

LITERATURE GUIDE

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“A Poetic pêhonân: A Gathering of nehiyawewin”

A selection of Cree Poetry & Literature Guide created by
Mackenzie Ground

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Introduction

tânisi. Mackenzie Ground nitisîyihkâson. Enoch maskekosihk Cree Nation ohci nîya. nikîtohpikin maskekosihk ekwa amiskwaciwâskahikanihk. niwahkohmanak Ground, Morin, Hodgson, ekwa Peacock. kâkîmasinahikeyân ôma masinahikewin, nîcimos, niminôsim, ekwa nîya nikîwîkinân Coast Salish territoryihk ahpô Burnabyihk, BCihk ekwa mekwac niwîkinân maskekosihk.

enehiyaweyân apisis kâkîhohpikiyân ekwa enehiyawikiskinohamâkosiyân kâhitohteyân kihcikiskinohamâkewikamikohk. tapwe emiyweyihtamân nehiyawewin.

tapwe! tapwe!

I am still learning. I struggle, need others to look over my grammar, and fumble when I speak—my apologies for any mistakes above— but the language makes me happy. It fills me with joy and soothes me in its sing-song rhythms. I was born in Edmonton, Alberta, in Treaty Six territory. I grew up in Enoch Cree Nation and Edmonton with my family. Both places have a sense of community for me and both are painful places to be. Enoch is just west of Edmonton, and their borders touch, which can be a trying, confrontational, and threatening relationship. I am currently living in Enoch but lived and studied on the traditional and unceded territories of the Sk̄wxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), səlilwətaʔl (Tsleil-Waututh), x̣m̄əθk̄wəȳəm (Musqueam), and Kwikwetlem peoples as a PhD student at Simon Fraser University and will continue to have a relationship with that territory as I finish my doctorate program. I am trying to figure out my responsibilities to living in both places in a good way. I am a student, scholar, and writer. Words entrance me as much as they frustrate.



Pictured: Enoch Cree Nation's location in Alberta

I did not read a book by a Cree author until after I finished my Bachelor of Arts degree. I must have encountered a few children's books and educational workbooks growing up. I could have found a book and read it on my own. I could have, but it would have been with effort and I had no idea how to understand my identity and how to deal with a guilt and shame of not knowing my language or stories, not feeling authentic enough, and being white-coded with my fair skin. Being quiet, sensitive, temperamental, and nerdy made living on the reserve difficult for me. I had some maturing to do. Eventually I took an Indigenous literatures course, and everything changed. Cree was so

comforting to hear. Seeing it in written text always delighted me. I heard Cree growing up and probably read a few short texts in Cree when I was quite young, but I always wished I had a better sense of Indigenous and Cree writing while I was growing up and while I was going through my studies. I grew hungry for more. I want to share the beauty of this language. But what could that look like? What could a Cree anthology look like? What are the connections of Plains Cree to Swampy Cree? What are the conversations of a Plains Cree anthology? A *nehiyaw* anthology?

My intention in this collection is to create a meeting ground for voices that inspire me, that are medicine and ceremony, and that address how fraught it is to engage with Indigenous identity, knowledge systems, and language, specifically the Plains Cree language or nehiyawewin. I am thinking of a specific meeting ground, a p̄honân, which is a place to gather and trade, and is a place for ceremony (Donald n.p.). It is a meeting with exchange and communing. I want to create a collection that acknowledges traditional knowledge, story, and language, and then connects, addresses, strengthens, and heals where it can—a collection that understands Cree strength and does not need to argue that such strength and literatures are valid. Because they are. What is beyond something that justifies itself to a non-Indigenous audience?

