 1970s.

The work seems like a rock and roll image with the high contrast and complex use of colors and the subject matter. The American flag drapes behind the couple, with both assassinated Kennedy brothers present in the centre of the flag reminding the viewer of the struggles for civil rights and recalling the American Indian Movement's gathering momentum in the 1960s. The image reminds us that the struggle for accurate representation from an Indigenous perspective continues with this work of art. Both the man and woman wear moccasins that connect them to the Southwest: the man wears pointed toe quillwork moccasins—reminders of the elegance of the late nineteenth-century moccasin style—and the woman has Pueblo-style moccasins on (Kramer 2018). The composition is also rock and roll in that it rebels against conventional norms of Native American representation. Cannon's work confronts western hierarchies of the arts by equating Indigenous representation with the high art of opera and the parallel associations of artistic achievement and refinement. Is the image about the traversing of two different worlds, the age of the gramophone and the age of “traditional” Indigenous life? The ease of the couple at home listening to Tosca, who is a muse for both, is visible in their active poses; it conveys the commensurability of Indigenous life and technology and the adaptation of the everyday. T. C. Cannon's portraits revolutionized Indigenous representation by portraying people that were not stuck in the past as pre-modern, pre-contact subjects, as in the spectre fantasies of American photographer Edward Curtis, but as active subjects expanding conceptions of Native American art.

The pushback against the staid canon of art history is also present in the choice of medium. This revolution in imagery is an example of the democracy of representation, expanding our conceptions of Indigenous life. American inventor Thomas Edison designed the gramophone that occupies so central a role in Cannon's work out of necessity to transmit music and other forms of sound, and Cannon, too, created this image to necessitate a change in representation of Indigenous life from an Indigenous perspective. The medium he chose was a woodcut print, which meant that many variations in color could be made. The aesthetic of the woodcut also has a roughness to it, an immediacy in image that makes it appealing. Finally, the woodcut is also an accessible and affordable medium that has appealed to a diversity of artists throughout history and has long been a harbinger of revolution. I think especially about the Protestant Reformation and the war on images (Hill 2008). There was a proliferation of diverse subject matter during the Reformation, when artists circulated broadsheets and imagery of traditional and non-traditional subjects for mass audiences. Printmaking experienced a renaissance during the 1960s and 1970s in America and Cannon's work was part of a movement that presented the diversity of artists' voices (Allen 2018).

Cannon presents us with a revolutionary image. The print was commissioned for the cover of the *Tosca* opera programme that premiered at the Santa Fe Opera Company the summer of 1978 (Poon 2011). Cannon offers us a contemporary Indigenous portrait upending misconceptions that Indigenous people exist only in the past or as ethnographic subjects prevalent in mythologies of the Southwest (Shelton 2005). Audiences had likely never seen an Indigenous power couple engaging in technology of sound, the opera, quite the same way as presented here. Cannon's work thus prompts the question: what can artworks and visual culture tell us about the relationship between technologies, communication, and Indigenous literacies?

In this essay I want to engage in visual analysis of Indigenous literary artifacts and images. By Indigenous literacies I mean the ways that Indigenous people have engaged and continue to engage technologies and media to move ideas forward, to create art and culture. The essay takes a speculative approach, using some stories about artworks and narrative approaches to honor a history of Métis and Cree paths to knowledge that are based on storytelling rather than definitive histories. As a person of Métis ancestry on my maternal side, I write this essay not as a fluent Cree or Michif speaker, but as one who has learned some words and concepts at the time of this writing. I have learned multiple languages throughout my life, including Italian and French, some Oji-Cree, and Michif. I have some family members who speak Oji-Cree, but I have yet to

become fluent and take a slow approach. Fluency in languages is a skill that is built through time and relationships and patience. But so too is analysis of visual imagery, which expands fixed notions and simplistic understandings among non-Indigenous peoples of Indigenous literacies as solely based on writing and which will be the focus of this paper.

The essay discusses a wide range of media—including a Cree typewriter, an 1853 Albion Cree Press (described further below), and contemporary Indigenous artworks—to create a sense of the multiplicity of Indigenous technologies available for study today and the vastness of the visual record. While older art historical studies would be limited to so-called high art, namely paintings and sculpture, this essay takes an expansive approach to consider multiple examples of visual culture in the formation of Indigenous literacy traditions. The research considers the importance of birchbark biting and moss in the pictorial record, for example, as a form of Indigenous technology. This essay has also been inspired by recent conversations with my mom and colleagues in the discipline of contemporary art and for that I am thankful and try to reflect a more conversational approach to the media discussed herein as a methodology of upending binaries and tensions of spoken and unspoken and not-as-yet written stories.

