

Understanding Cree Protocol in the Shifting Passages of “Old Keyam”

Deanna Reder

Volume 31, Number 1, 2006

"For The Love of Words": Aboriginal Writers of Canada

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl31_1art10

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Reder, D. (2006). Understanding Cree Protocol in the Shifting Passages of “Old Keyam”. *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 31(1), 50–64.

Article abstract

Voices of The Plains Cree, compiled and published in 1973, was actually two separate works authored by the Cree Anglican cleric Edward Ahenakew approximately fifty years earlier. While the first section is ethnographic and preserves cultural stories of the past, the second section, entitled “Old Keyam,” is contemporary for its time. The title character, Keyam, is a conflicted personality, allied both to Cree cultural and political rights and to white standards of success. Ahenakew presents these impulses as distinct throughout the text, and does not offer a way to resolve them via the expected means of hybridity, fusion, or creolization. Resistant to typical postcolonial readings of Indigenous subject formation under colonization, “Old Keyam” reflects Ahenakew’s complex position as a colonized subject with an intimate understanding of Cree protocol. Works by critics such as Marie Battiste, Lorraine Brundige, Stan Cuthand, Olive Dickason, and Joel Pfister are useful when exploring Ahenakew’s primary narrative concerns.

Understanding Cree Protocol in the Shifting Passages of “Old Keyam”

DEANNA REDER

VOICES OF THE PLAINS CREE, compiled and published in 1973, was actually written as two separate works by the Cree writer and Anglican cleric Edward Ahenakew about fifty years earlier. The first section was written while Ahenakew was on an extended visit to the Thunderchild Reserve in the 1920s, where he collected stories from the aging Chief Thunderchild and translated them from Cree into English. While this first half is ethnographic, preserving cultural stories of the past, the second section, entitled “Old Keyam” after its central figure, is contemporary for its time. Ahenakew creates a character based on the Cree icon of the *Old Man* to articulate the *Indian point of view*, yet Keyam is conflicted, allied both to Cree cultural and political rights and to white standards of success. But rather than the hybridity, fusion, or creolization proposed by postcolonial critics, which creates a new form to challenge old genres and the colonial order, these two separate and competing impulses remain distinct throughout the text. Instead, “Old Keyam” is a site to discuss the challenges to Indigenous subject formation under colonization. At the same time, specifically Cree concepts of relationship and authority are at play. To adequately understand Ahenakew’s work, not only his position as a colonized subject but also his understanding of Cree protocol have to be taken into consideration.

Ahenakew translates *keyam* as Cree for *I don’t care* and explains that this term “expresses the attitude of many Indians who stand bewildered in the maze of things, not knowing exactly what to do, and hiding their keen sense of defeat under the assumed demeanor of ‘keyam!’ — while in fact they do care greatly” (7). The character Keyam represents the early twentieth-century generation of Nehiyawak¹ who, unlike Chief Thunderchild, was born and raised on reserves and never knew tribal life before colonization and the interfering presence of the Canadian state.

Contemporary Cree scholars Maria Campbell and Winona Wheeler

argue that while “Old Keyam” seems to be addressed to non-Aboriginal readers “who have the power to address ineffective and harmful federal Indian policies” (180), the text instead ought to be considered as resistance literature full of coded messages for a Cree audience. Campbell and Wheeler argue that only those who know the language and culture could determine the status of certain characters based on actual people or recognize the references to sacred stories in High Cree. Likewise it is only the Cree reader who can decipher Ahenakew’s embedded codes or recognize what Campbell calls *word bundles*. Wheeler summarizes Campbell’s argument:

In the stories of Chief Thunderchild and Old Keyam, [Campbell] explains, are the teachings of Napewatsowin, *man ways*, in the context of nehiyawewin, *Cree ways*. Encoded for future generations are instructions on how to be warriors, providers, and protectors in an ever changing world. (183)

I build on these insights to interrogate the conflicts of identity in the “Old Keyam” text. I am persuaded by Campbell and Wheeler that the text is full of *word bundles*, teaching nehiyawewin. But as I focus on the more vitriolic passages that seem to be critical of the Cree and more allied with the colonizer’s agenda, Keyam’s shifting positions are not fully explained by a heroic or a subversive interpretation.