I think of this collection as a p̄honân because an anthology threatens to exclude Indigenous minds in the way that archives have been places where Indigenous peoples are the objects of study. An anthology risks becoming another space where our stories are stored and where Indigenous Peoples then have difficulty accessing these stories. Anthologies and written texts grapple with the history and the belief that Indigenous peoples have no systems of writing, no histories and bodies of literatures, and no knowledge of how to write intelligently, creatively, or poetically. We need declarative truths of our brilliance because systemic racism attempts to kill our beings. Residential Schools weaponized education to limit and control knowledge and to perpetuate the belief that Indigeneity has no worth or validity. Colonialism, missionary work, and institutions of knowledge like universities spread beliefs that Indigenous peoples were dying and needing saving or were sources of knowledge to extract and drain for archives so that future non-Indigenous and white people could refer to this long-gone culture. This is a reminder for all non-Indigenous readers and for all white academic readers to tread lightly, to keep listening, and to remember that anger and distrust have been sown into our relationships for generations. Indigenous Peoples are rightly angry. tawow if you can hold onto those thoughts—we can all be so much more than these histories and structures.

This is a reminder for myself, for my anger, rage, grief, shame, and guilt that I have had to untangle my whole life, to keep my eyes focused on making my own joy and celebration in the way that works with my gifts, that I can make a collection of nehiyaw poetry and believe that our future generations can build from it. I can hold in my heart the moment I read my kohkom’s report card and her letters from Residential School alongside the memory of speaking with her, who read every day well into her eighties. I remember laughing with her about her story when she had to leave a university Cree class because she was told that her Cree was too good and that she could not learn anything there. Our Elders and knowledge keepers hold so much knowledge. How Indigenous scholars want to work within these institutions will hold different meaning than for our non-Indigenous colleagues. For any Indigenous reader who needs this, we matter and always have. We are intelligent, brilliant, creative, poetic, and beautiful and so much more. We have generations of

writing, stories, texts beyond written forms, amazing humour, and systems full of knowledge and wondrous languages, which carry the sounds and knowledge of our ancestors and scholars. It just needs to be reawakened for us. âhkameyihtamohk.

I intended to gather only poetry because it is a manageable starting point and I find there is something between nehiyawewin, stories, and poetry that blend well together. Writers like Tomson Highway and Neal McLeod speak of the language’s poetics, beauty, and humour, and nehiyawewin also centres action words and verbs, which makes it a descriptive language. m̄cisowinâhtik refers to a table, plainly translated, or to that wooden place where you eat. Can you see it? Does the word not transport you to the experience of eating? Do you hear a bowl of stew gently tapping on a wooden table as it is placed down in front of you? Is your mouth watering yet, seeing and smelling that bowl of stew on the table? Mmm! If only I could let you hear the word! It is a language full of small lullabies, and a good speaker can carry you in their sway of vowels between the consonants by the pull and push of their breath. While nehiyawewin is not a metaphorical language, it is quite literal but grounding, it is a language that creates scenes in a word, and I always want to dance and be held by the sounds when I hear it.

I grow hesitant around mentioning Neal McLeod since his writing has guided and inspired a lot of my thinking, and he has done so much for the language, but I feel grief too. I feel a responsibility to note his influence in my studies but to acknowledge that communities are healing¹. I have needed my own time to grieve and to sit with his past of domestic violence and have chosen to not cite his work here but not to be silent either. It is an exhausting narrative to encounter again and again. It is a real and violent reality as the national inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous women and girls continues to fight in court, as families and communities still hurt and try to heal, as women and girls continue to face violence, to fight for their lives, and to protect each other. Our knowledge keepers are our role models wherever you learn, and our communities are still healing.