## **The Colonial Elephant in the Room: Misconceptions About Indigenous Literacies and the Nature of Histories**

One of the justifications for colonialism was the misconception that Indigenous people were not literate and had no written words or recorded history. Settler colonials and the governmental apparatus viewed this as a form of savagery in the binary of savage and civilized. Indigenous literacies confront and counter this stereotype and misunderstanding. Authority also comes into question with oral versus written histories. Who has written and who is writing and who is speaking are different approaches to knowledge-making (Burton n.d.). Missionaries armed with the written word of religious tracts were sent out to convert Indigenous peoples in the broader mission of colonization. Theorist Friedrich Kittler discusses this legacy as a “monopoly of writing. History was that homogenous field which, as a subject in school curricula, included only cultures with written language. Mouths and graphisms dropped out into prehistory” (Kittler, Mücke, and Similon 1987, 105). What does Kittler intend by “mouths” and “graphisms”? He could be referencing oral traditions, the way that stories change with each telling. “Graphisms” makes me think of the work of Indigenous artists making pictographs and other media that could be considered forms of Indigenous literacy and writing and abstractions beyond a settler colonial framework. Indigenous literacies constitute a broad range of media and technologies that upend settler colonial conceptions of narrative, history, writing, and civilization (Rasmussen 2012, 17). Indigenous technologies and media revolutionize our ways of thinking about arts and praxis and present a more complex picture of the world around us, complicating and multiplying views and interpretations of history.

## **A Cree Typewriter – Masinatahikan**

The word technology comes from the Greek *techne*. Cree origin stories begin with tales of syllabics and of knowledge-making and a spiritual relation between the knowledge keeper and all our relations. There are many forms of Cree literacy today. Part of the broader movement of self-determination that Cannon’s work evokes and another literary artifact from the 1970s that we will consider is a Cree typewriter.<sup>2</sup> The headline of the newspaper *Indian News* from October 1973 reads “Cree typewriter available in two major dialects” (Figure 1 and Figure 1a). The typewriter displayed uses Western Cree syllabics. It is important to note that both Western and Eastern typewriters were made, and some are still in communities today. The black-and-white photograph of the typewriter, in the middle of the right column of the paper, was taken looking down at the keys, as if the viewer were about to place their fingers on them. This gives a sense of the usability of the typewriter for multiple communities—both Cree communities as well as the government apparatus. The article announces that the Italian design company Olivetti is producing Cree typewriters at its Don Mills location, near T’karonto (Toronto).<sup>3</sup> The article notes that “although there are some typewriters in existence with Cree syllabic keyboards, this was the first comprehensive attempt on a national scale to create a Cree syllabic typewriter acceptable and usable throughout the country” (“Cree Typewriter” 1973, 8).

<sup>2</sup> Another example of a Cree typewriter is located at the Sam Waller Museum (<https://www.samwallermuseum.ca/feature/?id=12>).

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that the Olivetti company also produced many different language typewriters. Some of the fonts used by the Olivetti company include Greek, Thai, Devangari, Cyrillic, Arabic, Hebrew, and Amharic. Italian Arturo Rolfo created the typeface for Cree script. Typewriters became important implements for language preservation and distribution for diverse communities (Silva 2015, 28–29).





**Figure 1:** Photocopy of the first page of an article in the newspaper *Indian News*, October 1973, with the headline “Cree typewriter available in two major dialects.” Photo courtesy of Magdalena Milosz and University of Waterloo.

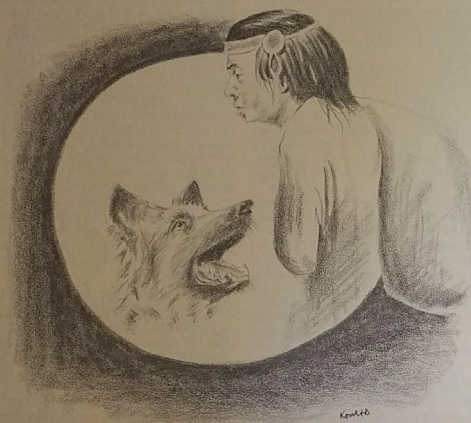


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THE INDIAN NEWS

Oct./Oct. 1973

## How the boy got into the moon



Written by James McNeill Illustrated by Don Konrad

The winter had been long and very cold. Snow lay deep and crusted over the ice and muskeg of the great delta of the MacKenzie River. Hunger-weakened hunters looked in vain for the tracks of the caribou. Men with strong medicine sought the life-giving animals but none were seen, even in their visions. All the time one small boy kept trying to help but only his father would listen to his plan.

When all else had failed, the boy's father called the men together and told them that his little son had a plan. Because there was nothing else to do but wait until starvation killed the band, they agreed to do what he said.

The boy ordered the men to build a large rail fence among the trees and at every opening, fasten a snare. When this was done he divided the hunters into two groups and ordered them to walk single file in opposite directions for two days. After two days journey and the men were four days apart in distance, they were to form a large circle and return, shouting and singing, to the fence. This was done and as the men returned, they drove before them a large herd of caribou and hundreds were caught in the leather snares. There was great joy as the animals were butchered and the tenderest pieces of meat were cooked and eaten on the spot. The little boy was praised by everyone, but did not tell the secret of his plan or how he knew about it. He asked his father to carry him around the vast fence so he could find the fattest caribou. Pointing to the largest and fattest animal, he told his father that he must have it. Alas, the choice animal had already been claimed by the boy's uncle and the older man refused to give it up.