The best example of this is in chapter ten, where Keyam muses on the imposition by the white man of “regulations necessary for [Indian] welfare” (100). In this chapter Keyam convincingly argues both for the justification of Cree cultural and spiritual practice made illegal by the State and for the abandonment of these cultural and spiritual practices in favour of knowledge brought by those whites whom he describes as “those who mean well” (99).

The structure of the chapter is this: First a problem is articulated, one that Cree listeners would recognize as the same problem as that of Fine Day, a famous Cree warrior who had pledged to make eight Sun Dances over the course of his life but was prohibited from fulfilling this promise because legislation at the time made such ceremonies illegal. The chapter begins when a man wanders to the reserve, very disturbed because during a near-death experience he vowed to Ma-ni-to to make a Sun Dance:

When the lodge had been erected and the dancers were ready, the police came to forbid the dance. That was the law they told the people, and serious trouble was averted only because the police were tactful,

even sympathetic. But the man's vow remained unfulfilled and he was deeply troubled. (93)

Following the articulation of the problem, Keyam gives a Statement of Faith first as a Christian but also as someone who "respects matters of conscience" (which he later describes as a British principle). He makes his argument for the value of the Sun Dance, first by telling the legend and identifying the teaching of the Sun Dance as a ceremony where the dancer must "sustain trials to open himself to the store of mercy that is in Ma-ni-to" (94). Keyam does take care to declare that he does not criticize the motives of those who made the anti-Sun Dance law, but also states that "he does not think it altogether wise" (94).

Throughout this discussion, Keyam employs an arsenal of rhetorical strategies to defend the Sun Dance. First, he demystifies the outlawed ceremony through telling the story of its origin. Second, he uses logic to defend the Sun Dance, addressing three objections to the ceremony and rebutting them by describing how similar they are to Christian practices. Third, he goes on the offensive, questioning the justice of the law itself that contradicts the "freedom to worship as one's conscience dictates [which] is a British principle" (95). Next he questions the efficacy of legislation designed to suppress rituals, which in fact only keeps them alive. He then questions the justification for making illegal an act of worship "that is free of any vice" (95). He ends this half of the chapter with another Statement of Faith that he longs "for the day when the Christian Church will be strong on every reserve" (95). But while he insists that Cree religious beliefs eventually will be subsumed by Christian ones, he laments that "it is a time of change when all that made our lives secure is going from us, and we have not yet learned the new ways, nor can we understand why these things should be" (95). While Keyam's prediction about the inevitable triumph of Christianity is in keeping with his statements of faith, his lamentations are those of a Cree person. The modals in this last phrase, the *can* and the *should* in "nor can we understand why these things should be," bear examination, if only because they can be read in two ways. Either the Cree cannot understand, suggesting an inability because of a lack of education in the "new ways," or perhaps it is a questioning of the necessity of changes, "why these things should be."

This sense of ambiguity continues in the next paragraph. While Keyam is quick to state that the Indians "know that they deceived themselves" by depending on medicine men and conjurers, Keyam contra-

dicts this statement when he effectively defends Cree spiritual beliefs. By describing these beliefs as “what the white man is compelled to scoff at because it does not always fall within reason” (96), Keyam implies that to disregard or “scoff at” what you do not understand is a deficiency. He recounts two stories given to him by Basil Starblanket, whom he describes as a “strong, hard-headed . . . and stalwart defender of the Christian religion” (96). Combined with the fact that he is the son of the famous Cree chief, Ah-tah-ka-koop, this makes Starblanket a very credible source. In the first story Keyam tells how Starblanket witnessed the work of a conjuror and in the second how Ah-tah-ka-koop, in the days before signing Treaty in 1876, evaded the curse of a conjuror who was greatly disliked and feared. The implication is that if even a stalwart Christian in the first story and an eminent chief in the second, both well respected by whites and Crees, could testify to the powers of conjurors, then these accounts must be valid, credible, and believable. Yet Keyam then dismisses these stories as only believable to the uneducated by stating that “we who have gone to school know that such things are not always as they appear” (98).