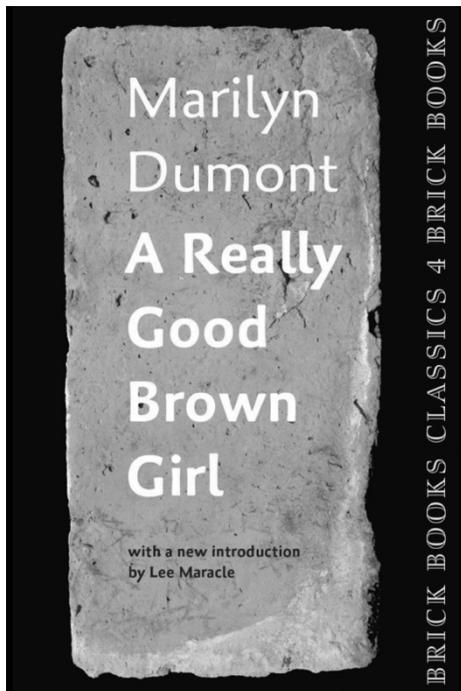
Reading and selecting poems for this collection brings me right into this conversation, into the beauty of the language, and into colonial history, intergenerational trauma, and resilience. I sometimes crave an ability to read with detachment, but this comes from my academic background as critically reading a text often means tearing apart a text and aiming for an objective position of analysis, i.e., to separate oneself from reading. This goes against an Indigenous system of thought that involves our own positionalities. Reading, therefore, cannot be an objective task. It should not be. So often academic analysis relegates Indigenous existence to an object of study, and we are so much more than that. It is the reason why taking a course on Indigenous literature is a long-awaited, long-deliberated decision, which involves one’s identity, history, positionality, responsibilities and ethics, language, family, and being.

This collection has a core of nehiyawewin and notions of Cree poetics and being Cree. This idea of being Cree is something with which I am still grappling. While working on my Master’s thesis, I read Jim Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw counselling speeches, which recount the time of treaty making and other stories. He speaks about being Cree: “who then is really Cree – who thinks that he is really Cree ... That he would know what Creeness is, what the old men have been leaving behind for us” (73). He also speaks about the mixed nehiyaw and m̄niyaw (white) parents who “take out children over

¹ See Neal McLeod’s Open Letter: nealmcleodopenletter.wordpress.com.

there [to the city] [sic], they lead them to lose their Creeness; that is why this happens” (89). From his speeches then, Creeness is something that can be lost, and I worry. nehiyawewin has been a grounding point that guides me in defining what being Cree means to me. The language bundles teachings inside of it. Many words contain the words ‘nehiyaw’ or ‘iyiniw’, the former translating to human or Indigenous person, to describe an action or noun, which primes me to listen or watch actively. Additionally, the âtayôhkêwina, sacred stories, provide teaching and guidance. Poetry that engages with or works alongside the language and sacred stories addresses my anxiety of what being Cree means, and I have followed that inclination.

A few poets identify closer with a mixed or blended Indigenous and non-Indigenous identity or as Métis but engage deeply with their relatives, the beauty of Cree, and Cree thinking. I began with a desire to have a Plains Cree or nehiyaw anthology and found myself in a position policing identity, which I did not want to do. Some poets who I thought were Cree were Ojibway. For some I needed



Pictured: Marilyn Dumont's A Really Good Brown Girl (Brick Books) / Desaturated from original

to learn how they express their Métis identity—e.g. Cree-Métis or Métis only—which I hope I have done in a way that shows respect to their own individual self-determination and to the self-determination of Métis people. I want to further address the difficulty of the title ‘Cree,’ which generalizes a vast group of people and is not a word from any Cree language. It is imposed language. What is possible in shifting away from Cree, to Plains Cree, to nehiyaw, and to naming their First Nation and communities and their relations? What federal and governmental practices can we call out when it is difficult to know one’s family and kinship ties? What assimilative practices? Does this labeling only hurt the reader and author more than anything? Can it show their resilience? What kind of teaching moments arise?

ahâw nitôtemitik. nîya nehiyaw iskwew. maskekosihk Enoch Cree Nation ohci nîya. This is my particularity I struggled to find and will continue to nurture.