That night as his father and mother feasted, the boy refused to eat. He instead pointed to a front shoulder of

meat and to an intestine back of blood and told his mother to put them carefully away, because they would soon be needed. His mother knew her son's words were true, for indeed he had already shown he had the power to bring animals to the starving Indians. That night they put their son to bed, hanging his clothes carefully up to dry.

In the morning they called him, but there was no answer. He was gone, though his outer clothes still hung by the smoke hole. They searched everywhere among their relatives and friends. Their son had disappeared. There was sorrow in the camp but even greater was the woe of the people, when returning to the fence for the rest of the meat, they found the caribou had all vanished without a trace.

That night sadness lay heavy upon the band. No light burned in the shelters. The boy's parents were sitting in silence when suddenly, all around them was a molten yellow brightness. Then they heard their son's voice. "It was the Moon that made my medicine and and told me how to bring the caribou. I could not keep my promise to give him the best animal so he took them all away. I am going to live on the moon until the end of the world. When you are hungry, cut only the meat you can eat at one meal from the shoulder you put away. Do not break the bone and the meat will grow back onto it. When the moon is full you will be able to see me. When the moon is small and its arms point down - times will be bad. If they point upward - times will be good and the people can dance and sing. Remember what I have told you. I will take with me the bag of blood and my little dog. Do not try to follow me."

The boy and his dog disappeared

and the yellow light was replaced by darkness. His parents rushed out and saw the moon rising above the stunted spruce trees. Against its brightness

they could see their son with the bag on his back and his little dog beside him. He can be seen there to this day when the moon is full.

## Business good at Molson Lake

**MOLSON LAKE, Man.** - A fishing lodge owned and operated by an Indian family at this picturesque northern lake was Manitoba's angling hot spot this summer, producing more than 160 trophy northern pike, expected to be a record for the province.

Molson Lake Lodge, the only fishing camp on the 150-square-mile lake 405 miles north of Winnipeg, had reached 161 trophy pike of 18 pounds or more by September 8, with two weeks still to go in the lodge's season.

That's just about one trophy fish for every guest the lodge accommodated this season.

While provincial tourist branch officers have no comparable statistics for other fishing areas to date, they are satisfied no other lake in the province has ever produced that many trophies in a single year.

Last year, Molson lake for the first time surpassed famed Gods Lake as Manitoba's hottest fishing area, producing 86 trophy fish compared to 78 for Gods Lake.

Largest fish caught at Molson lake this year was a 26-pounder, short of the 29-pound record from 1972. It was, however, a memorable season for brothers Joseph and Edward Paupanekis who operate the lodge, and for the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development which helped them establish it.

Les Zettergren, tourist development officer with the Department of Indian Affairs, protests it is no fish story when he says some anglers this year were tossing back 18-pounders - because they already had a 20-pounder in the bottom of the boat, heading for mounting and the wall of a den.

As proof, he offers the catch of four anglers from Cicero, Ill., who kept their best 20 fish from one day's fishing. Total weight for the 20 fish was 360 pounds. Les also reports one fisherman caught seven trophy fish in one day this summer at Molson Lake.

Molson Lake Lodge started as a sawmill - the Paupanekis brothers set it up to provide the logs and lumber for buildings which now have indoor plumbing and which can accommodate 16 fly-in fishermen at one time. The Department of Indian Affairs became involved by providing both technical and financial assistance in the form of a grant and a loan. The loan has now been repaid and another provided for future expansion. The lodge must be one of the few anywhere which now has its 1974 season booked for June, July and into mid-August.

Several Indian families have been highly successful in the operating of tourist camps, and Les Zettergren's job is to help them get established in the business. He and the Department of Indian Affairs have just approved a grant and loan to help a father and son

team, Cornelius and Eugene Wood of Ste. Therese Point in the Island Lake area, to set up a lodge on Bolton Lake, 450 miles northeast of Winnipeg.

The department has provided technical and financial assistance to help establish three other drive-in camps where the Dauphin River meets Lake Winnipeg, 210 miles north of Winnipeg, and about a four-hour drive from Winnipeg.

Anama Bay Tourist Camp operated by Mr. and Mrs. Alex Letender, Sturgeon Bay Tourist Camp operated by Daniel Stagg, and Dauphin River Tourist Camp operated by Walter Anderson, now have a combined accommodation for 50 campers and trailers, 150 tenting sites, and cabins to house 30 fishermen.

It's been a successful fishing season for those camps too - particularly as more Manitobans become aware that they can drive a relatively short distance for a chance at trophy fish. At one time, most of the trade for the Dauphin River area camps came from the United States. Manitobans now are in the majority, representing at least 60 per cent of the trade, and their numbers are expected to increase.

## PENPAL WANTED IN OTTAWA

Penpal in Ottawa for 17-year-old Marlis Sarkany  
513 Evered Avenue  
Ottawa, Ontario

Interest include N. Am. Indian culture (present and past) their art and music. Also, swimming, judo, canoeing, snow-shoeing. Collects stamps and diaries.

## OLIVETTI-CREE TYPEWRITER

(continued from page 8)

ted and spoken. (In the final versions, the X was retained, as well as a comma and two versions of the period. There was universal agreement on the need to retain the dollar sign.)

