



Miisa Giizhaabiziyinⁱ

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Abstract

Taking an axe to gendered space in a northern Ontario reserve.

The basis for the following dibaajimowin was told to me many times by my father throughout my life.ⁱⁱ He witnessed it as a child. It is a story that has become mine in a shared sense by way of learning it enough to tell it in my own way, to re-interpret it within my own life's context (Henderson 2006, 131). Thus, this story is true while also taking on certain aspects I have added in order to apply it in a way that I believe supports the resurgence of Anishinabekwewak knowledge and power within the intersection of Indigenous Women's connection to territory and Indigenous Women's transcendence over the effects of colonialism. In keeping with Anishinabe intellectual traditions, if/when shared in a different context, I would not/will not tell this dibaajimowin in exactly the same way.

The road in front of my house in Anishinabekwe Bay was a dirt road for years and years and years. It was a dirt road right until I left home in the late 90s, so it was rocky and gravelly all throughout my aunt's childhood. She grew up in Anishinabekwe Bay, too. My auntie Ma'iingan, my dad and their one hundred brothers and sisters felt the potholes and the rocks under their feet. They even felt the smooth places where cars had pressed the

gravel laid months before into something resembling asphalt. Compressed gravel is reserve asphalt.

[2] Growing up in the Bay was worse than growing up in The Mission - the main part of our reserve. But even though The Mission was poor, the Bay was known for being even poorer: it's where people from the The Mission and the neighbouring city dumped their garbage.

[3] Being poor, the kids improvised. Ice on the bay in the winter was begging for hockey; but it was the road that saved those kids in the summer. Those flat spots of rez asphalt created the opportunities to play hockey in the hot months of the year in lieu of bibeon and its gift of ice. So in the summer when it came time to play, the kids played road hockey.

[4] Ma'iingan is older than my dad. But she was still a kid when he was a kid. They were all kids, but the boys would run away and do things without the girls. So when Ma'iingan wanted to play road hockey with them one day in early July, she had to find them first. So she walked.

[5] She walked to the church, but no one was there. It was boarded-up.

[6] She went over to Waabooz's house, but he was gone to his grandson's funeral.

[7] She went to the next bay over, and chuckled to herself when she saw only some white tourists taking pictures of the Sleeping Giant.

[8] Getting hot, she took the short-cut through the bush back to the main part of the Bay. Almost back, she heard voices - those awkward teenaged boy voices - coming from down the road, along that side of the Bay she assumed wasn't worth checking because it was where the Band's summer workers were clearing brush along the roadside the day before. Everyone knew these workers' machines usually tore up the road too much for a hockey game. But she knew what she heard: the yells of *PASS IT!!!*, *SHOOT ALREADY!!!* and *GREAT SAVE!!!* betrayed the boys' hiding place.

[9] Turns out the Band workers had finished the night before, and the tractor they usually used was broke, so they had cut the brush by hand. The road itself was fine, but those boys knew it would be a good place to hide from the girls, because no one would come looking for a road hockey game where they knew the Band workers had just been. They thought they'd be able to play on their own, without the girls wanting to join and 'slow the game down', as they put it.

[10] And so it was with disdain that they greeted Ma'iingan when she came walking out of the forest and into the newly cleared roadside. Surprised that she had found them, none of the boys noticed she walked out of the bush as comfortable and as spry as if she had just walked out of her own house. She was ready to play, and she had all the energy she needed to take on those boys.

[11] "OK! Whose team am I on?," she yelled.

[12] "We have enough players," my uncle Makwa said, "but we could use an audience. Why don't you just cheer for one of our teams?"

[13] It was obvious they didn't have enough players. There was one too many players on one team, so they had agreed to play with only four players at any one time instead of the regular five. The problem with this was that one team always had a little more energy, because they always had one "sub."

[14] "But then why is Gaag sitting over there waiting to get on?" Ma'iingan asked. She wasn't stupid; she always paid attention to everything around

her, and had even picked up some strategy from *Hockey Night in Canada* on Saturday nights.

[15] “Well, Gaag’s just takin’ a break” my dad said. “But even if you were to play, you’re smaller than all the guys on his team, so they’d just beat us anyway.”

[16] “What the hell are you talking about?” Ma’iingan says as she’s sizing up the teams. “Look, I’m taller than half those fools. And I beat Mooz in a race just the other day when mom asked us to go down to the lake for water.”

[17] Mooz, acting like he didn’t hear that, said “Ma’iingan, even if you’re taller than some of us, you’re a girl, and it wouldn’t be fair because we’d have to play easier so as not to hurt you. We’re just stronger than you.”

[18] “Don’t talk silly,” Ma’iingan belted back. “I hauled more nets the other day than Amik. Remember? He hauled up three and started whining about it. Mom said she could hear him clear across the lake. I thought about driving him back to shore to shut him up, but then convinced him he had to keep helping.”