But if I could argue that Ahenakew constructs for Keyam a veneer of compliance with the beliefs of the white man to appease his white readers — be they his potential publisher, his bishop, or the officials at Indian Affairs — the last page and a half swing directly against this argument. Keyam argues in the early passages that the Sun Dance was to some spiritually necessary, but in any event generally inoffensive. At the end of the chapter Keyam condemns traditional spiritual practices by arguing that they are harmful to contemporary Cree: “One of the greatest forces in maintaining this ignorance has been the influence of the medicine-men, particularly the one who professes the miraculous skill of conjuring” (98). If Keyam used logic to rebut the objections to the Sun Dance and other Cree practices, and dignified the value of acting as “one’s conscience dictates,” in the last page Keyam uses logic to list objections to current sanitation practices and contends that the only salvation is in following “the wise direction of a field matron . . . kind but firm” or “those who mean well” (99), supposedly like those “tactful, even sympathetic” policemen who came to the reserve to stop the Sun Dance. Keyam suggests that the Cree tradition of accepting the uncertainty of life encouraged a “stoic fatalism” that becomes “disregard for the simplest rules of health. . . . The factors that worked for our well-being formerly were the natural accompaniments of a free life, not the deliberate precautions that we must now take” (98).

Here Keyam describes life without freedom: if before there was a teepee, now there is a shanty, overcrowded and unclean. If before there were constant changes in camp, now the stationary settlements are filled with dirt and refuse. Clothing used to be simple and easily renewed, while now, because of the adoption of European clothing styles and reserve conditions, it is difficult to keep clean. Now food is easier to obtain but unhealthy, so that ignorance contributes to malnourishment. Keyam readily identifies that these problems, like the “diseases that the white man brought amongst us” (98), are the result of contact. But rather than rail against the injustices of the loss of freedom, or the subjection to the poverty that elsewhere he has eloquently argued is the result of interference or obstruction by the white man, Keyam encourages submission:

The Indians must be educated to work faithfully with those who mean well, instead of working against them. Appropriate means must be taken to help us see the fallacy of the old ideas on one hand, and on the other the efficacy of the white man’s methods in simple principles. (99)

This swing, from one point to another and then back again, mimics its author’s position, and I look to the historical context to consider what roles were available to Ahenakew. The State’s contradictory impulses, to segregate yet also to assimilate the Indigenous person, seem to be partly responsible for this attitude of “keyam” that Ahenakew describes in his text. Ahenakew and his generation were subject to the restrictions of legislation that criminalized traditional cultural practices while dictating everything from their legal identity and mobility to their education. For example, they were literally segregated from mainstream society, living on reserves, or attending Indian residential schools. Their legal status was not that of full citizens but rather, in the words of the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs, Lawrence Vankoughnet in 1876, that of “minors, with the Government as their guardians” (Harring 262). Yet there were policies in place to assimilate Status Indians in a way that sounds eerily similar to cultural genocide. Duncan Campbell Scott, Canadian poet and bureaucrat for the Department of Indian Affairs in the early decades of the twentieth century, was a strong proponent of enfranchisement. He articulates his department’s purpose “to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department” (qtd.in Dickason 308). Keyam responds directly to this proposal in chapter twelve:

Enfranchisement is offered to us all, but at a price that many of us do not want to pay, for it means that we must leave our reserves, cut ourselves off from our own people. Why should we leave Treaty in order to have a say in the affairs of the land? (104)

Yet Keyam's resolution is not a simple rejection of government intrusion. In this passage he continues on to state, "There is still room for us here. Could the Government not set a standard that would exclude the unintelligent and the non-productive voters?" (104).

Keyam's concession is that the government officials (many of whom he is very critical of, in several passages in the book, as incompetent patronage appointments) should determine and exclude the "unintelligent" and the "non-productive," criteria that could easily be manipulated to exclude more than Keyam intends.