Olivetti reports that it has already received a number of orders from these machines. There is no doubt that the Cree typewriters will improve communications between Crees themselves and in their dealings with the Department of Indian Affairs, and will also help to preserve an indigenous Canadian language.

**Figure 1a:** Photocopy of the second page of an article in the newspaper *Indian News*, October 1973, with the headline "Cree typewriter available in two major dialects." Photo courtesy of Magdalena Milosz and University of Waterloo.



The typewriter, then, is an agent, a mediator and a result of “several months of negotiations” between Cree communities and the Department of Indian Affairs. How many typewriters were made? How many typewriters still exist in Cree communities? I do not know the full answer, but it seems some are still circulating now, at least as antiques, like other typewriters. I am part of a group called *nêhiyawêwin*, Cree word of the day; it is a community resource for learning Cree and sharing knowledge. The word for typewriter and keyboard can be translated in Cree as *masinatahikan* and relates to the making of marks. There are a diversity of Cree dialects and thus a diversity of Cree syllabic systems and typewriters made. *Tahtakahikan* may be thought of as another Cree word for typewriter.<sup>4</sup>

The clicking of a Cree typewriter can be heard in a film clipping from the National Film Board’s archive of Indigenous life from the 1970s. The government filmed a Cree typist using a Cree typewriter in the film *Cree Way* from the community of Waskaganish (1977). Cree typists are shown throughout the film and in the production of Cree print materials for the benefit of the community. Rather than being part of the state apparatus, the Cree typists are using typewriters as tools for Cree language promotion and literacy. If we turn our eyes back to read further on the same page from the article in *Indian News*, we read about the popularity of the typewriter:

Olivetti reports that it has already received a number of orders from [*sic*] these machines. There is no doubt that the Cree typewriters will improve communications between the Cree themselves and in their dealings with the Department of Indian Affairs, and will also help to preserve an indigenous Canadian language. (“Cree Typewriter” 1973, 12)

Unlike forms of Indigenous literacy such as wampum or birchbark biting, which preserve the maker’s hand, the typewriter deletes that relationship between maker and medium. Kittler notes of the typewriter that “in contrast to the flow of handwriting, here discrete elements separated by spaces are placed side by side. The symbolic has the status of block letters” (Kittler 1987, 115). Unlike the typewriter, the contemporary artworks discussed herein present the trace of the individual hand, beyond machine, and attest to the importance of the relationship between hand and knowledge and production of thought discussed by phenomenological scholars such as Tim Ingold (2007). Yet, a whiff of romanticism also surrounds the typewriter now as a reminder of our relationships to older machines. Is the dynamism of oral cultures in tension with the anonymity of the machines such as the typewriter and gramophone, which have been used to record First Nations, Métis, and Inuit oral histories? Crucial to this remains the interpretation of language and emotional resonances of media.

## Indigenous Literacies and the Death Drive

Another aspect of this reflection on Indigenous literacies and media is the death drive of the archive, which looms large in settler colonial institutions and narratives of “civilization” across Turtle Island. Archives, both physical and online, hold reams of Indigenous language materials and artifacts, such as the 1853 Albion Cree Press at McGill University Rare Books and Special Collections Library, which I will turn to shortly. Anthropologists and other colonial agents collected Indigenous languages and recorded them to preserve in perpetuity, many of which are held at Canadian institutions such as the Canadian Museum of History. They collected life stories, memories, and ontologies. Many Indigenous languages were “preserved,” including Cree and Michif.

Although many archival records are being “preserved” via digitization, there remain limits to the digitization of knowledge, especially for Indigenous materials and cultural belongings. Some scholars suggest digital repatriation as a way forward, but this does not fully account for the agency of both cultural belonging and community (Phillips 2011, 73). While earlier definitions of the term *digital* refer to the human hand, more recent conceptions of the digital are about its space-making potential online.

Could the online archive function as a redemptory space? Gwichyà Gwich’in historian Crystal Fraser and Métis scholar Zoe Todd remind us about the systemic difficulties for Indigenous scholars and communities engaging in settler colonial archives. They critique the long legacy of Indigenous people being erased and marginalized within records and point out that we knowingly work with archival records that always remain fractured and incomplete. Todd and Fraser (2016) note that “for Indigenous peoples, access to state or church archives is complicated, given ongoing settler-colonial realities that frame and govern

<sup>4</sup>I would like to thank Anishnaabe Azejicigan collective and Digital Arts Resource Center for the invitation to participate in the artist panel with Cree elder Greg Spence and Métis Cree Video game designer Meagan Byrne in November 2020 for sharing ideas around Cree typewriters, Cree font, and neon Indigenous futures. I would also like to thank the reviewers of this article for their important feedback. I welcome inquiries especially if you have an Indigenous language typewriter and/or want to work towards an exhibition.

archives in Canada.” They add that “to decolonize the archives requires an erasure or negation of the colonial realities of the archives themselves. Given the inherent colonial realities of the archives as institutions, any effort to decolonize or Indigenize the archives in Canada can only ever be partial” (Fraser and Todd 2016). The death drive of the archive looms like a spectre in any deliberation with colonial archives, especially on unceded First Nations, Métis, and Inuit homelands throughout Turtle Island. This spectre is the colonial agent. The belief that Indigenous peoples and their languages and stories would die out sparked many accumulation projects, including the collection of artifacts related to Canadiana at the McGill Library Rare Books and Special Collections, of which the 1853 Albion Cree Press is one such casualty and artifact. The press, like the typewriter, served colonial aims in connecting the government with Indigenous communities but also served Indigenous communities in the usage, promotion, and visibility of Cree language.

