

MINNESOTA WOMEN'S PRESS



Language

**Healing from Native
Language Loss**

**Anishinaabe
Language Warriors**

**Sisterhood, Not
Cisterhood**

MINNESOTA WOMEN'S PRESS

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BAABIITAW BOYD
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Our vision: We all are parts of a greater whole. Our stronger future will be built from the collective energy of people who shift narratives to effect change.

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The oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves, to reconcile, to reunite, to renew. Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle.

— bell hooks

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The Courage to Swim

by Lydia Moran,
Associate Editor

In Jhumpa Lahiri's 2015 book "In Other Words," the author describes her desire to swim across a lake. "I'm aware that the lake is very deep in the middle, and even though I know how to swim I'm afraid of being alone in the water, without any support." For a while, she hugs the shoreline. "It's good exercise, but not very exciting." Then one morning, Lahiri finds the courage to swim. "After a crossing, the known shore becomes the opposite side: here becomes there."



Lahiri isn't really swimming; she's writing about learning Italian and eventually finding herself in Rome after her love for the language leads her to move there, the middle of the lake. Without English as a crutch, Lahiri is forced to learn Italian through trial and error. She can no longer rely on the comfort of the known shore; she has to swim through the imperfect.

Even though it is scary, swimming feels good. Lahiri, who is the daughter of immigrants, writes that in America she never felt rooted, nor was she able to speak her parents' native language perfectly. Italian is totally foreign; it escapes that dissonant feeling of inadequacy.

"Language is a place of struggle," as bell hooks writes, where shame might lead to isolation if you cannot speak the language of your elders or connect with your learning community. For many writers in this magazine, learning, teaching, or forgetting a language raises profound questions about their identity and place in the world. But attempting to communicate in an unknown language can also be a source of healing if we trust ourselves to speak despite our fear of being wrong.

"In Italian, I'm always uncertain," Lahiri writes. "My sole intention is to be understood, and to understand myself."

Finding My Voice After Losing My Native Language



written by Ia Xiong

“**C**hing, chang, chong!” This is what I heard ringing in my ears as a child while shopping one day with my family. I looked up to see a group of young white boys erupting in laughter. They were mocking my parents, who were speaking our native language: Hmong. I was frozen. I couldn’t find it in me to respond.

In middle school, my classmates found out I could speak another language and asked me to teach them something in Hmong. I couldn’t. Again, I felt frozen. A classmate asked in surprise if I was ashamed. I couldn’t identify my feelings at the time, but in reflection, I was more than ashamed; I was terrified. I could never be sure if sharing the words that are sacred to my people would be met with genuine interest or used to taunt me for entertainment.

I don’t know the exact moment English became my dominant language, but I do know the exact moment I made perfecting English my top priority. In kindergarten, my class was called out to recess by our hair color. On one occasion, “blond” was called. Blond? I had no idea what color that was. I could feel the desperation in my body as I searched for clues. In my five-year-old brain, I rationalized that the teacher must have meant “black.” I quickly jumped up, but before I could take a step, I heard my name yelled. My teacher proclaimed to the entire class that since I was not following instructions,

I would be the last person released to recess. I couldn’t utter a word to explain how I had misunderstood, and sat down holding back tears. I knew that day that I absolutely had to learn English because not knowing English felt unsafe.

As my English got better, my Hmong began to disappear. Gradually, I began to stumble over words at home and with elders. Eventually, my responses in my mother tongue came slower, until suddenly, I felt frozen. Words that had once flowed effortlessly as a child became foreign and choppy.

As an adult and licensed psychologist, I now reflect on these experiences as trauma responses. I have learned how the body turns on the parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems in response to stress or threat and prepare ourselves to fight, flee, or freeze. Chronic states of stress can lead to dysregulation of the nervous system.

I now understand how my “freeze” responses work to keep me safe by not standing out and putting myself in a vulnerable position; however, this safety comes at the cost of not speaking up for myself and voicing my truth.

In 2021, Hmong American gymnast Sunisa Lee won an Olympic gold medal and represented the Hmong community on the world stage. During a press conference, a Hmong reporter asked Lee to share a message with the Hmong community, and she hesitantly spoke a few words in Hmong: “Hi, my name is Sunisa Lee.” Critics flooded the comment

section expressing disappointment in her apparent lack of ability, and even went as far as questioning her Hmong identity. I immediately saw myself in Lee. I knew those few seconds of pause and hesitation before speaking my native language. I knew the shame. I decided to write about it on my Facebook page, Hmong Mental Health & Wellness, to encourage the younger Hmong generation and to remind the younger version of myself:

“Dear Hmong kids who aren’t fluent in Hmong, It is not shameful or a personal failure. It is an example of loss associated with historical trauma.”