But while I argue that government policies designed to simultaneously segregate and assimilate the Status Indian resulted in identity confusion and mixed loyalties, Stan Cuthand, in the introduction to the 1995 edition, gives another reason why Ahenakew and his generation (including the fictional Keyam) would ally themselves with the colonizer, despite the fact that it was not in their own interests:

I think it was because of their strong Cree upbringing. Their attitudes toward Christian religious authorities were shaped by their respect for medicine men and powerful Cree leaders. That respect took the form of deference. You never asked questions of the real old-timers. You just waited and watched. That was how they were. (x)

Aboriginal scholar Lorraine Brundige confirms the role of respect in Cree culture. She quotes Cree Elder Abel Chapman: "A long time ago the youngsters gathered around an elder, like we sit around the TV today. The elder would relate stories about survival. That's how the children learned" (41).

This is not to suggest that Cree learners complacently accepted the words of authority. Brundige argues that embedded in Cree philosophy was the need for perceptual reality checks and rechecks, because there was an understanding that everyone spoke from a different perspective. Upon contact she argues that the Cree understood that Europeans had a different world view, but that it was important to share their land in order to "come together in a relationship as relatives who had much to learn and

benefit from each other” (116). While Cuthand considers Ahenakew’s generation to be deferential to authority against their own interests, Brundige notes that

This is not to say that Cree peoples accepted everything the European had to offer, contrary to European expectations. However, because of the cultural value of *kisteanemétowin* [*respect between people*], they would not have had reason to dismiss Europeans as less than human or incapable of relational interaction. (116)

The value of maintaining good relations was more important than epistemological differences. Brundige argues that because of the belief in multiple perspectives, perceptual differences were accommodated in traditional society:

Historically, Swampy Cree people were prepared to accept “other” stories and found no contradiction in the idea that Europeans and Swampy Crees had different beliefs about the world. Far more important than having the same beliefs was an ability to engage in respectful interaction. (85)

Within his narrative Ahenakew demonstrates how contradictory arguments might be overlooked in deference to respectful relationships. In chapter eight, Old Keyam is newly married to Chochena and describes how they travelled to a city about seventy miles from the reserve in order that he could work as an interpreter at a conference on Indian education. When describing what they have heard, Keyam mentions that he and his wife have discussed the speeches many times and that they are not in complete agreement. Chochena “agrees with the Chief” so much so that “sometimes she has almost convinced” Keyam, and he admits that though this Chief’s “motion was defeated ... he spoke well” (87). Keyam, however, is convinced by another:

The Chief who spoke in opposition was another fine speaker — a credit to us all. Now I am not naming these Chiefs on purpose. It is not that I have forgotten their names.... It is because I cannot mention all who spoke well and review all their arguments. I would not slight any of those who represented our people at that conference. We can be proud of them. It is not easy to take the stand that some of them did, and to speak boldly. (87)

Rather than discredit Chochena or other people with opposing opinions, Keyam practises *kisteanemétowin*. While he signals the importance of

debate as he relates the content of different arguments, he takes care to articulate his respect for all participants.

Because of the preponderance of the stereotype of the *Indian* in the North American imagination, with the marketing of New Age shamanism as a recent incarnation, it is possible to dismiss kisteanemétowin as a naive, uncomplicated value that emerges from a prelapsarian culture. But *respect for others* comes out of a complex epistemological system based on the interrelationship of all things. Rather than the famous Cartesian mind/body split or the hierarchies of human beings over animals and plants, the animate over the inanimate, Cree philosophy is based on the concept that everything is interconnected, and kisteanemétowin is the recognition of these relationships.