While writing this essay I had a flashback about having a Cree app on my phone that used to prompt me with daily exercises. This is about the everydayness of language learning. The usage of the tongue and the brain together, to hear new sounds. What if everyone spoke Oji-Cree instead of English in Oji-Cree territories? Would our world change? The Canadian constitution recognizes English and French as the official languages, but it should recognize the diversity of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit languages first and foremost. There are many connections across fluent tongues-immersed brains—sovereign lands that transcend these immaterial and material boundaries that have come to define us in limiting and limited ways. But the media studied in this essay helps us go beyond that.

What unites these artifacts—the press, the typewriter, and the artworks—are their engagement with Indigenous literacies. All three are part of Indigenous print cultures. The analysis of Indigenous visual culture requires literacy in interpreting artifacts and images; how and why and what we read in images forms narratives outside of the western canon. As an art historian I am concerned with building narratives inspired by a variety of media, including artworks, printed matter, and artifacts. On my mom’s side of the family we have stories about our Cree relatives near Moose Factory, James Bay, singing Cree hymns. Keeping up the Christian faith. Mom reminds me at the kitchen table—over kwapii coffee!—about the importance of singing songs and of memories in song. I think it is this broader relational framework that scholars such as Katherine Hayles identify in the bridging of science and literature and all our relations:

From my point of view, literature and science as an area of specialization is more than a subset of cultural studies or a minor activity in a literature department. It is a way of understanding ourselves as embodied creatures living within and through embodied worlds and embodied words. (Hayles 1999, 24)

Can songs be science too? Songs are embodied science. Cree laborers produced many Cree hymnals on the printing press that I visited and that I discuss in the next section.

## Visit to the 1853 Albion Cree Press

My graduate class and I attended a workshop that I organized at the Rare Books and Special Collections Library for my Indigenous Archival Methods course. I assigned the students a project to pick an artifact or document from the collection that for them represented Indigenous absence or presence. The students could choose any document that resonated with them. We did a tour of the documents and artifacts in the collection, and in one dark corner stood a single-pull Albion printing press (Figure 2). In 1853 the Church Missionary Society sent the press to Moose Factory, James Bay, to Anglican Bishop James Horden. It was an improved model of the Albion press designed by R. W. Cope and John Hopkinson in 1839.<sup>5</sup> It is about five feet tall and made of black cast iron. The press was designed to be operated by a single person. It still has the chase, the place where the font is situated, and it is currently set with Cree syllabics for the last of Horden’s publications—a Cree almanac—which seems to be a calendar with important dates for Cree celebrations. Some of the Cree hymnals produced on this press may have been the very ones sung by my Cree relations. The songs my mom refers to and reminds me about stem out of that print tradition. I thought about that possibility of family relations using the press and working the press when I was there in the library. It was a strong connection, a compelling possibility.

In the literature, Bishop Horden and his team of white missionaries get all the credit for the press. But what is also interesting and perhaps key is how Cree people were using the press to produce Cree hymnals

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to curator Ann Marie Holland at McGill Rare Books and Special Collections for sharing her research in progress. See also Ann Marie Holland, “In the Spirit of Horden,” *Amphora* 186 (Fall 2020).





**Figure 2:** Nineteenth-century single-pull Albion Cree Press. Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Library. Photo by Gloria Bell.

(“Literacy and the Printing Press” 2021). Misperceptions about Indigenous literacy rates abound, but in the 1850s many Cree language books were printed by the press, which shows that there must have been a substantial community of Cree readers and speakers in the James Bay area and throughout Rupert’s Land. Looking at the press today I think about all the Cree language materials that were printed, including Cree language dictionaries, hymnals, and other paper works, during the mid-nineteenth century. I also think about the labor of Bishop Horden’s Cree associates, whose names were not recorded in the archival record. Their labor was essential to the production of Indigenous reading materials for communities across Turtle Island. The Cree syllabic font keys (seen tied to boxes of type in Figure 3) still bear traces of the black ink used to print reading materials and thus a trace of Indigenous labor and the agency of Indigenous people in the production of media. Perhaps these ink smudges from fingerprints foreshadow Cree hands on typewriters throughout Turtle Island. Like the press, the production of the Cree syllabic font system is a matter of some controversy because white missionaries received the credit for developing the system in a paternalistic line of interpretation that continues to this day. This theory, however, does not consider the origin stories of Cree elders such as Wood Cree Badger Call and the labor of Horden’s Cree associates (Stevenson 1999).