[19] Amik said something to distract everyone. Then he said "Well, even if you did play, you ain't got no hockey stick. This ain't soccer, you cant use you're feet."

[17] Ma'iingan thought about this. And Amik was right. This wasn't soccer, after all.

[18] Mooz jumped on this one: "Ya, so why don't you go home and see what mama's up to. I'm sure she's guttin' up that fish right now."

[19] Ma'iingan, pissed off, turned around to go find something else to do. The afternoon was far from over, and she knew it was too early to be doing the fish. Besides, she knew Mooz should gut some fish anyway. She knew Mooz was just trying to get rid of her.

[20] The game continued. My dad got elbowed in the ribs and got pissed at Mooz. Gaag scored his first goal in a long time, because he actually didn't play hockey that often and didn't know all the moves. Makwa and Amik almost got into a fight because a rock flew up and drilled Makwa in the lips when Amik shot the ball...gravel always does that.

Then the game heated up. The score was close, and the boys got all caught up in the stick-handling and the movement of it all. They stopped hesitating. They wanted to win, and they focused. Makwa made a pass to my dad, and yelled at him because my dad didn't seem to notice. He was standing there, eyes wide open and with a look of bewilderment and worry strewn across his face.

[21] Makwa looked around and suddenly had to jump back about two feet. Ma'iingan was attempting to steal the ball from him. It was the most convincing poke-check any of them had ever seen. Ma'iingan wasn't using no hockey stick. Ma'iingan was using an axe.

[22] Those Band road workers were always leaving equipment around. And the night before they happened to leave a full-length bush axe in the ditch. When Ma'iingan found it, she turned and ran directly into the dusty heap of boys who 10 minutes before had said 'no girls allowed'.

[23] It is said that sparks flew that afternoon as Ma'iingan maneuvered that axe across the stones impacted into the old gravel road.

[24] But sparks weren't the only things flying around. Legs, sticks and boys were all flying out of Ma'iingan's way. She took the ball from anyone who

had it, and no one could say anything because she was good. Really good. She was better than most of those boys, even though she was using that axe for a hockey stick, which, honestly, isn't a very easy thing to use as a hockey stick. My dad knew she'd be even better if she had a proper stick. In that moment, they all knew. And as the boys flew out of her way, balls flew right into the nets.

[25] Yes. Nets. Plural. Because she wasn't playing for one of their teams. She was playing against both teams. Any time she took that ball, she took the longest, hardest route to the furthest net, and "axe-handled" her way around everyone. That blade sparkled like a disco ball as sparks flew and as as Mishomis-Giizis beamed from just over the mountain at the edge of the Bay, shining light directly at the sharpened edge of the blade.

[26] No one lost that day. Because there was no game. What started as two teams of boys playing against each other turned into a realization that Ma'iingan was just as good, just as important as, and maybe even a little smarter than, any of the boys that had snuck away.

Anishinabemowin-to-English Word List

Amik: Beaver

Anishinabekwe: Anishinabe Woman

Anishinabemowin: Anishinabe language

Biboon: Winter

Dibaajimowin : “Teaching, ordinary story, personal story, history story”

(Anishinaabe Wordlist qtd. in Geniusz 2009, 192)

Gaag: Raccoon

Gitchi Gami: Lake Superior

Ma’iingan: Wolf

Makwa : Bear

Miisa Giizhaabiziyin: You made it through

Mishomis-Giizis: Grandfather Sun

Mooz: Moose

Waabooz: Rabbit

ⁱ I have included a Word List at the end of this dibaajimowin to reference the Anishinabemowin I’ve used. However, as I am a language learner and not a fluent speaker, I have referenced this word with Elder Doug Williams of Curve Lake First Nation of the Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg. This cross referencing with a fluent speaker who is also an Elder is imperative within a context where many Anishinabek are recovering our language because, as Leanne Simpson (2011) notes, “there are too many examples of academics who are not fluent speakers using Nishnaabemowin words incorrectly” (25-6, footnote 1), which creates the opportunity for learners who also have access to publishing to prolong colonial distortion within the use of our language; further, cross referencing with an Elder also ensures the deeper philosophy embodied in the word is considered before a piece of writing is published. For this reason, and taking my cue from Simpson’s (2011) work, I asked Doug Williams about the proper use of the term Miisa Giizhaabiziyin on 4 July 2011 at his house at Curve Lake First Nation, Ontario. The other Anishinabemowin I use in the main body of this text are common words, and thus I did not cross reference with with an Elder fluent in Anishinabemowin. Finally, the words I use here reflect mainly the Minnesota dialect of Anishinabemowin.

ⁱⁱ My father’s name is Arthur MacLaurin. He is Anishinabe and lives in the house we grew up in at Fort William First Nation, on the northwest shore of Gitchi Gami.

Works Cited

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