Winona Wheeler explains how this epistemological difference affects her understanding and study of Cree history:

Cree teachings, like Cree stories/oral traditions, have no rigid beginnings or endings. Everyone's personal (his)stories interconnect and overlap, all are extensions of the past, and all are grounded in wakhôtowin, *kinship/relations*. According to Nêhiyawîhtamawâkan, *Cree teachings, etymology*, we inherit relationships and obligations to the generations behind, among, and before us, to life on this earth as we know it, and to our homelands. (2)

Concepts of time rooted in Western notions of progress and of space as a simple exchangeable commodity (ie. real estate) are challenged by Nêhiyawîhtamawâkan, which sees both as something with which you have a relationship and to which you have obligations. Keyam discusses this in chapter two, when he cajoles his audience to respect their neighbours, the Bush Cree. To Keyam, the influence of the past and of the land manifests itself in cultural differences:

We are told by some thinkers that between the material and spiritual parts of man there is a great division, that there is no shading of one into the other. I cannot believe that. One affects the other, and the place where a man lives can shape his character.... It is the nature of one's country, its effect through many generations, that makes the difference in men. (58-59)

Contrary to Cuthand's evaluation of Ahenakew's generation, it is clear that whatever respect or deference Keyam feels for the school or church, he does not accept this teaching without question. He rejects the European belief in "the great division" between "the material and spiritual parts of

man” in favour of the Cree concept of holism and the interrelationship between people and the land.

Yet, as much as there is evidence that Keyam voices the values of Cree philosophy and protocol, there are still swings in the text where Keyam speaks with the voice of the assimilated. Continuing his discussion of the effect of the land on people, he explains the deficiencies of the Plains Cree as though he himself is no longer one. In the above passage, Keyam begins with the pronoun “we” (as in “we are told by some thinkers ...”) to build a narrative in which he and the group to which he belongs, be it other students in school or fellow parishioners in the on-reserve church, or fellow members of his community, are “told by some thinkers.” Because Keyam was limited to segregated communities, it is clear that the majority of those referred to as “we” would have to be Cree. To complement this action of “being told,” Keyam resists and states that “I cannot believe that.” Because he proposes a Cree belief, that “it is the nature of one’s country ... that makes the difference in men,” he is allying himself with other Cree rather than individuating himself from the group. His “we” confirms his membership as a Cree. However, a page later he clearly articulates the values of the Protestant work ethic, but more significantly, no longer speaks as a group insider:

The prairie Indian lacks one thing sadly. It is what I would call ‘stick-to-it-iveness.’ He dislikes to work at anything that requires sustained effort, that has in it the element of plodding. He wants quick returns. He will put forth great effort when the object to be attained is within view, but when the work has only remote reward, and to get it means the exercising of much patience, he either gives in altogether, or continues in a most pathetic way. (59)

The first pronoun in this passage indicates that the narrator is not one of whom he speaks. On one hand is “the prairie Indian” and on the other is “I”. This “I” is in a position of power, speaking in a well-established discourse, even by the 1920s, about the *plight of the prairie Indian* and the *Indian problem*. The adjective “sadly” further distances the narrator from the “prairie Indian” and marks affect that denotes a mix of empathy, pity and perhaps futility. It is not that “the prairie Indian” is sad but that in public discussions about the problems with “the prairie Indian” this one deficiency or lack is unfortunate as it clearly is so pervasive as to be insurmountable. Furthermore, “the prairie Indian” clearly cannot be blamed for this lack but rather can only be pitied. When Keyam notes that “it is

what I would call ‘stick-to-it-iveness,’ Keyam is not only aligned with the majority who understand just what a lack this is, but also sets himself up as an authority who has studied this problem.

There are other examples of contradiction worth examining. In chapter ten Keyam defends the Sun Dance and other Cree religious practices, asking “Why should individuals be forced to give up what they consider to be a means of reconciliation with the author of their being?” (95). Yet in chapter four he defends the “prohibition by Canadian law” of the Mah-tah-e-to-win (*the give-away dance*), “for it is like a drunken orgy, releasing all that is most reckless in Indians” (69). The effect of declarations made confidently in one place and retracted in another gives the “Old Keyam” text an unstable feeling.