What is the relation between technologies of printing and Indigenous literacies? On the one hand, many missionaries strived to learn Indigenous languages and made Indigenous language dictionaries from the early contact period into the twentieth century. On the other hand, missionaries were key colonial agents in the destruction of Indigenous languages by forbidding children to speak their languages at missionary-run residential schools. Saulteaux artist Robert Houle represents this violence in recent oil stick works.<sup>6</sup> The metaphorical cutting out of tongues, the casting out of language, of meaning, is evoked in Houle’s work. The Cree press is a reminder of missionary colonial activity and an example of the technology of printing.

What about birchbark biting? As an Indigenous printing method and technology, it records abstract florals and motifs. It is a practice of many Indigenous women to this day wherever birch trees are found throughout Turtle Island. Walking in the woods I think about the practice of harvesting birch and about the collection of pine needles for pine needle tea. How Indigenous people knew and know when to collect the needles for vitamin C when the snow is just melting and the ground is still frozen is amazing. When winter does not want to give up its cold grasp of us. On my walk in the woods I see moss too, many different kinds. I think about moss as a technology as well. In the way that Indigenous communities across Turtle Island have used moss for its healing and antiseptic properties. And to line the tikinagan, moss carrier bags that



**Figure 3:** Boxes of Cree syllabic type with font keys for numbers and days of the week tied overtop. The type is used with the Albion Cree Press at Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Library. Photo by Gloria Bell.

<sup>6</sup> The exhibition *Robert Houle: Histories* (2019) at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection presented the artist’s most recent oil stick drawings as exorcisms of his traumatic memories of residential school. See John Nyman, “Robert Houle,” *Border Crossings* 153 (March 2020), McMichael Canadian Art Collection, <https://mcmichael.com/robert-houle/>.





**Figure 4:** Collecting, harvesting, and drying moss is a form of knowledge preservation. Photo by Gloria Bell.

Indigenous women used to carry their young—our young (Nahwegahbow 2017). The collection and harvesting and drying of moss in preparation for use. Knowledge preservation (Figure 4).

Talking with mom on our walk in the woods about moss, about using moss for the healing of wounds. The wounds of herstory.<sup>7</sup> Philosopher Martin Heidegger turned to the woods for inspiration and found a liminal place of possibility in the forest clearings for his writings on history and existentialism. His hut in the woods provided a dwelling place for deepening thoughts and a romantic sense of being at one with nature. The forest, the clearing in the woods, the lookout, was a space of possibility.<sup>8</sup> Appreciation and acknowledgement of the forest as a gifting and giving space is found in the teachings of Indigenous communities throughout Turtle Island (Kimmerer 2013, 363). The forest, in other words, is full of gifts, material and spiritual, for Indigenous literacies.

I am interested in this idea of tongues—speaking in tongues and the possibility of speaking back, the idea of reflexivity for Indigenous literacies beyond settler colonial conceptions and frameworks. In the Christian tradition there is a history of speaking in tongues, where people would sometimes speak in unknown languages that would then need to be interpreted by someone. I think about the history of knowledge keepers

<sup>7</sup> I am inspired by Peter Morin and Ayumi Goto's *How Do You Carry the Land?* (2018) exhibition catalogue and approach to writing histories and herstories.

<sup>8</sup> I'm thinking loosely here of the way that Leland de la Durantaye writes about Heidegger in "Being There: On the Trail of Heidegger" (2007).

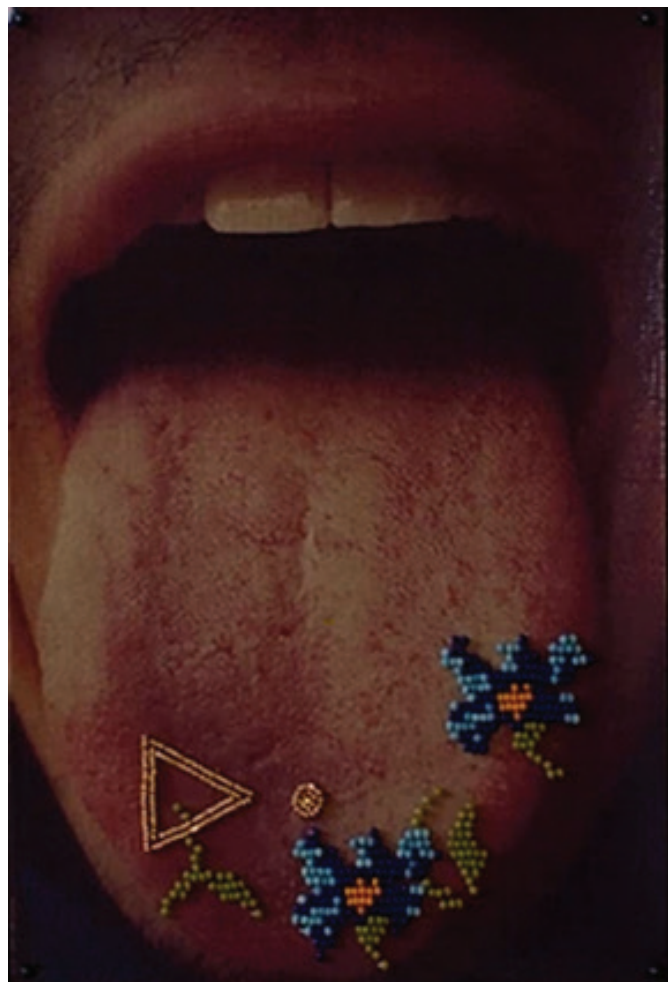


in Indigenous communities, Cree and Michif speakers, and the importance of oral traditions and the need to speak Indigenous languages. *Glossolalia* is the speaking of multiple tongues. Sometimes these languages are interpreted in a religious context; sometimes there is no interpreter. There are things—concepts, ideas, epistemologies—which cannot be translated. There are some teachings—concepts, ideas, ontologies, thoughts—which should not be translated.