The post was shared over 1,000 times.

I didn’t always understand the loss of my first language as a symptom of trauma. Instead, I believed the problem was me. As a child of Hmong refugees and the first person in my family to be born in the U.S., I felt the responsibility to bring hope, and a new start, after my community endured horrors. As I struggled to navigate life growing up in America, I felt I had failed my community. It wasn’t until I learned about Hmong history and my parents’ stories of heartbreak and survival that I began to piece together how the problem was much larger than me. Of course speaking up and sharing my truth felt dangerous; my people had long experienced oppression and genocide for doing just that.

The Hmong, an ethnic minority group residing in the mountains of Laos, were recruited by the United States’ CIA during the Vietnam War to help aid in U.S. efforts. This became known as the Secret War, and nearly half of the Hmong population was murdered in masses for being allied with the U.S. The Secret War has largely remained a secret for most of my life. A majority of Americans had never heard of the Hmong until Lee represented America at the Olympics. The Hmong story was paraded as an extension of the American story for the first time, and a people whose history was intentionally kept a secret for decades was now representing arguably the most powerful country in the world. This moment broke the silence of the Hmong experience, and for the first time, the Hmong had a voice on a global scale. Lee’s win, while momentous, is understandably a huge weight to carry.

continued on next page

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When we understand that losing the Hmong language is not a personal failure but a natural consequence of historical trauma and survival instincts, we can better understand the struggles that our younger generations face.

Honoring our community while also gaining the skills to succeed in today's society is no easy task, and no one should be expected to maintain the competing responsibilities perfectly.

Instead of shaming our younger generations, we can:

- Grieve the losses in our community. Many families lost elders in the war. Elders often teach and preserve culture and language, but what happens when we have so few? Our sadness is tied to our losses, and our young ones are not responsible for it. We have to feel the pain to heal the pain.
- Encourage our children by reading and speaking to them in Hmong. Praising and modeling Hmong instead of laughing or criticizing can help to build confidence. Playing games and making the process fun is effective.
- Teach our kids Hmong history and share our family legacies. When kids begin to understand the significance of the Hmong story and how they are part

of it, they can feel empowered to preserve the Hmong language and culture.

- Fund our Hmong language teachers and build a culture where the younger generations are allowed to learn, make mistakes, and develop their skills.
- Honor our grief while accepting that it is important that our children feel confident expressing themselves in any language. While we have had many losses in our history, we have incredible resilience to adapt no matter where we are in the world.

My father was just a child when he had to make the difficult decision to leave his dying mother in the jungle of Laos because she was too sick and weak to continue to run from communist forces. Learning my grandmother's last words for the first time brought me grief and wisdom. What used to feel like a burden to represent the Hmong wherever I go now feels like an incredible privilege — I bridge the hopes of the generations before me with the spirit of future generations. While I have lost much of my ability to speak Hmong fluently, I no longer let fear hold me back from expressing myself and sharing my truth. I am grounded in my grandmother's last words to "love each other deeply." From this place of love and compassion, I am no longer frozen. I am free to connect with the voice within me and amplify the voices of my people.

"Sib sib hlub ov mog."



Decolonizing Colonized Language

submitted by Amanda Rosas

I have been a Spanish language teacher for almost two decades, and with middle age I have learned to embrace my long-held belief that I am a writer. Spanish and English give me an uninterrupted vein of connection to my Latina history and identity. Through bilingual poetry and prose, I am telling stories my ancestors savor on silent tongues.

I teach my students the power of story, history, compassion, and solidarity. I teach ancient recipes tied to both our Indigenous roots and colonial identities. We honor indigeneity when we learn that water is sacred and nature is mother.

Recently, anti-racist work has led many language educators to begin the process of decolonizing languages like Spanish. More and more, we are centering Indigenous voices and experiences by incorporating them directly into language instruction through reading history and literary texts that acknowledge the brute truths and realities of colonization. In other words, we are mapping the distance it takes to heal after losing our native tongues. We are learning to believe that from conquest blossoms the word resilience, not erasure.

PHOTO ANN BAKIEWICZ



Hace dos décadas que soy profesora de español y, ya que he entrado en la edad mediana, he aprendido a abrazar la creencia de que también soy escritora. Los idiomas español e inglés me han dado una conexión continua a mi herencia e identidad latina. Por medio de la poesía y la prosa bilingües, cuento las historias que mis antepasados saborearon solamente en las bocas de su propio silencio.

