

# An Indigenous Perspective on a Period in the History of North America

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## **Introduction**

We humans perceive reality in a variety of ways. A situation that represents a success to one group is a disaster to another. Let us consider the United States and Canada. Both countries have recent histories that are such that they now offer the hope of freedom and economic prosperity to their citizens and newcomers. The United States, in particular, sees itself as a model for other nations to follow politically and economically. Winnie Jourdain, a United States citizen and member of the Ojibwa tribe, does not see the recent history of North America in glowing terms. For her, the arrival of Europeans began a tragic course of events.

## **Who are the Ojibwa ?**

The Ojibwa (a.k.a. Ojibwe, Ojibway, Anishinabe or Chippewa, Powell, 2004 : 2) are a band of North American Indians whose original homeland included areas in Ontario (Canada), Minnesota and Michigan, U.S.A. Their land stretched from the east shore of Georgian Bay along the north shore of Lake Huron through areas along Lake Superior and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan (Rogers, 1978 : 760).

The Ojibwa had a “survival culture”, meaning they were “. . . content with being, not bent on doing” (Friesen, 1997 : 23). They were hunters and gatherers and had no “development” plans, no programs to subdue nature (Mille Lacs Band : 1). To put it another way, the Ojibwa did not build towns, dig mines, log forests or clear land for farming. As one scholar puts it, they “did no damage to the landscape around them” and, in fact, “. . . left a legacy of perpetual reverence for all manner of life” (Friesen : 23). This rosy assessment is not entirely correct. The Ojibwa have traditions of spear fishing and building birch bark canoes (Fortier, 1997 : 3), for example, traditions which caused a limited, and most importantly, recoverable impact on the natural environment. The important point here is that the Ojibwa lived in reasonable harmony with nature.

Perhaps there are two significant reasons for this willingness to live in harmony with nature. On the one hand, why would any sensible group of people harm or destroy the very thing that supplies everything they need to live? This is a question we could well ask of those who advocate “development” at almost any cost. The other reason probably has to do with religious beliefs. Like Christians, the Ojibwa have a tradition of believing that a “Creator” is responsible for nature (Vogt, 1994 : 5). Showing respect to nature was, and is, an appropriate way to show respect to the “Creator”.

[The next section of this paper discusses some of Ms. Jourdain's comments, included in a series of articles published in the "Star Tribune" of Minneapolis, Minnesota, U.S.A.]

**Article 1 : Spirit of White Earth : Winnie Jourdain, a survivor's spirit**

*How could they have taken everything away from us ?*

(Article 1 : 1)

We note the use of the plural pronoun 'they', a convenient expression when referring to an unspecified group responsible for certain actions. What is it that the group referred to as 'us' has lost ?

**Land**

In Ontario, Canada following the end of the American Revolution a large number of European immigrants arrived seeking farming land. In the province of Ontario, over a period of 150 years, 60 treaty exercises happened between the authorities and Indian tribes. The Ojibwa, amongst others, ended up living on 171 reserves totaling only 700,000 hectares (Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, DIAND, 1999 : 2). On the US side the Ojibwa began signing treaties with the Federal government in 1815. By 1842 all the land previously in Indian hands was now in government hands (Rogers : 763).

**A brand of democracy**

Before the arrival of European settlers in North America, Ojibwa community life was really quite 'democratic'. Entire communities participated in decision-making concerning issues of importance (DIAND : 4). The introduction of reservations in both Canada and the U.S. brought with it a new way of handling community affairs. The Ojibwa found themselves dealing with government officials, officials representing provincial, state and national governments (Rogers : 765). Concerning the Canadian experience, Schmalz claims that the Indian Act of 1876 brought the Ojibwa under very tight control with "... government agents who became overseers of nearly every aspect of (Ojibwa) lives" (Krotz, 1980 : 180). 'Democracy' as they had known it, and for that matter, self rule, disappeared over time.

**Dignity**

The 1948-1998 Universal Declaration of Human Rights preamble mentions "freedom of speech" as one of the basic goals for all of humanity. It is interesting to consider this lofty aspiration next to a policy adopted with regard the Ojibwa people. Winnie Jourdain during the time of her youth experienced the indignity of being forbidden to use her native language. Attempts to achieve assimilation can go too far !