However, in the quotation from chapter ten, Keyam is not speaking as much from the position of Cree activist as he is from that of colonized British subject, familiar with the discourses around freedom of religion. He is not defending Cree people but rather the much sanctified *individual*. Joel Pfister, in his 2004 monograph, *Individuality Incorporated: Indians and the Multicultural Modern*, cautions that there must be a “historical awareness that the word *individual* was invested with particular ideological meanings by dominant groups and was used by these groups both to dominate and to “give” certain kinds of opportunities to Natives and others” (16).² In other words, despite the rhetoric around the rights of the individual, Native Americans were not granted these rights consistently. In the second quotation from chapter four, Keyam speaks again from the position of the dominant group and demonstrates the inconsistency that Pfister describes. If in chapter ten Keyam alludes to British law to defend the rights of the individual, in chapter four he cites Canadian law and its prohibition of dancing. In both cases his words, as contradictory as they might be, ally him with the colonizing state. He condemns the give-away dance because it releases “all that is most reckless in Indians.” If the first passage invokes the *individual* to enshrine religious freedom, it is clear from the second passage that this right does not always apply if you are an Indian. Within the context of the second one, it is clear there is a fiduciary duty of the State to dominate through legislation, to protect the Indians from themselves.

As much as I argue that concepts of kisteanemétowin (*respect between people*) and nêhiyawîhtamawâkan (*Cree teachings*) exist within the text, they sit uneasily with Keyam’s shift in voice from “we” to “he.” But while

Keyam does sometimes speak with the voice of the colonizer, the fact that he is able to entertain opposing points of view that prohibit him from succumbing entirely to the devastating evaluation of the church and state, which reduced aboriginal people to savages and heathens and wards rather than full citizens, is in itself Cree. In her dissertation, Brundige suggests that besides the acknowledgement that people have different perceptions of reality, which encourages tolerance for different perspectives, the Cree value of reciprocity also reinforces respectful relations. Because a Cree world view “does not hint that a possibility for knowledge or relational interaction can occur only if they both believe in the same things” (91), there is less emphasis on agreement and more emphasis on good relations. Keyam tries to reconcile possibly irreconcilable perspectives of the Cree and of the colonizers, because this is a Cree value.

Of course, the contradictions of Keyam are evident in Ahenakew’s life. On one hand he was a fierce critic of government policy and bitter at the prejudice he experienced within the church and in general society. On the other hand he was known by his community to be a devout Christian, loyal to the British Royal family and a devoted Anglican cleric. Stan Cuthand writes in a 1978 article that while Ahenakew “worked hard with the League of Indians” he was “not aggressive in his approach to rectify the wrongs of his people, he was caught between two worlds, and was often more loyal to the church” (383). Brundige identifies this problem as a personal one for Aboriginal people under colonization and asks “how are we to make sense of our life if we are caught between two opposing narratives?” (133). She suggests that autobiography is a necessary impulse, motivated or inspired to be an act of resistance against inaccurate narratives. Speaking of the contemporary situation, she writes that “many Aboriginal/Indigenous people are coming forth to contest the inherited legacy of the European narrative, its stereotypes and its social/political structures, and they are providing alternative stories” (151).

Many of those who knew Ahenakew considered his “Old Keyam” character to be at least partly autobiographical, disguised enough to free him from the censure of his bishop. For example, much of chapter seven is directly taken from an address he delivered on 16 June, 1920, at the Annual Meeting of the Women’s Auxiliary held in the City of Prince Albert, Saskatchewan.³ Also, several passages are directly taken from the author’s notes on his own family history.⁴ His editor, Ruth Matheson Buck, writes in the 1973 edition, “much of the material is drawn from his own experi-

ences in the counseling of his people, and is sometimes autobiographical” (3). Neal McLeod calls “Old Man Keyam, the semi-autobiographical voice of Edward Ahenakew.”

Considering what aspects of this work are autobiographical is not, as Sneja Gunew might argue, to limit Ahenakew, as women and minorities so often are, to the role of “the truth-speaking subject” (57). Fully confident of Ahenakew’s abilities to write fiction, I wonder how he would be able to write an autobiography to convey multiple and self-conflicted identities. I am not suggesting that identities are singular, consistent, and discrete, but Canon Ahenakew’s position was particularly conflicted as well as scrutinized. Given the generic expectations of autobiography produced in the 1920s, how would Ahenakew, bilingual and literate, an activist and a cleric, a Cree and a Christian, be able to express his opinions and experiences, especially when some of what he articulates is in opposition to himself?