### Loss and Language: Catherine Blackburn's *Our Mother(s) Tongue*

The work of Catherine Blackburn, a Dene artist, is particularly poignant on this matter and manner of speaking (Figure 5). In the work *ee* (2017), a tongue has been beaded with Dene syllabics and beadwork in a gel print. Blackburn photographs family members' tongues for the works. The viewer sees a cropped pink tongue with beadwork over the lower part of the composition. Gold-plated seed beads in a near-copper color are used to create Dene syllabics. Beaded blue flowers rest below and around the syllabics. Part of the series *Our Mother(s) Tongue*, the work centres on family members and relations needed to pass on language. The rest of the photograph is quite dark, so the viewer focuses in on the beadwork and the lightness of the mouth. The indentations in the tongue are concave while the beadwork is raised, creating a contrast in textures. The floral patterns are somewhat abstracted and, instead of the backdrop of hide, the beadwork is in relief against the gel photo print of the tongue. The tongue in contemporary art is a powerful site and sight of multiple meanings.

The beadwork is a form of floral beauty but also a reminder of the forms of violence against First Nations, Métis, and Inuit to not speak our languages. The cutting out of tongues is suggested in the close cropping of the speaker's mouth. The punishment inflicted by missionaries at residential schools for speaking one's language is suggested through the overlay of the beadwork overtop the tongue. The beads and pins pierce the photo transfer, suggestive of the violence of Indigenous experiences in residential schools (Blackburn



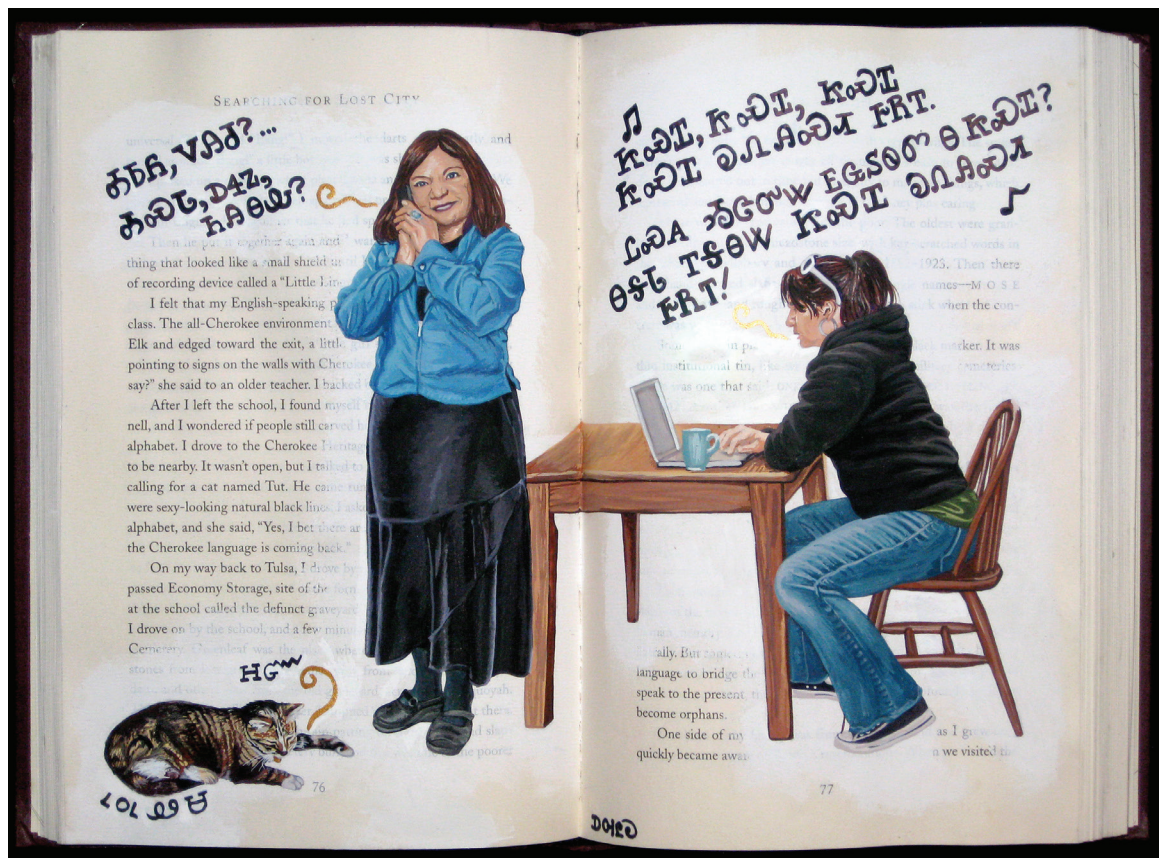
**Figure 5:** Catherine Blackburn, *ee*, 2017, seed beads, pins, gel photo transfer, 6 x 9", Collection of Dunlop Art Gallery. Part of the series *Our Mother(s) Tongue*. Image reproduced with permission of Dunlop Art Gallery.