When Europeans came to North America they brought with them two things that the Ojibwa had never known before—the profit motive (DIAND : 4) and alcohol (Shkilnyk, 1985 : 161). The Ojibwa discovered they could procure both money and liquor by trading beaver furs. Unfortunately, the Ojibwa found out that 'white' men could be very deceptive, swindling the

Indians out of valuable fur supplies for mere pennies through the clever application of liquor in trading negotiations (Graham, 1975 : 80).

*I remember when I was a child there was this old woman from White Earth who made a trip to Minneapolis, and she could not believe the way white people there lived. She said they pooped and peed in the same house they ate in, just like pigs do ! This amazed her because the Anishinaabeg always went to the toilet outdoors.*

(Article 1 : 3)

To use Fairclough's method of discourse analysis we have here a case of language creating two distinct groups; the "white people" and the "Anishinabe". The language denigrates the 'white' group with the comparison "...just like pigs do!" The language simultaneously elevates the 'Anishinabe' group, pointing out that they do their toilet business "outdoors" (Fairclough, 1992 : 3). Sapir has pointed out that people identify with a particular group by defining themselves "...jointly as insiders against others, whom they define as outsiders" (Kramsch, 1998 : 8). It is interesting that the 'insiders' in the above quote are the ones who go to the toilet outside!

Perhaps one of the biggest reasons for the problematic history between Indian bands like the Ojibwa and the 'white' people of Canada and the United States is that each side has historically chosen to view the other as an adversary. The original settlers from Europe wanted land to farm and develop towns on (DIAND : 2). For them the Indians were a "problem" because they occupied valuable land. From the Ojibwa perspective the new arrivals were dangerous competitors for land with its food and other supplies.

## **Article 2 : Spirit of White Earth : Broken promises, stolen land**

*We never thought of ourselves as different.* (See note 1)

*White people decided we were different.*

(Article 2 : 1)

Here we have a direct accusation. Two points are relevant. One, we note that the accusation is inconsistent with the commentary concerning toilet behavior above. Ms Jourdain in fact sees the Ojibwe as different from 'white' people. Second, the accusation is very understandable in that it demonstrates the very human tendency to blame problem situations on 'someone else'. Even Adam in the book of Genesis blamed Eve, and Eve the snake (Satan, the fallen angel leader) for the wrongdoing in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3 : 12, 13).

*You look at White Earth and you see the trees and plants, the lakes, the clean air, and it seems so full of life. . . It's a place where you want to be free. But where was the freedom ?*

(Article 2 : 3)

Freedom is an expression with various connotations. A Chinese Communist Party official was once questioned about the Chinese government's refusal to grant the Chinese people freedom. The official responded to the interviewer by saying 'democratic' freedoms lead to chaos in the West. China, he claimed, wanted to focus on more important, more relevant freedoms like the freedom to work and earn a living wage.

Perhaps the freedom that Ms. Jourdain refers to is the freedom to organize Ojibwa affairs according to Ojibwa priorities. Concerning education; before being subjected to Canadian and U.S. dictates, Ojibwa youth learned about two important areas during their 'school' years. The first had to do with food economics, how to hunt to survive. The second priority was spiritual; how to get on with the spirit world (Friesen: 43).

What were the early U.S. and Canadian ideas concerning the education of the Ojibwa people? In 1867, ten Mississippi chiefs signed a treaty "... that saw several tribes including the Ojibwa move to the then new White Earth Reservation (Bunyan: 1). The idea was that "... the Ojibwa people ... learn the habits of civilized life" (Article 2: 2). The 1876 Indian Act enacted by the Canadian government hoped for "... the ultimate assimilation (of Indians) into European society through education..." (Schmalz, 1991: 180). We note the widely differing goals assigned to education.

#### **Article 4: Spirit of White Earth: Off to boarding school**

*The moment they told me not to speak Ojibwa, I was determined to keep the language alive.*  
(Article 4: 2)

Kramersch argues that there is a connection between the language spoken by members of a social group and that group's identity (Kramersch: 65). If this connection is real, Ms. Jourdain's resistance to the order forbidding the use of Ojibwa is a case of protecting one's identity, something deep in the psyche. The current French resistance to the "overuse" of English is an interesting situation to consider by way of comparison. Clearly France is not under threat, militarily, from the English speaking world. But the cultural and economic power of English is such that some French people feel their identity is in danger of being compromised.