In the introduction to “Old Keyam” written in June 1923, Ahenakew explains his motivation to write this work: “*The time has come* in the life of my race when that which has been like a *sealed* book to the masses of our Canadian compatriots — namely the view that the Indians have of certain matters affecting their lives — should be known” (9; emphasis added). Yet Ahenakew’s manuscript remained sealed, despite his attempts to have it published. Nephew Stan Cuthand states that it was submitted to and subsequently rejected by Ryerson Press as early as 1922 (Ahenakew xiii). Ahenakew writes about the interest in “Old Keyam” by a member of the American Philosophical Society as late as 1948.⁵ Yet this work did not find a publisher during its author’s lifetime. In fact, “Old Keyam” was almost lost. Paul A.W. Wallace, Ahenakew’s long-time correspondent and friend, mentions in a 1929 letter that he is returning to Ahenakew a copy of “Old Keyam” that very well might be the only remaining copy that we have today.⁶ Not until after Ahenakew’s death in 1960 is his work gathered and entrusted to Ruth M. Buck, a family friend and historian charged with the job to ready his papers for publication. She makes it clear in the 1973 introduction that the immediate relevance of this work had expired: “The papers in this collection deal with the traditions and past history of the Plains Cree and with the effects, fifty years ago, of a changing way of life” (1).

This work did not initially find its intended audience, or what genre theorists call “uptake,” until it was generically transformed by the passage

of time from political commentary to cultural artifact. Yet other kinds of writing by Ahenakew were readily received: for example, his collection of Cree trickster tales was published by the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1929; he worked with Archdeacon Faries to complete a Cree-English dictionary (1938); throughout his career as a clergyman, he regularly wrote in certain Anglican periodicals, like the *Cree Monthly Guide*. But as a Status Indian and a cleric, Ahenakew was not free to participate in any activity he wished. For example, in 1933 he was forced to give up his position in the League of Indians for Western Canada: “the Indian Department urged the bishop to tell him to attend to his duties as a churchman and not meddle in the affairs of the state” (xviii).

While it was acceptable for Ahenakew to act in roles that positioned the Cree as a vanishing people (as ethnographer to collect “Native American folklore” or as an informant to Cree linguists) or as a people in need of civilization (in his work as a missionary, spreading the gospel and Western standards of cleanliness and propriety), it was not acceptable when Ahenakew stepped outside of roles sanctioned by Church and State. Likewise, while Ahenakew found a publisher and audience for certain kinds of texts, he could not find either for “Old Keyam” during his lifetime.

Certainly the text deserves critical attention, partly to understand why it has been overlooked until now. Yet since its republication in 1995, *Voices of the Plains Cree* has been studied almost exclusively by Indigenous academics.⁷ Besides the work by Maria Campbell and Winona Wheeler, Métis scholar Judy Iseke-Barnes cites it as she catalogues examples of storytelling that have preserved Indigenous communities (219). Neal McLeod also includes a discussion of the text in his 2000 on-line article, “Cree Narratives of Change,” where he argues that “social and cultural changes [of the past century among the Cree]... were absorbed ... into pre-existing philosophies and conceptual frameworks.” He relies on Ahenakew’s work to substantiate some of his family stories, but also includes biographical detail about the author as told to him by his father. He writes, “All of my family who remember Edward Ahenakew, remember him as a very gentle and compassionate man.”

This recuperation of not just the work, but also the man, cannot be simplistically dismissed as revisionist or sentimental. Given the values of relations and the collapse of barriers between personal and academic discourse that marks Indigenous scholarship, McLeod’s personal connection to Ahenakew is relevant. Mi’kmaq professor Marie Battiste argues that the

“agenda of Indigenous scholarship ... is to transform Eurocentric theory so that it will not only include and properly value Indigenous knowledge, thought, and heritage ... but also develop a cooperative and dignified strategy that will invigorate and animate Indigenous languages, cultures, knowledge, and vision in academic structures” (213-14). While there are insights to be gained by reading *Voices of the Plains Cree* through the lens of postcolonial theory, reading the text with a knowledge of Cree philosophy has the potential to correct the wrongs of colonization.

