

**Mariella Lorusso**

**'Cree-English': the Creative Word in the Poetry of Louise Halfe**

**Abstract I:** Per le popolazioni aborigene, la lingua non è solamente un veicolo di comunicazione, ma anche espressione della vera essenza della natura umana, simbolo di identità e mezzo per trasmettere gli insegnamenti del passato. Essa possiede una qualità spirituale che emana direttamente dalla Madre Terra e la stretta interdipendenza fra gli esseri umani, la terra e la lingua è al centro della filosofia culturale nativa. Con questo contributo si intende concentrare l'attenzione sulla creatività della parola indigena nell'opera di Louise Halfe, "Skydancer" e sull'uso del 'Cree-English', ibridazione linguistica che riflette il popolo e la cultura Cree.

**Abstract II:** For Aboriginal people, language is not only a means of communication, but is also an expression of the real essence of human nature, a symbol of identity and a way of passing on the traditional knowledge of the past. The language has a spiritual quality that emanates directly from Mother Earth and the essential interdependence between human beings, the earth and language is at the centre of indigenous cultural philosophy. This article focuses on the creative use of indigenous linguistic expressions in the poetry of Louise Halfe, "Skydancer" and on the use and meaning of 'Cree-English', a distinctive linguistic form which reflects the hybrid condition of the Cree people and culture.

The Eurocentric vision of the New World as *terra nullius*, as an uninhabited, wild and unspoiled environment and consequently a land to conquer, dominate and exploit may be contrasted with the very different sacred vision of the indigenous world. On the one hand, the first Europeans were seduced by the grand opportunity presented by a land without boundaries, free of any type of social restriction, in which the only requirement to be confronted was that of Nature in the wild, that is wilderness, whose occupation and appropriation was considered not just an obligation but also a duty. The occupation of the land was justified by the argument that otherwise the land would have been left, abandoned and unproductive. On the other hand, in the indigenous view Nature coincides with the very life of the people (Meli 2007: 8; Cfr. Chamberlin 2004). The concept of Mother Earth for the indigenous people includes not only the land, but also the animals, rocks, plants and their mutual and binding relationship with human beings. In the indigenous tradition one can refer to the other categories of living beings as 'people' in the real sense of the word: the 'Snake People' for the Hopi, the 'Buffalo People' for the Plains Indians, the 'Salmon People' for the North-East coast Indians and so on. The ability to form relationships among all living beings underlies the concept that human beings can become animals and vice versa (Lorusso 2010: 250). Human beings do not occupy a position of supremacy over Nature but are a part of the sacred circle. As Simon Ortiz explains, there is an "inextricable relationship and interconnection" between humans and the land, "land and people are interdependent" (Ortiz 1998: xii). The concept of interdependence between all of creation and humans is the foundation of the cultural philosophy of all the North American Native people. It is a connection that binds and keeps alive the awareness of one's origins and essential heritage and the deep significance of existence. The process of learning takes place through the lived experience of observation and the internalizing of natural phenomena. The Native people refer to themselves as keepers of the Land, who respect and honour the Land as

part of themselves and as a manifestation of the Creator that entrusted them with it (Lorusso 2010: 211). The products of Mother Earth are not only used as consumer goods, but are regarded as relatives, as very dear persons to be treated with the greatest of respect. As Franco Meli points out “the relationship of the Native world with the Land [...] that Land referred to as wilderness from the beginning of colonization - is usually expressed as mystical, but it would be more appropriate to speak of a moral bond, of responsibility and respect. In effect we are speaking of an ethical tie” (Meli 2007: 158).

The Land inspires and communicates such concepts through the Native language, which is intertwined to all of Creation by a relationship of interdependence. The voice of the Land comes from the deep, is universal, precious; the word is rare, venerated and assumes a sacred and powerful value. The stories told in the Native languages transmit ideals and beliefs important for the Native peoples and also preserve those languages. Jeannette Armstrong states: “Language was given to us by the land we live within [...] it is land that holds all knowledge of life and death and is a constant teacher. It is said in Okanagan that the land constantly speaks. It is constantly communicating. Not to learn its language is to die” (Armstrong 1998: 175-176). The writer underlines the significance of the Native languages and the ties with the Land in reinventing the language of the enemy: “to speak is to create more than words [...] it is to realize the potential for transformation of the world [...] words can change the future” (Armstrong 1998: 183).