Les enseño a mis estudiantes el poder de los cuentos, la historia, la compasión y la solidaridad. Enseño las recetas antiguas vinculadas a nuestras raíces indígenas e identidades coloniales. Honramos la indigenidad cuando aprendemos que el agua es sagrada y la naturaleza es madre.

Actualmente, el trabajo anti-racista ha llevado a muchos educadores de lengua y cultura a empezar el proceso de descolonizar los idiomas colonizados como el español. Más y más estamos centrando las experiencias y las voces de los indígenas al incorporarlas directamente en las lecciones del lenguaje, al leer textos históricos y literarios que revelan y afirman las verdades y realidades brutales de la colonización. Es decir, estamos mapeando la distancia necesaria para curarnos después de perder nuestras lenguas maternas. Aprenderemos a creer que, de la conquista florece la resiliencia, no la borradura.



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Reading to Live: Dyslexia and Racial Disparities in Minnesota

written by Khulia Pringle

In 2015, I began speaking with parents across Minnesota, primarily Black, brown, Indigenous, and low-income families, regarding their concerns, truths, and experiences in K-12 education. I was serving as a Promise Fellow with AmeriCorps VISTA, and I realized K-12 advocacy was where I needed to be. As a Promise Fellow, I had my first experience inside of a school where the atmosphere affirmed my culture as a Black woman. I was in charge of community partners, after-school programming, and parent engagement. Every enrolled family was supposed to have 20 hours per year of school engagement, and it was my job to make that happen. The school where I worked was 98 percent Black. I knew that, despite racial stereotypes I had been hearing all my life, as long as barriers such as transportation, food, and child care are taken care of, families will fully engage with their school community.

I quickly realized that parents needed an outlet to share their experiences. The parents I spoke with knew there was something wrong with the level at which their children were reading, but they were unsure exactly how far behind their children were. Parents also recognized that their children were displaying behavioral problems at school, but not at home. I realized there was a problem bigger than

they even knew.

I remembered hearing the term dyslexia, but I never knew what it meant. After I educated myself, I learned that this word was foreign to a lot of the parents I spoke with. I started to research more about dyslexia, a learning disorder that makes it harder for people to associate speech sounds with written words, through the Minnesota Dyslexia Advocates and Decoding Dyslexia organizations. While many white families know about dyslexia and have the resources to get their children diagnosed and enrolled in special services, if many non-white socioeconomically disadvantaged families have no idea what dyslexia is and have limited resources, I asked myself how could they provide the necessary interventions?

Read or Die

Minnesota has some of the worst disparities across the board for Black children, families, and individuals in health, economics, housing, the criminal legal system, and school suspensions and academic outcomes. If a child does not gain the foundational skills of reading before they leave the third grade so that they are able to read to learn, the

disparities begin and continue into adulthood. People who cannot read are more likely to have interactions with the criminal legal system and lack health insurance.

It has always been read or die for the Black community. Historically, if an enslaved person learned how to read, it could save their life. After the Civil War, the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the United States Constitution gave Black people newfound freedom and the opportunity to read. Black people saw the importance of literacy immediately after freedom, and began to build primary, secondary, and post-secondary schools known as Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

In 1896, when Plessy v. Ferguson was ruled and segregation was legal, Black people were relegated to second-class citizenship and received a second-class education. The Civil Rights movement began with the landmark education decision of Brown v. Board of Education to dismantle segregation in public schools. It was a read-or-die situation for people like Ruby Bridges, the Little Rock Nine, and James Meredith as they risked their lives to integrate.

The Science of Reading

According to Decoding Dyslexia MN founder Rachel Berger, school systems across Minnesota have not been set up to identify dyslexia as a disability, and educators are not trained to do so themselves. When a student who is dyslexic is not properly identified or given the appropriate intervention, it increases their risk of being placed in special education.

Students with identified learning disabilities are more likely to have characteristics that look like negative behavior because they cannot engage in their learning community.

Students of color are disproportionately suspended in the U.S., which leads to an emotional wreck for the child and further contributes to the achievement gap.

Dyslexia can be inherited genetically, but it can also be influenced by instructional casualties. When at-risk students are provided instruction that is not based in the science of reading, they can show characteristics of dyslexia. Districts need to begin using reading curriculum and interventions steeped in the science of reading, which bases the fundamentals of reading instruction on phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, fluency, and vocabulary and text comprehension.

In December, Minnesota lawmakers approved a \$3 million grant to fund teacher training in the LETRS (Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling) program.

This year, Senate Republicans introduced a plan to spend over \$30 million of the state's \$9 billion surplus for kindergarten through fifth grade teachers to complete a language program based on the science of reading. DFL party members proposed \$4.75 million in spending on LETRS training as part of their proposed \$3.3 billion education funding package over the next three years. Lawmakers did not negotiate in time to come to an agreement this session.