#### **Article 5: Spirit of White Earth: Winnie Jourdain takes in city life**

*The city was full of prejudice...*

(Article 5: 2)

The subject of the copular verb builds powerful imagery. Not just one person or a small group; "the city" is like a giant ogre victimizing the Ojibwa, referred to as "my people". The word "full" is a key in building this imagery. The choice of the noun 'city' is also significant in that it creates an oppressor group that is not clearly identified (somewhat like the 'they' in the first excerpt). Not everyone in Minneapolis, the city in question was, or now is, prejudiced.

However, the language used by Ms. Jourdain tends to “spread” the guilt, as it were, because those actually holding prejudicial feelings are not distinguished from those innocent of such attitudes. From this simple quote we note how in ordinary speech, unintentionally in the majority of cases, distorted realities are easily made through the creative power of words.

*I helped Indian people get jobs because my people needed help.*

(Article 5 : 2)

The language used by Ms. Jourdain once again tends to create a class of victims. The Indians “needed help”. Not only were the Indians victims of prejudice; they were also in financial need, without work. Could it be that that the ‘help’ given Indians in the past, schools (usually with non-indigenous teachers!), government officials to oversee and handle reservation affairs, welfare money (Sckilnyk : 147), has caused a mentality, surviving to the present, that the Ojibwa and other Indians are in need, or deserving of, assistance from the general populations of the U.S. and Canada?

*You took this whole country from us. All we want is a couple of acres.*

(Article 5 : 3)

The above quote is from a political speech (undated) given by Ms. Jourdain. The pronouns ‘You (pl.)’ and ‘us’ in a by now familiar pattern divide North Americans into two groups, the ‘guilty’ and the ‘victims’. We note the presence of an “action process”, to use Fairclough’s terminology, to provide significant emphasis to the accusatory message. The “agent” of the process is the group referred to with the pronoun “You”. The simple past of ‘take’ identifies the process and the “goal” is the possession of vast areas of North American land (Fairclough : 178).

#### **Article 6 : Spirit of White Earth : Winnie Jourdain returns home**

*I’m 98 years old and I’ve had a beautiful life. . . Nothing is hard ! It’s all how you look at things.*

(Article 6 : 3)

These comments with their positive flavor stand in contrast to angry and depressing statements found throughout the article series under discussion in this paper. To say she’s had a “beautiful life” shows ability, a somewhat Japanese ability, to focus on something pleasing to the senses in the midst of ugliness. Ms. Jourdain’s positive comments help to provide a welcome balance to what is a disturbing, personal commentary on life in North America.

*I have hope that our ways will survive.*

(Article 6 : 3)

Ms. Jourdain has reason to have hope for the future. Already back in the 1960's, Rogers points out, the Ojibwa people initiated concerted efforts to counter the trend characterized by the erosion of traditional values and beliefs by the "forces" of North American modernity—especially in education (Rogers : 768).

For their part, the Canadian and U.S. governments have since the 60's encouraged Indian participation in education. Various efforts by Ojibwa groups to retain the identity and culture of the tribe include, for example, the teaching of traditional activities like the 'Sun' dance and 'Grass' dance to youngsters (ibid).

A 1999 paper published by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development of Canada states that the Canadian government is negotiating with First Nation bands concerning "... the recognition of... inherent right to self-government". Of particular interest are the areas of education, "broad governance", the all important land management and policing (DIAND : 10). The fact that negotiations such as this are happening is cause for hope. No longer are the Indians seen as just a problem (Krotz : 28), a group needing civilizing or assimilating (DIAND : 6). Now the tribes have opportunities to speak as fellow citizens with rightful claims.

Here at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the U.S. and Canada face challenges and difficulties with regard to the original inhabitants of North America. There are no easy, quick solutions to problems caused by unfortunate turns of history. Is the present situation of Indians, like the Ojibwa, reasonable and just? Ms. Jourdain provides a slightly cryptic answer to this question when she says, "... It's all in the way you look at things" (Article 6 : 3).

## Note

1. "Most Ojibwa speakers use the self-designation 'anissinape', Indian or human being". (Rogers : 768)

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