I want to respect people’s identity and how they self-identify as I consider how long it has taken me to feel comfortable claiming my own. I have family members who are related to the signatory Chiefs at Treaty making, and I have distant family members who are Métis. I am related to Cree-speaking people, to nehiyawak who speak nehiyawewin, regardless of whether they identify as Cree or Métis. For example, Marilyn Dumont is not just a wonderful Cree/Métis author but is a distant relative from my nohkôm’s side. These bring different senses of obligation for me. While I want to stress the important cultural distinctions of Cree, Métis, and blended heritage, identity, and culture, I also want to stress how close we are. Therefore, to guide my process, rather than starting from identities settler colonialism has imposed onto Indigenous Peoples, I looked for nehiyawak, those who speak nehiyawewin, to connect and guide us rather than separate us.

Geography was something I considered in this collection but does not limit it. The geographical scope of nehiyawewin, however, does give the collection some structure. The Cree territory is vast

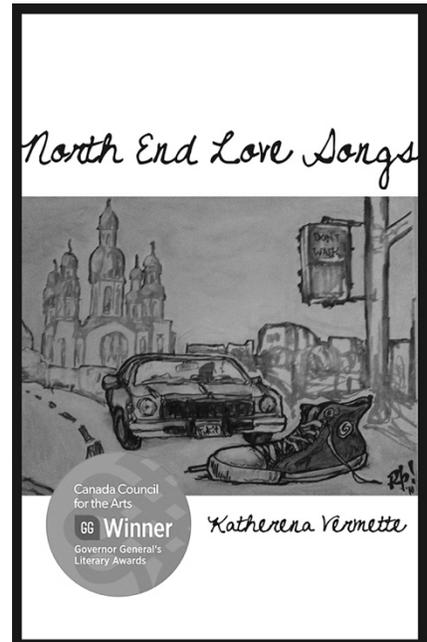
with a long range. We move. We live on reserves, in cities, in small towns, out in the bush. We have a close relationship with the M tis, the Ojibway or Anishinaabe, and the Blackfoot or niisitapi, albeit the last is a more strained and adversarial relationship. Each is complicated and complex in their own right. Many selected authors and stories reflect these close, inter-related relationships and kinships. To give this collection some focus and structure, I tried to keep my selected pieces within the Plains Cree or the y-dialect. This, for example, removed some work by Solomon Ratt who does a lot to share the language and has some fully translated poetry in Cree² in the th-dialect or Woods Cree. This decision comes from a desire for some unity in the focus and to make the length approachable.

I realized that the language outlines a spatial geography that alludes to the reserve system, the Indian Act, and treaty making which complicate identities outside of these geographies. By this I mean that in the creation of the reservation system through the Indian Act and in the signing of treaties, the movement of language was federally controlled and contained. The Pass system limited movement in and out of the reserve. The collection then must work within a narrative of land-locked identity, combined with the notion that reserves are where authenticity resides despite the fact that “[i]t’s our destiny to travel; we’re Nehewin” (Dumont 27). The movement of Indigenous people and the reality of people living in cities are narratives that need to be shared; the work of Katherena Vermette, Joshua Whitehead, and Billy-Ray Belcourt are crucial because they address cities, overseas travel, digital space, and complicated relationships to the reserve. They are essential in giving voice to our contemporary existences in which we have long histories with cities and modern conveniences. We get to decide what modern, urban, and digital Indigenous identities can be.

Having language as a focus of the collection also alludes to the loss of the language’s strength and to the Indian Residential School system’s aim to remove Indigenous languages. In my own language learning, I struggle with an impatience to know the language. I wish to understand and to reclaim the language I did not get to hear growing up. I want to speak it with others and to my nieces and nephews. I want to read books. I want to write poems in this beautiful language, but I can’t.

Not yet.