Many students are reading at the sixth-grade level as juniors and seniors in high school, so teachers in all grade levels need this training. My hope is that every current and pre-service teacher in the country receives LETRS training so that students everywhere can become readers.

Khulia Pringle (she/her) is the Minnesota State Director for National Parents Union and serves in the City of Saint Paul Legislative Advisory Committee on Reparations. She completed her undergraduate studies in human service at Metropolitan State University and has a graduate certificate in secondary urban education with licensure.

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PHOTO SARAH WHITING

Dr. Anna Ruelle's patients cannot tell her how they feel. That is part of the joy of being a veterinarian. "Not only do we love animals," she says, "but we also have a love for solving puzzles and getting to the heart of a mystery."

Recently, for example, a five-year-old beagle, Maggie, was seen because of a troublesome skin condition. It took intuition and lab tests to determine the answer. "Thankfully, Maggie is now on the right medicine. Her skin, her breathing, her energy, and her body condition are all improving."

Ruelle says her work is gratifying because animals often bring out the best in people. She likens it to pediatrics. "Patients cannot tell us what is wrong, but loving caregivers let us know what they are noticing and how things have changed."

Physical diagnostics use several senses: palpating with hands, listening, and looking under the microscope. The more extensive testing involves blood analyzer machines to check for infections, whether a patient is dehydrated or anemic, and what organs or electrolytes are impacting the health of an animal.

She points out that many species of animals — such as rabbits, guinea pigs, hamsters, and birds — often hide symptoms of illness. "This was an evolutionary advantage. Showing signs of illness made them susceptible to be targeted as prey."

Ruelle believes that we all have the capacity for some form of animal communication. "There is the hard science that we veterinarians become masters of," she says. "And there

is the soft science that most pet owners and veterinarians become practiced at. I trust pet owners, especially when they are clearly very in tune with their animal. They know when something is not right."

Intuitive Communication

Lisa Lawrow says she was communicating with animals as a child, not knowing that most people do not have the ability. After leaving a corporate job that was the wrong fit for her, she was introduced to someone who trained her on energy and intuitive healing. Now she runs her own business as an intuitive animal communicator.

Her intuitive path with animals started with her dog Austin, when he was in a lot of pain. "I have sensations — a knowing in my body — about what [the animal] is feeling," Lawrow says. She was able to share information with a vet from an intuitive session with her dog, who is now 17 and healthy.

Intuitive communication, Lawrow indicates, is about listening with care and compassion. She believes communication "is the art of giving and receiving, energetically touching and being touched, and a continual flow of sharing thoughts and experiences."

When we listen to each other without words, Lawrow says, we are able to communicate honestly about who we are, which can open up parts of the self that are ready to heal.

— reported by Mikki Morrisette

Through the Ojibwe Language, Baabiitaw Boyd Understands Her World and Herself

as told to Emily Poupart

In January, the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe announced their partnership with Rosetta Stone to create an online publicly available Ojibwe language-learning platform. The course is free for all Mille Lacs tribal members and first descendants, and available at a reduced fee for federally recognized tribal members as well as tribal schools. With the dwindling number of Ojibwemowin (Ojibwe language) speakers, especially fluent speakers, revitalizing the language and finding the means to do so is a high priority among “language warriors.” But Anishinaabe language warriors aren’t only working to save the language for the language’s sake. They know that to learn a language is more than memorizing words and phrases — it is changing our view of and relationship with the world and ourselves, as well as honoring the ancestors that came before us.

Baabiitaw Boyd is on the team behind the Ojibwe Rosetta Stone project. She talks here about the impact of learning Ojibwemowin on her life, the importance of language revitalization and the role of language in grieving, and hopes for an expansive Ojibwemowin curriculum in Minnesota schools.

Where and how did you learn it, and how have you kept up with Ojibwemowin?

I was not raised in an Ojibwemowin-speaking household. By the time I was 9 years old, the people who spoke fluent Ojibwe in my family had already passed on. There were 11 siblings in my grandparents’ family, and once they hit their early sixties, they began falling ill and passing away. In that time, we had many funerals to plan and prepare for; those funerals were conducted in Ojibwemowin. This sparked a burning curiosity in me. “What are they talking about at ceremony? Who are they talking to? And why am I missing out on this?” I realized that there were things to know in

another language about who I was as an Anishinaabe person, beyond what my rural public education was teaching me about myself.