Not surprisingly, many of the strategies or approaches by Indigenous scholars are poorly understood. For example, when McLeod identifies Ahenakew as someone his family knew, he is not simply associating himself with celebrity or ignoring the complex relationship between an author and his work. Instead McLeod identifies a relationship with Ahenakew as a demonstration of how the world fits together for a Cree person. More generally, *Voices of the Plains Cree* is a text that has become important to emerging Indigenous academics who are looking for those who have come before us, looking quite literally for those to whom we relate.

NOTES

¹ Cree word for Cree people; recently, several Cree scholars (Winona Wheeler, Lorraine Brundige) have begun keeping Cree words in regular font and italicizing the English translation. I continue this new convention.

² His thesis is that the American government used sites like the Carlisle Indian School to coerce Native American children from various tribes to forget their specific nation in favour of being an *Indian* and then, in order to accommodate industrial society, to think of themselves as *individuals*.

³ A transcript of this speech is available in UBC stacks on microfilm, call number MM54 A34.

⁴ Some of this has been published in “The Story of the Ahenakews” in *Saskatchewan History* 17:12-23 1964.

⁵ Stan Cuthand references the correspondence between Ahenakew and his friend Paul A.W. Wallace, for this information. In a letter dated 4 June, 1948, Ahenakew mentions the interest in his work by Dr. Lingelbach of the American Philosophical Society and Dr. William Fenton of the Bureau of American Ethnology at the Smithsonian. See Preface xiii.

⁶ This was told to me in conversation with David R. Miller, Indigenous Studies, First Nations University of Canada in September 2004.

⁷ The most notable exception is David R. Miller, professor at First Nations University, who is studying the editorial changes made to Ahenakew’s original text.

WORKS CITED

- Ahenakew, Edward. "The Story of the Ahenakews." *Saskatchewan History*. Ed. Ruth Matheson Buck. 17 (1964): 12-23.
- . *Voices of the Plains Cree*. Ed. Ruth M. Buck. Rev. ed. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1995.
- Battiste, Marie. "Unfolding the Lessons of Colonization." *Unhomely States: Theorizing English-Canadian Postcolonialism*. Ed. Cynthia Sugars. Peterborough: Broadview P, 2004, 209-220.
- Brundige, Lorraine. "*Tanisi Isinisohtamahk Kitaskino: Cree Philosophy Akwa Kayaskiacimowin*." Diss. U of Oregon, 2004.
- Campbell, Maria. "*Kiasyno Akuâ Nehiawatsowin: Old Man and Cree Life Ways*," Unpublished manuscript in possession of the author, 1999.
- Cuthand, Stan. "The Native Peoples of the Prairie Provinces in the 1920s and 1930s." *Sweet Promises: A Reader on Indian-White Relations in Canada*. Ed. J.R. Miller. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1991. 381-92.
- Dickason, Olive. *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times*. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1997.
- Gunew, Sneja. *Framing Marginality: Multicultural Literary Studies*. Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1994.
- Harring, Sidney L. *White Man's Law: Native People in Nineteenth-Century Canadian Jurisprudence*. Toronto: Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History, 1998.
- Iseke-Barnes, Judy. "Living and Writing Indigenous Spiritual Resistance." *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 24:3 (2003): 211-38.
- McLeod, Neal. "Cree Narratives of Change." *Journal of Indigenous Thought* (2001). <http://www.sifc.edu/Indian%20Studies/IndigenousThought/winter2001/narratives.html>.
- Pfister, Joel. *Individuality Incorporated: Indians and the Multicultural Modern*. Raleigh: Duke UP, 2004.
- Stevenson (Wheeler), Winona L. "Decolonizing Tribal Histories." Diss. U of California, Berkeley, 2000.