It is a gap we must face over and over and over, but there are fluent speakers, knowledge keepers, Elders, and writers, and nehiyawewin continues to be taught. Some languages do not have this privileged position. Dedicating the collection to a language, then, is a means I use to hold myself together, to see these writers meet in one place, to keep practicing, and to create space for other



Pictured: Katherena Vermette’s North End Love Songs (The Muses’ Company) / Desaturated from original

² See Rosanna Deerchild’s *Calling Down the Sky*, BookLand P, 2015 and Solomon Ratt’s Cree translation *itw stamaw tam Solomon ratt  -nitotamahk k sik*, BookLand P, 2017. See also Ratt’s story, “I am Not an Indian,” in English and in nehiyawewin, in *Read, Listen, Tell* (170-172).

collections in more Indigenous languages. I selected some pieces that grapple with language learning and loss to acknowledge this learning: Dumont’s “âcimowina,” McIlwraith’s “Cree Lessons,” and Scofield’s “I’ll Teach You Cree,” for example.

With this history and the complications of identity in mind, selecting pieces was difficult. I call this a collection because anthologies bring their own baggage. There has been far too much taking without consent or without following protocol or without reciprocation. Decisions were made to complete this collection, and I tried to make mine following my love of nehiyawewin, its poetics, its fun, and its sexiness³, and following the work of many wonderful authors emerging and established.

Some authors have been writing for decades. Some are beginning their careers. There is a large body of work that is from Cree writers and has nehiyawewin. I focused this collection on a loose theme and topic and then selected pieces in a more intuitive manner. My research interests revolve around ceremony and urban studies, and this collection reflects those interests. The poems, therefore, revolve around my own wondering about how ceremony and language sustain. How do language and ceremony inform each other, are a part of each other, sustain us in cities, through grief and loss, and uplift us and hold us to account? In a sense, there is a layer of optimism and hope in this collection; however, my slow, growing experience with knowledge keepers, language, and ceremony teaches me that action is important. This collection is not to calm or belie pain and suffering, but to teach and remind me what to *do*. These poems show me strength when I live with the brokenness (Halberstam 5). They sustain as lifeblood.

There are a few guiding principles for organization. The ordering is a chronology based on the author’s publishing career. This in part creates a sense of generation and lineage within our writing, which can grow forward and backwards. In Billy-Ray Belcourt’s *This Wound Is A World*, his poem “Rez Sisters II” is a reference to Tomson Highway’s play *The Rez Sisters*, which was published thirty years before Belcourt’s poem. The voices of Sky Dancer Louise Bernice Halfe, Marilyn Dumont, and Gregory Scofield are well-established authors who continue to inspire new writers. They have inspired my own writing practices, especially how they continue to support emerging writers, and how they build, refer to, and diverge from one another’s work.

Besides chronology, I organized this collection by its relation to nehiyaw knowledge. The selections from Halfe, Scofield, Dumont, and McIlwraith revolve around language and stories. There are questions of responsibility, kinship, knowledge, and experiences of ceremony; these discussions are furthered by Cuthand and Deerchild. In 2008, Cuthand published a revised version of *Voices of the Waterfall*, which is the version I chose to organize into my collection. It is amazing to see the strength of her voice, so long tended, flourishing in its newest form. Both Cuthand and Deerchild engage with the themes of the previous writers before turning our attention to “where ceremonies go” as we move into Vermette, Whitehead, and Belcourt’s writing. These poems are pivotal in how they refer to earlier pieces in the collection and to traditional knowledge and

³ See Tomson Highway’s “Why Cree is the Sexiest of All Languages” *Me Sexy: An Exploration of Native Sex and Sexuality*, edited by Drew Hayden Taylor, Douglas and McIntyre Ltd., 2008. and “Why Cree is the Funniest of All Languages.” *Me Funny*, edited by Drew Hayden Taylor, Douglas and McIntyre Ltd., 2006.