When I was 18 years old, I attended Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College, where I participated in Ojibwe language instruction in a formal classroom setting. It was an awakening. When I took a break from school, I went to work with the Mille Lacs Band as a second-language learner through a master-apprentice program. I spent time with fluent speakers and ceremonial leaders. I was assigned to a master fluent speaker who performed funerals, so much of my professional work in language has been around grieving people.

From an Ojibwe perspective, there are teachings offered to us through manidoo (an Ojibwe spirit or god) that support us while we are grieving. Understanding those teachings shifted me from where I was as a young student in a rural public school to where I am now as an adult with my role in my community.

As part of my language acquisition program, I was placed in a classroom with preschool

children. For a good deal of time, I was not satisfied with my second-language acquisition, and I was not really satisfied with my ability to teach effectively. We decided to develop an Ojibwe immersion space, which helped with second language acquisition tremendously. Once you remove English from your day-to-day operations, it forces you to try new things no matter how painful it is, and no matter how much you stumble over your words and grammar. I taught that way for six years, and there were fluent speakers available to sit with and inform us of authentic uses of the language. After leaving preschool, children would roll into English-speaking kindergarten [because the curriculum did not progress further], which was frustrating.

PHOTO SARAH WHITING



Baabiitaw Boyd in her backyard on Mille Lacs Lake

After that, I finished my bachelor's degree in history and linguistics at St. Scholastica, and I returned to the Mille Lacs Band charged up to move language revitalization forward.

How did learning Ojibwemowin as an adult impact your worldview?

Ojibwe people have a polytheistic nature; we have spirits and powers that are planted in our communities to support, protect, and show up for us when we are at our lowest. They are knocking things out of our way so we have a clear path; they are working for us all the time. I would not be able to do the things that I do as a mother, a community member, or an educator if I did not have a good understanding of those manidoo, how they work for us, and what the old people tell us about what our relationship with them should be. [When we understand that] everything on this planet is for us, that we have to be stewards of it, that we are part of its ecosystem, we move away from exploitation.

That relationship to the earth is immediately found in language.

Our language is polysynthetic, meaning it is built upon tiny bits of information, syllables called morphemes. The breakdowns of our language tell us what is animate and what is inanimate, in contrast to a gendered language like German or Spanish. Our language tells us that snow is animate, ice is animate, but water is not; raspberries are animate, but strawberries are not. Our drums and feathers, those are discussed as animate things in the language as well. These representations of life and lifelessness are built into the language, and that gives us perspective on things that deserve consideration for being alive.

Once you start to grow your relationship with the manidoo, you have an opportunity to talk with them in the language that they gave [the Anishinaabe people]. Praying in English has a different vibration. While praying, you have thoughts that are happening in your mind, the sound that you are making with your voice and your breath. When you are doing that in Ojibwemowin, there is no

greater feeling than being able to commune with manidoo in the language that was intended for us. For me, there is a great deal of gratitude in that because not everybody has had their needs met to a point where they have the opportunity to prioritize language acquisition — especially with generational poverty and the disparities that Indigenous people experience.

Learning Ojibwe as a kid, my teacher explained animacy, and that kind of made me go, “Wait, this thing’s alive?” That stuck with me even though I didn’t get the opportunity to learn much more Ojibwe. Do language learners have any common experiences when they are learning? I know that shame is a common feeling.

Shame is definitely a big part of language learning. There are some emotional breakdowns that happen; in order to pick stuff up, you have to put stuff down, right? And so there is this personal awakening that happens when you start to prioritize language because you start to feed your soul and your Anishinaabe spirit with something that it has been yearning for. All of the misnomers about being Indian, those things melt away as you gain more confidence in your self-identification as an Anishinaabe person. In public school, all I wanted to do was be Indian, but there was nothing there to show me how, right? The amount of time we could spend on being an Ojibwe person at school [was limited], and it wasn't necessarily strategic language instruction — it was crafts, beads, things like that.

You also have the overt and covert racism that children experience in public school or the internalized oppression and self-loathing — those things are all maintained and manifested by Western education standards and curriculum and instruction methods that do not reflect the cultural needs of Anishinaabe people. Shame comes from a lack of healthy depictions of Anishinaabe practices in the curriculum and the expectation that children should engage in factory-style learning and an outdated form of education.

When I started working on language

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acquisition, it was because I was good at it and it made me feel strong. It also came from a deep sense of insecurity that I did not know myself as an Anishinaabe person and that I had to prove to my peers, my mentors, that I could be a “good little Indian,” “good Indian woman.” I know that I have a much healthier expectation of myself as a human and an Anishinaabe woman now than I did 15 years ago, but it is still a daily thing I am working through. I know Ojibwe people who are dead-set against language revitalization because it contradicts their experiences. I say to them, no one is trying to force feed you anything, but we owe it to the people who sacrificed their lives to promote our healthy Anishinaabe way of being that was given to us by the manidoo. We owe them, and it is our obligation, our right and responsibility, to move Ojibwemowin forward.