The frequent use of Native language in Canadian Aboriginal literature means that one’s identity has been affirmed and confirms that the Land always belongs and always will belong to the indigenous populations able to interpret its essence. In indigenous aesthetics, according to Armstrong’s insight, there is a ‘double translation’ (she calls it auto-translation): from the indigenous language into English and from the oral form to the written form (Armstrong 2006: 20-30). One can also add a third step, as indicated by Susan Gingell: the varieties of

'indigenized' English used by Canadian poets which reflect the intention to privilege a mainly indigenous audience and achieve a type of counter-colonization and linguistic self-government (Gingell 2010: 3; Cfr. Lorusso 2012). For instance, in the poetry of Louise Halfe, "Skydancer", the images and terms of the natural world are conveyed by 'Cree-English', a linguistic hybrid between Cree and English, which becomes a creative expression and at the same time a political statement that contributes to the process of decolonization. In "Bone Lodge", the opening poem in *Bear Bones and Feathers* (1994) – her first collection of poetry – Halfe repeatedly refers to the 'bone lodge', a sort of rib cage protecting heart, mind and spirit, where she sleeps with the weasel ("sleep with sikhos"), chants with the robin, weaves the spirit of the journey with the spider ("I weave with spider /the journey's ahcāhk"). She also refers to the squirrel, buffalo, caterpillar, hummingbird and crow. She is part of all of these and, protected by the bones of the lodge, knows their deepest significance "Of these I know / in the bones of the lodge" (Halfe 1994: 3). Once again we can see the inextricable and indissoluble unity among all creatures and the fusion of woman and animals seems completely natural and harmonious.

In the two poems *Nokōm ātayokān 1* e *Nokōm ātayokān 2*, the grandmothers, the ancestors of the legends cannot but be impressed in the child poet's memory with images that derive directly from nature. In the first poem: "brome hair / Ravines cut through the soft leather / of your face", [...] "the movement of your long / strong neck / a graceful tree". The grandmother's wrinkles and those of the Land are the same thing, just as the elegance of her grandmother's long neck coincides with the graceful swaying of a tree. In *Nokōm ātayokān 2*, as Jean Perrault observes (Perrault 1999: 262), from the luxuriant opening "Your flaming flowers / spread on my breast" one proceeds to decay: "I've watched life / blossom and fade from / your eyes". Images of death "you've folded flies /between your lips" – alternate with vital new images "welcomed the swirl of drinking hummingbirds". In the same way, in the poem

that portrays the poet's own grandmother, Nokōm, Medicine Bear, the present tense is used to reinforce the very striking image of the blending of the bear: "A shuffling brown bear / snorting and puffing" with Nokōm, the grandmother, a medicine woman "alone in her attic den / smoking slim cigarettes / wears the perfume of sage, sweetgrass / and earth medicine ties" (Halfe 1994: 13-14). The bear-grandmother perfumed with sage and sweetgrass moves slowly but surely to treat people with her "medicine", namely the wisdom which emanates from the earth, the "troubled spirits".

Louise Halfe takes for granted that the woman and the bear are a single entity and also emphasizes the power of knowledge of beneficial plants to cure human beings. This aspect of her poetry is implicit throughout the poem *Bear Bones and Feathers*. Moreover, in poems which are dealing with the imposition of Christian religion such as *Der Poop* (poem number 102), the ironical tone of the poem is already expressed in the title, which contains an assonance between 'pope' and 'poop'. The rejection of the imposed dogma is expressed through images of native prayer linked to Nature: "if me wants to dalk to trees / and build nests in house /dats hup to me"; "me is happy with da sky, da bird lyiniwak, / four-legged lyiniwak, i is happy / sorry mean dat i don't need yous church / and yous priest telling me what to do /sorry mean dat i free to dalk to Manitou /the spirits and plant lyiniwak".