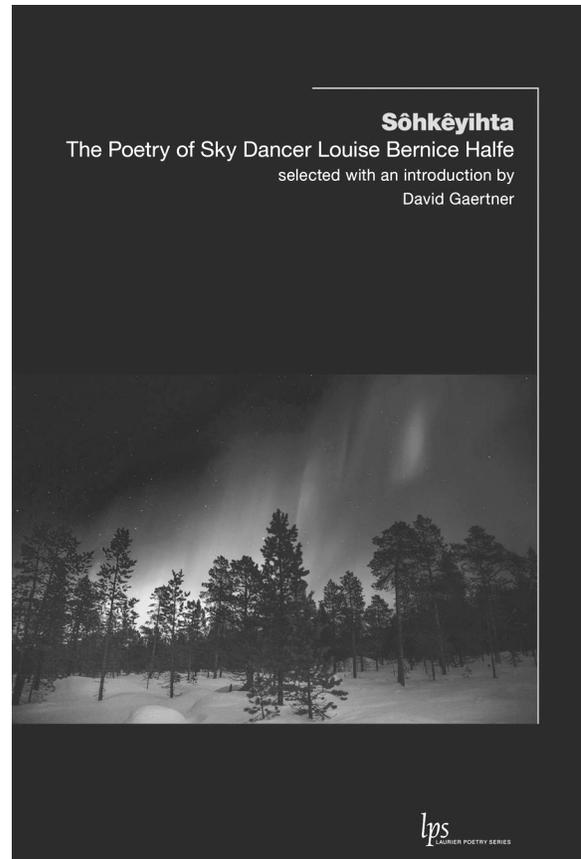
nehiyawewin, yet also contextualize this knowledge in dance, in cities, in dedication to the missing and murdered Indigenous womxn and girls, in digital space, in queer spaces, and in love.

These themes and generational thinking are the primary selecting criteria, but these poems also bring me a sense of joy. Some authors are colleagues and friends, and they influence and inform my thinking. A layer of my intention in putting together this collection is to do something about the feeling about not seeing enough Indigenous, Cree, and nehiyaw writers growing up. It is for someone who may be in the same position in which I found myself. But as I grew up and became more acquainted with these texts and authors, I realized our closeness in experience and in families. Learning more about these authors, their homes, and their writing practices provide important depth and understanding to their writing.

I knew I wanted to begin this collection with Sky Dancer Louise Bernice Halfe and Marilyn Dumont. Halfe is Cree from Saddle Lake Cree Nation⁴. When I read Halfe’s work, I feel my brain stretching as I try to keep up with her stories. It is as though the Cree that I heard growing up, all those old sounds and teachings, are waking up from a deep slumber. Her writing not only has nehiyawewin but also figures from traditional stories, which I hold dearly and protect like food for the winter to give me strength when I need it. As I age and learn more, I find more and more with each read.

Marilyn Dumont is a Cree/Métis woman, a descendant of Gabriel Dumont, and someone I hold dear to me. The first time I read my own poetry was before her, and I will never forget her reading “Letter to Sir John A. MacDonald.” I cherish each time I get the honour to hear her read it again. Her ferocity, her writing practice, and her presence in the university inspire me, and I resonate with her language learning process. Her book *That Tongued Belonging* was one of the first books of Indigenous poetry I read, and *A Really Good Brown Girl* and *The Pemmican Eaters* are strongholds of Cree, Métis, Indigenous, and Canadian literatures.

I was introduced to the work of Naomi McIlwraith by a friend. She is of mixed heritage: Cree, Ojibway, Scottish, and English. We have met only briefly, but her intensity, reflection, and commitment to nehiyawewin motivate and challenge me. Her writing has made me ask questions about nehiyawewin and poetry like none other.



Pictured: Bernice Halfe’s Sôhkêyihta: The Poetry of Sky Dancer Louise Bernice Halfe (Wilfrid Laurier University Press) / Desaturated from original

⁴ I am still working out if and how we are related!

Reading Gregory Scofield, in a life-changing Indigenous literatures class, provided me a moment where I saw the relationship of poetry and ceremony and asked me what being Cree could mean. He is Red River Métis with Cree and European ancestry and sings beautifully. His work *Native Canadiana: Songs from the Urban Rez* continues to impact my research and study. The relationship of erotics and sexuality in language was much needed for my cis-gendered self and freeing from my prudish sex education in Alberta. I wanted his poems to lead this selection.

