

Book Review

Whitecalf, Sarah, *mitoni niya nêhiyaw—nêhiyaw-iskwêw mitoni niya / Cree is who I truly am—me, I am truly a Cree woman (A life told by Sarah Whitecalf)*, Edited and translated by H.C. Wolfart and Freda Ahenakew, with a preface and photographs by Ted Whitecalf. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press. 2021, 362 pages.

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Sarah Whitecalf's book, *mitoni niya nêhiyaw*, makes a significant contribution to Indigenous life history studies and is an outstanding example of the collective oeuvre of H.C. Wolfart and the late Freda Ahenakew, the book's editors. Wolfart and Ahenakew are known for publishing recorded oral accounts by Cree Elders in Saskatchewan and Alberta, recorded in the Cree language—typically, as here with Whitecalf, in the Y Dialect (Plains Cree). This book is the second publication resulting from the collaborations of Whitecalf with Wolfart and Ahenakew, following on *kinêhiyâwiwininaw nehiyawewin / The Cree Language is Our Identity (The La Ronge Lectures of nêhiyawêwin)* (1993). In contrast to the public teaching and counselling lectures documented in Whitecalf (1993), *mitoni niya nêhiyaw* focuses on the speaker's own life story, as well as her accounts of other twentieth-century events and narratives documented in oral history around Sweetgrass First Nation and Moosomin First Nation, in west-central Saskatchewan. This book will be of interest to those studying or participating in Cree oral traditions, as well as to scholars of the life history genre, translation of Indigenous languages, and Indigenous women's lived experiences during the twentieth century.

Sarah Whitecalf (1919–1991) recorded elements of her life story and other narratives in discussion with Ahenakew, Wolfart, and other interlocutors, between March 1988 and December 1990. While Whitecalf is the main speaker, generally uninterrupted in the tradition of the *âcimowin* genre, the text includes

several interjections by Ahenakew and other Cree women, as well as Wolfart. As with Wolfart and Ahenakew's previous work, the original Cree recordings are painstakingly transcribed and translated, published in a side-by-side Cree-English format, with the Cree text first. As the Cree title and its English version may indicate, the translation emphasizes the rhythms and structures of spoken Cree.

There are elements of Whitecalf's narrative that seem typical or illustrative of broader histories and experiences for those who lived through the punitive restrictions and isolation, in the guise of tutelage, which characterized the reserve period in the Prairie Provinces. Other aspects of her story are more unique and surprising, which makes for a book full of rich moments and passages. One part of Whitecalf's life story that was atypical for her time and place is that her mother managed to avoid sending her to residential school, despite the interventions of a priest. As such, Whitecalf was raised by her grandparents, and she grew up essentially as a unilingual Cree speaker. While many Indigenous people in the north who were born in the early twentieth century did not attend school or learn much English, this was more unusual in the reserve communities of the plains region. The principal reason Whitecalf's mother did not want her to attend school was that she had already lost a daughter, who became ill while attending residential school and ultimately died at home, highlighting the high mortality of students in such institutions.

Whitecalf's childhood involved travel between her mother's home at Sweetgrass and her maternal grandparents, with whom she primarily lived, at Moosomin. As an adolescent, she moved to Sweetgrass and eventually married a man from there. After raising her family, she left her husband and moved with her grandchildren to Saskatoon, where she was living when she began her collaboration with Wolfart and Ahenakew, who had been seeking fluent Cree speakers for their work. In this book, as in *Whitecalf* (1993), Sarah Whitecalf explicitly draws connections between Cree identity and fluency in the Cree language, being, as she says, "truly a Cree woman" in part due to her fluency in Cree.

There are notable points for comparison between Whitecalf's narrative and those of Wolfart and Ahenakew's other collaborators, most notably Emma Minde (see Minde 1997). While Minde (b. 1907) did attend residential school and spoke English, there remain significant similarities in the two elders' life stories, including discussions of life on reserve in the early-mid twentieth century, of

elders and historical leaders known to these women or their family members, of work, marriage, and family life, and of the importance of the Roman Catholic faith. Both Minde and Whitecalf travelled far outside their native region (Minde to Quebec and Whitecalf to Montana) on journeys that might have seemed incongruous at the time. Whitecalf's discussion of her travels to visit relatives in the USA is one of the highlights of the book, particularly when she discusses returning home alone by bus and train. Both women also recount the circumstances of their marriage, establishing themselves as an adult in a new community, and the difficulties posed by a husband's struggles with alcohol. Minde and Whitecalf lived during times of significant change, as documented both through their own recollections and through accompanying photographs in each book. Experiences of women such as the narrators and their family members are fundamental in both works, including tales of work and survival, as well as Whitecalf's discussion of a Cree woman who was murdered by her husband, and the murder's aftermath.

The editors' emphasis is directly on the primary documents—transcriptions of Whitecalf's words and Wolfart and Ahenakew's outstanding translations. Wolfart's introduction provides a framing for the narrative and limited analysis, as does Ted Whitecalf's briefer preface (Ted Whitecalf, son of Sarah Whitecalf, also contributes photographs). Wolfart refers to a deeper analysis of the text that will be published separately. Still, as with Wolfart and Ahenakew's other work with elders, there is substantial scope for analysis of this primary text on the levels of history, linguistics, sociolinguistics, narrative, lived experience, and translation.

The third part of the book, "The spiritual life," departs from Whitecalf's own life story to focus on mourning practices, the importance of both Roman Catholic and Cree rituals and prayers, and on accounts of a woman being taken away underground by spirits, at a specific named place on the Sweetgrass reserve. It is an excellent contribution. The latter story, "*manitow kê-matwêhikêt/* Where the spirits drum" is reproduced three times based on different recordings by Whitecalf (a fourth performance of the story is referred to but was not recorded). These three performances would support considerable analysis, both as a set and in comparison with other related narratives. The story highlights the spiritual importance of placenames in the Prairie Provinces incorporating the anthropologically significant term, *manitow*, as well as the association of spiritual drumming or music with such places (see Westman and July 2017).

Ted Whitecalf provided a photograph of this sacred place for publication in the book. This section will be useful for those who are interested in learning more about Plains Cree religious practices in the context of the reserve period.

In her early life, Whitecalf encountered important elders such as Fine Day and Coming Day, who had worked with anthropologists or linguists including David Mandelbaum and Leonard Bloomfield, acting as key informants about the pre-reserve period. Through her collaborations with Wolfart and Ahenakew, Whitecalf takes centre stage, presenting her own twentieth-century life and teachings for a broad audience. This book is an important contribution to the body of work around Indigenous life stories and particularly significant as a primary source exemplifying Plains Cree women's lived experience, as recounted firsthand in Cree.

References

- Minde, Emma. 1997. *kwayask ê-kî-pê-kiskinowâpahtihicik/ Their Example Showed Me the Way (A Cree Woman's Life Shaped by Two Cultures)*, edited and translated by Freda Ahenakew and H.C. Wolfart. Edmonton, University of Alberta Press.
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