Sometimes the presence of the Cree language is dominant, as in the case of the poem *Sister*, where more than half of the content consists of a transcription of a Cree morning song (Gingell 2010: 18-19) and the reader who does not understand the indigenous language is in the position of cultural outsider. However, taking the poet's poetry as a whole, the readers are not excluded from understanding the text, since in every collection there is always a glossary which contains the meaning of the *nêhiyawêwin* language, that is Cree. The Cree language, as happens in oral cultures, brings to the written form the lightness, movement and intangibility of the voice. Louise Halfe uses

techniques taken from the aboriginal rituals, such as repetition and emphasis, which fix in the memory the word which is often represented as a form of expression both stable and rewritable (Cfr. Lorusso 2010).

The poet's strategy of code-switching, that is the way in which bilingual speakers move between one language and the other, emphasises the cultural dialectic between Canadian culture and that of the First Nations. This strategy is not only a form of resistance, but also expresses the speakers' intention to communicate in two languages and consequently to conduct a dialogue between two completely different worlds. 'Cree-English' is the hybrid linguistic form which reflects the cross-cultural condition of the Cree people. In *Blue Marrow* (2004), we see clearly the hybrid state of Louise Halfe's identity and her current culture by means of her identification with a chameleon (line 65), a creature capable of disguising itself and adapting to new situations. This skill is revealed almost explicitly in the succession of names given to children and grandchildren and the alternating between words referring to food, clothing, means of transport, music and literature, according to the indigenous-western binary code (Gingell 2010: 21).

Another interesting creature is the snake. The snake carries a high symbolic load and is present in a large part of Halfe's work, especially in the last collection: *The Crooked Good* (2007). It includes the poetic transposition of the sacred story of "The Rolling Head", a part of the Cree Creation Legend. The interpretation of the story remains open and complex; the snake does not represent evil or trickery, but is the woman's lover. It is a creature even more human than human beings. The snake and the baby snakes obtained from the union with the woman are able to reciprocate her love and show empathy towards her, unlike the husband and the human children who do not understand the woman's alienation and solitude and demonize her, by being terrified and fleeing from her. As well as leading us to think about the different ways of perceiving emotions between men and women and their different

approaches and reactions to certain events, this story makes us reflect on the role which the natural world plays in the life of human beings; it also makes us think about the jealousy of the husband who sees the snake as his equal and wants to kill it. The husband, who in turn is acting in good faith, seeing the woman's love for her children as a destructive threat, is rewarded by ascent into heaven where he becomes the Milky Way. In contrast, only the woman's body manages to ascend into the sky, as her head, after rolling around on earth and experiencing many difficulties, dies and is reborn as a creature belonging to the underworld where it becomes a muse for artists and visionaries.

The coexistence of human beings and animals as equals and the transformations of humans into stars or creatures of the underworld serve to renew the inextricable connection between all the elements of creation, both in the representation of myths and in everyday life, in this world and in the underworld, thereby ensuring the cyclic nature of existence: "The End and the Beginning". With the same grace and naturalness, the poet's grandmother, Nokōm, wears silk with pearls and gems as a fine English wife, but with the coming of the Indian Summer, she takes off her gloves and calls for the spirits of the night, feeds the dead and invites her ancestors to the feast: "nokōm wore beads, gems, silk, an Englishman's bride" [...] "In Indian summer she [...] stripped off her gloves, conjured the nightly spirits, /fed the dead. Called all her relatives to feast" (Halfe 2007: 60). Our ancestors become spirits which dance in the sky ("Sky Dancers"); life and death coincide ("The End and The Beginning") and the cycle of existence is perpetuated in Nature.

As suggested by Renate Eigenbrod, these stories and this form of creative representation of Canadian aboriginal writing invite scholars "to rid ourselves of preconceived notions of linear and dualistic thinking and be open to complexities and indeterminacies" and accept the disorienting and destabilizing quality of this literature (Eigenbrod 2005: 206). As a final consideration, even if the main audience to which this poetry is addressed is

native and the Cree language serves as a form of resistance to the language of the colonizer and a reaffirmation of its own survival, the cultural outsider trying to undertake a process of 'self-decolonization' can perceive the continuing and 'creative' code-switching or alternating from one language to the other, as a form of inclusion, welcoming and acceptance, attempted sharing and even coexistence. Such considerations are perhaps somewhat daring, but at least they serve as a wish for the interaction and mutual understanding to come.

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