Beth Cuthand and Rosanna Deerchild are more recent for me; I wish I knew their work sooner. Cuthand is Cree from Little Pine First Nation, and her name comforts me in how familiar it sounds. The selected pieces strike deep in their approach to traditional knowledge, listening, and the flexibility and generosity of ceremonial practices. Rosanna Deerchild is Cree from O-Pipon-Na-Piwin Cree Nation and is former host of CBC Radio’s program *Unreserved*. Her work with her mother’s experience during Residential School and her own experiences are powerful. The strength in the lineage of women in her family almost had me creating a collection around kohkums!

Katherena Vermette is Métis, and her collection *North End Love Songs* is one of the few collections that speaks to the painful love of a city, which for her is the North End of Winnipeg, Manitoba. The section “November” shattered me. The theme of this nehiyawewin collection asks some interesting questions as I selected pieces. Ceremony and dance are celebration and honouring, but they require work, even suffering, to heal pain, loss, and grief. Vermette’s work marks that work.

Joshua Whitehead is two-spirit and Ojibwe-nehiyaw of the Peguis First Nation, and his book *Full-metal Indigiqueer* is truly transforming. Though Jim Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw’s counselling speeches brought me worry as I live in cities, Whitehead’s experimental form, references to pop-culture, and celebration of queer culture changed my understanding of being. His work taught me to accept my own being that I already had.

Billy-Ray Belcourt is fierce. He is Cree from the Driftpile Cree Nation and his academic work is brilliant, inspiring, stirring, and exciting. Winner of the Griffin Poetry Prize for his book *This Wound is A World*, he connects language, stories, politics, and love with full breath. He is a colleague, a friend, and a great motivator for me. He is someone whose work I want to support for how much his writing informs my writing.

Finally, I chose Amy Malbeuf’s and Lori Blondeau’s visual pieces because their work reminds me of the relationship of land, ceremony, and language, and they remind me that writing and poetry do not have to be just written text. Amy Malbeuf is Métis, and Lori Blondeau is Cree, Saulteaux, and Métis. In “Land Speaking,” Silyx poet Jeannette Armstrong shares that the land gives the language of a place (142). In many poems, in this collection and in the scope of these writers’ work, the poets refer to specific places and land. Malbeuf’s and Blondeau’s pieces visually make that connection in the physical and in the body, which is another important concept for Indigenous poets and writers. These pieces bring me joy and remind me of my home. I think of my aunts and kohkomak sewing, mending, and beading, and of listening to aspens in the wind. I first saw Amy Malbeuf’s work at the Art Gallery of Alberta and have since followed her work. Lori Blondeau’s work was in an exhibition on Métis work curated by Amy Malbeuf and Jessie Ray Short, *Li Salay*, presented only in Cree and Michif. When I was at that exhibition, I was getting comfortable reading nehiyawewin. Within each word that I foraged, I got to see the relationship

Envisioning a Future Gathering

Sky Dancer Louise Bernice Halfe

- "Crying for Voice"
- "N hkom, Medicine Bear"
- "The Quandry"

Marilyn Dumont

- "that tongued belonging"
- " cimowina"

Naomi McIlwraith

- "Cree Lessons"
- " -k -p cic y hk - We Danced Round Dance"

Gregory Scofield

- "I'll Teach You Cree"
- " st m p -miciso"

Beth Cuthand

- "This Knowledge"
- "Ceremony for ending an affair of the heart"

Rosanna Deerchild

- "dreaming dress"
- "where ceremonies go"

Katherena Vermette

- "blackbird"
- "redbird"

Joshua Whitehead

- "a brown queers golden world"
- "mihkokwaniy"

Billy-Ray Belcourt

- "Sacred"
- "Love is a Moontime Teaching"

Amy Malbeuf

- “Iskotew”

Lori Blondeau

- “Asiniy Iskwew”



“Asiniy Iskwew (Rock Woman)” by Lori Blondeau (2016), used with permission. / Desaturated from original.

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