What are your hopes for Ojibwemowin curriculum expansion?

My hope is that across the state of Minnesota, and in any place where there are Ojibwe people, the children in school systems have access to the information that is inherently theirs. I would like for the Ojibwe language to be accessible and offered to anybody who wants to learn it because it is a heritage language of the region and state. We have some beautiful, brilliant minds out here in Ojibwe aki (territory), and they are going to make something brilliant happen in the next year or two with teacher preparedness. I also want to have children build relationships with the natural world with time learning outside in the woods, swamps, lakes, rivers, and streams. This is how we grow citizens of Indian nations with a strong sense of self who respectfully sustain themselves from their land base.

When we partnered with Rosetta Stone to execute six levels of Ojibwe language, we recognized that there is not one silver-bullet way to learn language; it is a trial and error process. Rosetta Stone is part of the commitment from the Mille Lacs band to make Ojibwemowin accessible, not only to the emerging workforce within the Mille Lacs Band community, but also to the entire state of Minnesota.

The Midwest Indigenous Immersion Network is another example of language revitalization activity. It is a collaboration between immersion programs in the region — Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Canada — and we partner to share K-12 curriculum and professional development tactics. That network got off the ground this year.

Rosetta Stone Program:
culture.aanji.org/language/ojibwe-rosetta-stone

Midwest Indigenous Immersion Network:
miinojibwe.org

Sisterhood, Not Cisterhood

written by Dianna Anderson

I wanted to write an angry polemic about refuting people who are bigoted against trans people, who argued that those of us in the community shouldn't have the right to access the bathroom that matches our gender or remain safe in gendered spaces. I even wrote up a draft about how these bigots misuse studies and have poor, inconsistent internal logic.

Then I realized: I'm never going to convince the bigots. My own humanity isn't something I should have to make an argument for. It's nonsense to think, likewise, that I'm going to convince anyone who is hell-bent on being anti-trans to reconsider their position, whether I approached it kindly or angrily. But what I can do is help the cisgender reader to recognize some built-in deep-seated bigotry in our culture and work it out.

First: Question Yourself

The first thing cisgender people tend to do when they encounter trans or non-binary people is try to work out how we could possibly arrive at our identities. The idea that "thinking about gender" is somehow confusing or strange is a very cis-centric way to look at the concept of gender identity. Many of us didn't just wake up one day and consciously decide that we were trans or non-binary. Quite often, we knew something was "off" but didn't have the language or concepts to explain it. I had to do so much reading before I came out about my identity. I wanted first and foremost to be an expert on myself and what my gender meant to me. Cis people in general haven't had to do that kind of thinking. Many of them have not gone through a process of trying to find the right words and then eventually landing on "cis." "Trans," to many cis-identified people, has always been cast as the other, the abnormal, the different one.

I humbly request that cis people attempt to do the same work trans and non-binary people have done in thinking about themselves. Not just a feelings check but a real, deep inquiry. Take some time to write down what describes you, both gendered and ungendered. Ask yourself: Why do I believe I am a man? What makes me say I am a woman? Interrogate beyond the biology: Would I still feel like I am a woman if I lost my uterus? Would I still identify as a man if I got testicular cancer? What parts of myself do I see as vital to my gender? Question who you are, what made you cisgender,



PHOTO SARAH WHITTING

and attempt to put yourself, mentally, into a body that reads differently from your current one.

Second: Respect the Labels

During the pandemic of 2020, I spent most of my time in my 400-square-foot apartment. By June, I'd ordered a scanner and set up my book library on LibraryThing, a library cataloging system for my collection of books. My library numbers about 300 books, and they're organized on my shelf by genre and then by author within that genre. But doing that work also meant that I had a few books that fit into multiple categories or didn't quite fit in any of the existing categories.

Every so often, I'll study my bookshelf, look at the titles, and move around the books depending on whether or not my

continued on next page

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The graphic features a central sunburst logo at the top, surrounded by various icons representing social and environmental impact, including a recycling symbol, a lightbulb, a person, and a gear. Below the icons is a QR code with a sunburst pattern in the center. The background is a gradient of purple and blue.

thinking on its genre placement is different that day. Sometimes the labels imposed upon a thing don't make a whole lot of sense for those familiar with the thing itself — for example, my first two books frequently appear in two different parts of the bookstore, depending on who is stocking them, despite them both being broadly under the genre of women's studies.

