

Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage

Written as I Remember It: Teachings (ʔəms taʔaw) from the life of a Sliammon elder

Elsie Paul, in collaboration with Paige Raibmon and Harmony Johnson
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“So That’s How Important the Roots Were to our People” (p. 155)

The epigraph that Sliammon elder Elsie Paul speaks in her book *Written as I Remember It* dovetails with First Nations’ understanding of the lifelong learning journey. Sources and domains of knowledge ground a learner and are understood as roots that sustain a learner, represented in the stylized graphic of a tree (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007). Paul identifies these sources and domains of knowledge in her teachings. One of the book’s collaborators, Paige Raibmon, refers to these as Paul’s “categories of identity” (p. 40), and Raibmon, Paul, and Paul’s granddaughter, Harmony Johnson, use the stories to provide a nuanced interpretation of these categories—they are roots, nests where knowledge resides, grows, and changes. The categories are repurposed as “teachings on ideas, values, and intentions” (p. 42). Elders pass them on to listeners like Raibmon and Johnson with the intention that they live according to the messages in them. I conceive of the stories in *Written as I Remember It* as sources and domains of knowledge because Raibmon says “what is enduring about tradition or culture is not necessarily located in the physical practices...or in the texts and artifacts” (p. 42) where standard education systems teach us to

find knowledge. For me as an educator, the book is an opportunity to analyze what I learn from each of Paul's sources and domains of knowledge and take them with me on my lifelong learning journey because the authors want us "to take in not only the content of her [Paul's] words but the method and intention" (p. 5). Ancestors' teachings help "you... get your strength, your power to be who you are" (p. 68).

After Raibmon provides context and locates the book in literature on British Columbia history, Indigenous education, and anthropological investigations, Paul proceeds to set up the sources and domains of knowledge in which her stories nest. Her stories cover self-care, work, respect, the land and the place, and family. Any gaps readers notice may serve as touchstones to further research with Paul and other knowledgeable Sliammon. We see how the stories have an impact on the spiritual and cultural, social, economic, and political spheres (First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model, 2007) of Paul's life. Paul's motivation for her work is her family, as she argues that "it's very important to pass on to my children, to my grandchildren...the strong beliefs that my grandparents had, that there is a spiritual world...[and] that is what grounds us" (p. 389).

Paul's lessons shape the methods of Indigenous learning that Raibmon asks us to contemplate as we read. Paul says "you are taught by your Elders how to take care of yourself" (pp. 68-69). Elders share with you "the true history" of the land that "is never talked about" (p. 79). In these stories, we see revised histories of contemporary B.C. places from the families who lived in them. Powell River, Cape Mudge, Brem River, Theodosia, Okeover Inlet, Grace Harbour, Bella Bella, Bute Inlet, Egmont, and Rivers Inlet are communities that come up often in her stories. On the land, "it's really important to just share your history...how you grew up...what things were like in my grandmother's time, and the stories about how things were in my great-grandparents' time" (pp. 103-104). The stories are a point of entry for Paul to talk about "how a day begins for me as a young child in my grandmother's house" (p. 101). The stories are a conduit for children and youth to understand how "to respect the grandmothers and not to abuse them and use them" (p. 172). Although Paul acknowledges wage labour as a reality of Indigenous peoples in modern Canada, throughout the book she encourages everyone to learn to be self-sufficient, as her ancestors were.

In addition to sharing teachings, *Written as I Remember It*'s most powerful contribution lies in its illustration of the method of putting together the stories and the style of teaching to Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers. The authors see these stories as

a chance to honour children and youth now, “to recognize the good path if they’re on a good path” (pp. 172-173). The impact on the social sphere or branch of Indigenous learning is that they need to learn respect. For Paul, respect for animals is just as important. She reveals this respect in a story about how to prepare fish, a story that is not only about “how you handle it” but also “how you receive it” (p. 113). To properly prepare and gather food, one must know the land and the place and therefore, the appropriate lessons vary. Children and youth are not only socializing with their elders in a social space, they are learning important teachings. Elders teach in a way that children learn “what is appropriate and what is not appropriate, just by listening to those stories and legends” (p. 149). For Paul, repeatedly telling these stories to children makes it so that the stories “become...your policy in life!...That’s how you behave” (p. 167).

One can extrapolate from Paul’s words that although change occurs in society, the sources and domains of knowledge that shape how people interact are durable. Families must “always acknowledge” their siblings “and where they’re from...[and] acknowledge the different branches of the family and how they’re connected” (p. 91). The experience of grief is a source of knowledge but is intimately linked to family, and the act of looking after one’s family is what enables one to practice one’s knowledge.

In addition to the literature on BC history, Indigenous education, and anthropology, Paul’s stories can also be used as a touchstone to investigations of the impacts of the Catholic church on traditional Indigenous spirituality and Canadian and provincial social, educational, and legal policy on people’s lives at the reserve level. The book’s format begins with a Sliammon linguistic introduction by Paul’s long-time research collaborator Honoré Watanabe, proceeds to a standard literature review by Raibmon, is followed by 11 chapters of Paul’s teachings, and concludes with a reference list for further reading. The format allows ample space for Paul to share her knowledge without standard scholarly interference from citations. *Written as I Remember It* was for me a great pleasure to review—I found myself not wanting the book to end! I highly encourage the use of the stories in teacher education courses, K-12 schools, and history classes.

References

Canadian Council on Learning. (2007). *First Nations holistic lifelong learning model*. Ottawa, Canada: Retrieved from http://www.afn.ca/uploads/files/education/5._2007_redefining_how_success_is_measured_en.pdf