2019).<sup>9</sup> *Our Mother(s) Tongue* references the way that your language, your mother tongue, is familial and familiar. Your mother's tongue is the tongue you were gifted, the tongue you are most familiar with, spoken at home. On a census you might be asked, "What is your mother tongue?" A check in the dictionary states that it refers to the language you spoke as a baby.

Another aspect and meaning of the phrase *mother's tongue* derives from the longer colonial history of missionaries proselytizing in Indigenous languages. The feminine aspect of "Our Holy Mother Church" in the Catholic tradition is present in the term *mother's tongue*. Thus, the phrase stems from a longer history of Catholic colonialism and missionary violence in the oppression and manipulation of languages. It also can present the familial relations between mother and child and the first words spoken in that intimate bond. The collection of languages. What if you were severed from your mother's tongue? I know that learning any language is a process and my forays worldwide into speaking and learning Italian, French, and Michif and Ojibwe speak to the lifelong process of working toward language fluency and the reclaiming of Indigenous epistemologies.

The loss of language is the loss of the – a mother. A profound loss. "The lost body of information" from the mother (Hayles 1999, 21). The grieving of a parent for their child and the child for their parent. The idea of speaking back, of reclaiming relationships through time and history and of our matrilineal knowledge keepers and givers is present today throughout Indigenous media work such as Rebecca Belmore's *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother* (1991, 1992, 1996).

Indigenous artists today are engaging with media in exciting ways to bring the past into the present, reintegrate Indigenous literacies into visual culture, and promote a broader awareness and understanding between settler and Indigenous communities of Indigenous literacies. Cherokee Nation artist America Meredith's work is evocative of the long history of Cherokee literacy. The 2011 work *Because, You Know, the Cherokee Language Is Coming Back* (Figure 6) evokes that matrilineal knowledge transmission. The artist, who is also an editor of *First American Art Magazine*, is shown in profile working at the computer and



**Figure 6:** America Meredith, *Because, You Know, the Cherokee Language Is Coming Back*, 2011, gouache, watercolor, and India ink on book, 15.25 x 18.75" framed, private collection. Image reproduced with permission of America Meredith.

<sup>9</sup> The exhibition *Witnesses: Art and Canada's Indian Residential Schools* (2013) at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, Vancouver, BC, also presented contemporary Indigenous art in relation to the history of residential schools.



connecting with her mom, speaking on the phone in Cherokee. Her mom inspires her work in Cherokee language revitalization and is credited with the title of the work. The Cherokee syllabics are a prominent graphic in the image and frame the humans and animals, including a calico cat which lounges playfully in the lower left corner of the composition. The image is layered overtop of a colonial text that presents negative interpretations of Cherokee people. The artist's perspective reclaims the Cherokee narrative and centres Cherokee language at the centre of the matrilineal tribute. The complementary image *Dison'sdodi (Typewriter)* (2008) (Figure 7) also centres the importance of Cherokee language and recalls the strong tradition of Cherokee print culture and a wide community of readers.

Centring Indigenous languages and literacy is also crucial to the last artist that I would like to address in this essay. To close this reflection, I would like to briefly turn to the album art for *Wolastoqiyik Lintuwakonawa* (2018), by Wolastoq classically trained opera tenor Jeremy Dutcher. The artist sits in profile, facing a gramophone (Figure 8). Wax cylinder recordings are below the gramophone. The mural behind him is by Cree artist Kent Monkman, with Miss Chief Eagle Testicle brandishing a palette—not quite a nineteenth-century vibe of romanticism, but one of Indigenous futurism using a nineteenth-century motif of the artist at work. The album image is like a nineteenth-century studio portrait with the mural in the background and the active



**Figure 7:** America Meredith, *Dison'sdodi (Typewriter)*, 2008, watercolor and ink on paper, private collection. Image reproduced with permission of America Meredith.





**Figure 8:** Art for Jeremy Dutcher's album, *Wolastoqiyik Lintuwakonawa* (2018). Image reproduced with permission of Jeremy Dutcher.

pose of the sitter, serious but not stoic. Dutcher completed extensive archival research for the album, working with wax cylinder canisters from his Wolastoq community at the Canadian Museum of History to create his compositions (Dutcher n.d.). He drew on Wolastoq language, stories, songs, and memories recorded on wax cylinders in 1907 to inspire his musical compositions for a contemporary audience and to collaborate with ancestral relations. In the album art he sports regalia made of white beadwork, which trails up and emblazons his black dandy jacket. He faces the gramophone as if in conversation. Dutcher, like Cannon and the other media artists discussed in this essay, reclaims and complicates simplistic interpretations of Indigenous literacies and technologies for Indigenous revitalization and to create new aesthetics and graphisms for a global audience.

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