So I'm not surprised that cis people who have never really had to deal with minority genders are confused by a seemingly infinite proliferation of gender identities and labels when it feels like there should be just a few that each person fits into. Surely we don't need all these options? Surely there are just a few people that can fit into them?

Not really, no. Asking someone to fit themselves into a certain specific label that's only kinda sort of right will always not be quite right. People will find what works to describe themselves. Understand that from the get-go, and any new label will strike you not as odd and confusing but as, "Oh, that's a new one I've not heard of. Can you tell me more?" That's it. That's all it takes: basic respect that means you want to understand, not judge.

Third: Don't Make Us Manage Your Feelings

Back when I thought I was cisgender, I struggled with pronouns if someone announced a change and I'd been accustomed to using a specific one. After mixing it up for a while, I also realized that it was unhelpful for me to keep apologizing every time I did, typically because my apologies drew attention to the fact that I'd made an error. I was forcing trans people to bear my feelings about my mistakes, begging for forgiveness each time. But the reason it kept happening was because I simply wasn't taking the time to practice with myself. I still thought of the person as their assigned gender because I hadn't mentally flipped over to their new name. And I was something of a jerk in not doing that.

We in the gender-expansive community don't need to be your feelings manager or your pronoun police. When you misgender us, we can usually tell if you were doing it deliberately or as a mistake. All we ask in that

moment is for you to correct yourself and move on. Don't grovel or apologize or talk about how terrible you feel. Don't make us manage your emotions about your inability to remember our pronouns. Correct yourself, move on, and then when you are not around us, practice. Go home and say to yourself, "This is my friend Dianna. They use 'they/them' pronouns. They take the bus. They shop at Target, and they like dark roast coffee." Practice saying normal sentences describing your friends with their new pronouns, and your brain will start moving them over into the new category.

Fourth: Don't Be So Serious

One of my favorite Twitter accounts nowadays is the Gender of the Day. It's a bot account that randomly tweets, "Today's gender is..." followed by a random collection of things. "Today's gender is a flamboyance of fearsome narwhals," reads one. "Today's gender is a shimmering caribou," reads another. This delights me because it's often absurd and serves to highlight — at least for me — the nonsense that is gendered experience. It's a fun little laugh in the midst of a timeline that's usually yelling about the latest political event or disaster.

And the more I've talked with and become a part of the trans community, I've realized just how deeply important humor is to our existence.

For trans and non-binary people, just living through every day is sometimes a rough prospect. We face misgendering, potential violence, and fear in going out in the world as our authentic selves. So a lot of us have learned to make jokes about our lives to lighten ourselves up and laugh. Sometimes these jokes get very dark — gallows humor is part and parcel of the trans experience. Other times, these jokes are about cisgender people and "gender reveals." Lots of times, the jokes are lampshading the concept of non-binary, pretending to be confused by our own genders (let's face it, sometimes it is confusing!).

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Fifth: Ask Questions (Just Not Those)

One benefit that the increased visibility of trans people has had on our culture is that we now have an etiquette available to us for when a friend comes out. We know — from embarrassing incidents with Katie Couric and Laverne Cox — that asking about surgeries and genitals is a no-go. We know there's no reason to ask for a person's dead name. The AP has style guides for talking about us in professional journalism, for goodness' sake. We've made it!

But sometimes cis people read this as “you can't ask any questions.” Like any interpersonal relationship, that's a pretty unreasonable standard. Coming out is a big change, and it's natural to have questions. If you're close enough to a person, you can usually feel out if a question is okay. One of my friends texted me to ask what his kids should call me as I've been acting as a proto-aunt to them for years. We talked it through and decided on Entle. My sister-in-law texted me about whether or not this new identity means I'm trans. I explained to her that sometimes it means “transition”; sometimes it doesn't. I don't know that I want to take testosterone. I do know I might want top surgery at some point. Does that make me trans? I don't know right now, and that's okay.

This is, of course, not a definitive list, because the queer community is not a monolith. It is a general guide for how to be better people around us. My last bit of advice would be to make sure we don't have to always fight our own battles. This can be done in person or online. It takes a lot for us to simply survive, and having someone who is willing to stand by our side and either help us fight our own battles or fight them for us is a big boon to getting through the day.

Your choices can make the world better for our community; your complacency can make it worse. We aren't going anywhere, but sometimes we're just tired of having to be our own advocates all the time. You must stand in for us when we cannot stand for ourselves, hold the line when we are failing, and be willing to take on just a small bit of the risk we take in living our authentic selves every day. Love only wins if we fight for it.

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Dianna E. Anderson (they/them) is a nonbinary writer with a master's degree in English from Baylor University and a master of studies in women's studies from the University of Oxford in the U.K. Their work focuses on the intersections of gender, history, religion, and theory, and they have been published in Rolling Stone, Cosmo, Bitch Magazine, Dame, and many others. They live in Minneapolis.

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Cooperative Economic Justice

reported by
Camilla Breen



PHOTO SARAH WHITTING

Debra Hurston is the executive director of the Association for Black Economic Power and is establishing a Black-owned credit union in Minneapolis.

Fed up with policing injustice after the murder of Philando Castile, which is linked to economic injustice in North Minneapolis — a banking desert riddled with payday lenders that can charge 400 percent on a small loan — the Association for Black Economic Power (ABEP) began the years-long process of launching a credit union in 2016. Credit unions are member-owned nonprofit financial cooperations for banking.

After early management missteps, Debra Hurston was tapped by the new ABEP board to start from scratch. Regulators require her to re-establish community pledges and donations, which had previously included 2,000 surveys from community members indicating their desire for a credit union. She currently has \$3.7 million in corporate deposits and \$1 million in community pledges, which she would like to more than double.

Although her staffing now consists of one part-time assistant, she has the support of community, state, and federal experts, starting with a “rock star” from the national African American Credit Union Coalition. “This project has a bigger national image than it does in the state,” Hurston says. “I think what draws people outside of Minnesota to this is the fact that they are aware of the stories of Philando Castile and George Floyd, the banking drought. When I am contacted by organizations outside the state, they want to know what they can do to help.”

Hurston has a background in working with associations, and says, “This project has given me this amazing amount of respect for people who work in the credit union field. When they say cooperative, that is not a word — that is what they live. Part of it, too, is that the credit unions realize North Minneapolis has been left to be victims for so long. This is an opportunity to course correct.”

Hurston grew up with a single mom on the south side of Chicago, which was “an amazingly challenging place to live as a kid. My mother eventually got us out of that. I have been very fortunate to have gotten a great education.”

After George Floyd was murdered, Hurston says, “I felt completely incapable of helping. When this opportunity became available, I felt like it was a way for me to use my skills and my voice to help. It makes me feel like I am doing something extremely meaningful with my life. Not just my career, with my life.”



Debra Hurston will talk to anyone who wants to know the status and needs of the credit union. Learnaboutvillage.org

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June 17–July 24 — Emma Beatrez ::: **TECHNOLUST 3000**



Emma Beatrez, detail from TECHNOLUST 3000, 2022, rhinestone chain

Minneapolis-based artist Emma Beatrez's first solo show features a variety of materials and media — including pixels, rhinestones, studded surfaces, and mirrors — to explore themes of space and memory, pain and pleasure in a gallery-wide exhibition. Free. Hair + Nails Gallery, Minneapolis. hairandnailsart.com

July 30 — **Women of Mayo Specialty Tour**



Four Generations of the Mayo-Damon Family

Inspired by the 2016 book “Women of Mayo” by Virginia M. Peterson, this exhibit explores the often overlooked history of the female physicians, lab researchers, and developers who were instrumental in founding the Mayo Clinic alongside the Mayo brothers. \$35 for non-members of the History Center of Olmsted County; \$30 for members. 3pm–4:30pm. Mayowood Historic Home, Rochester. olmstedhistory.com/events

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How I Will Save My Tongue

by May Lee-Yang

1. I will not take community ed classes to recover the language of my birth. Nor will I linger before my mother's gravestone in regret. Instead, I will watch karaoke videos on YouTube, letting highlighted text create connections between the written and spoken words.
2. I will eat Thai chili peppers. They will be delicious, and they will come at a price. Diarrhea is the cost one must pay for honoring our authentic selves.
3. I will stop kissing. Butts. People. Men infected with viruses invisible to the naked eye.
4. I will eat chocolate cake lathered in caramel goo and accompanied by 2% milk. I am not one of those lactose-intolerant Asians.
5. I will spend my evenings practicing comeback lines so the next time I hear, "Where are you from?" I can say, "Shut the fuck up, motherfucker" instead of stuttering. Or worse, silently shutting myself down. If I keep practicing my comeback lines, I will have a quicker response time. I will sound witty. I will have fewer regrets. I will no longer say hours, days, even years later, "I should have said something."

May Lee-Yang (she/her) is a writer, performer, and educator. Her work has been supported by the Playwright Center McKnight Fellowship, the Bush Leadership Fellowship, the MN State Arts Board, and the Loft Literary Center. She is co-founder of Funny Asian Women Collective (FAWK) and holds an MFA in creative writing from the University of Minnesota.



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