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LEARNING THROUGH STORYTELLING: AN INTERVIEW WITH ANGEL SOBOTTA, AS TOLD BY ’ICEYÉEYE [COYOTE]

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Coyote and Fox

Once**,** a very long time ago, I had a son who was born from my elbow. I was very proud of my son, who was to be rich and a chief. Soon, I had to go hunting, and my daughters, as well as the daughters of my best friend Fox, came to take care of my son. My son was very cute, and the daughters fawned over him and tickled him, and my son laughed and laughed, until he laughed too much and died. I mourned and cried until I was exhausted. I put my son on top of the mountain so everyone could see him in his resting place.

I was furious that my son died, and in revenge I killed mine and Fox’s daughters, except for the youngest, who escaped. My youngest daughter said that she would come back in a storm and scoop up the hateful old man and jump over the cute one. I was arrogant and said to Fox, “Hear what she says—she will come back to scoop you up and jump over me.” But I was wrong; I had become hateful from my vengeance, and when my daughter returned, she scooped me up and jumped over Fox, and I died.

After some time had passed, Fox grew lonely, and he performed a ritual to bring me back to life. Fox cared for me, and eventually we were able to roam the land together as we had before. Fox had forgiven me. This story teaches us something very important: vengeance can often be a double-edged sword and harm the vengeful as much, if not more, than the one seeking revenge. Instead of seeking vengeance, we should be like Fox: forgive, forgive, forgive.

This story, and many like it, form the basis for my people, the Niimíipuu’s history, laws, and guiding principles. Through niimíipuum titwáatit [the people’s stories], Niimíipuu children—my children—learn both about their culture and their language.

Niimíipuu: Learning Through Storytelling

If you have not heard of the Niimíipuu before, it is likely because you have only heard the name given to us by early settlers and French fur trappers: Nez Perce [pierced nose]. This name is a misnomer for a few reasons. Firstly, it is a misinterpretation of our Niimíipuu sign language for our people, which means “people emerging from the mountains in single file.” Secondly, the name Nez Perce conflates the Niimíipuu with other Native American tribes that lived nearby and would mingle with the Niimíipuu; those tribes did have pierced noses, and early colonizers didn’t bother to distinguish between the tribes and simply called them Nez Perce. Niimíipuu is a reclamation: it means “the people” and is our name for ourselves in nimipuutímt [the people’s language].

Unfortunately, an incorrect name is not the only mark left on the Niimíipuu from colonization. Like many other Native American tribes, colonization divorced the Niimíipuu from our language and culture. Niimíipuu culture relied heavily on oral storytelling, which would be done in communal spaces like the longhouse while in the presence of kinfolk. Gifted storytellers could command attention effortlessly as they shared tales of the ancestors, the animal people, and the lessons our stories pass on. Colonization shattered this lifestyle and things are very different now. Though some Niimíipuu are becoming teachers and making strides in reclaiming the language and stories that are integral to the Niimíipuu way of life, it is an ongoing struggle to capture the true spirit of these stories in the colonized institution of Western schooling.

Angel Sobotta is one of these teachers striving to revive the Niimíipuu language and the vibrant tradition of storytelling. Twenty-eight years ago, Angel joined to reclaim the Niimíipuu language with the Nez Perce Tribe's Nez Perce Language Program and last year she began teaching Niimíipuu language and stories at Washington State University, which resides on Niimíipuu ancestral lands. Angel wears many hats: not only does she write grants with WSU to help assist the community, but for the Nez Perce Language Program she also teaches elementary and middle school students the Niimíipuu language and stories through playful storytelling, studies the stories herself, and works with other members of the tribe to bring the language back to life, including such work as a play production of the Niimíipuu creation story, Tim'néepe [Heartplace, or Heart of the Monster].

Just as she now teaches the children, Angel herself had to learn the stories of the Niimíipuu, and that learning was an ongoing process. "I only knew pieces of the stories, not the depth of them," she shared with an interviewer, discussing how the distance colonization created between the Niimíipuu and Niimíipuu ancestral stories has made it difficult to form a full understanding of Niimíipuu history. "It's estimated we have about three hundred stories, but many were lost due to colonization. We also only have one or two elders left who speak the language, down from the six or seven we had when I started."

For the Niimíipuu, the land itself is the center of much of their history. Angel's dissertation focused on Storytelling and Land, and she shared that she recites story names and their teachings to herself as she travels around her tribe's ancestral lands: "The stories are like relatives. You have to visit them, and they wake up when you think about them. Saying their names keeps them alive, it reminds me who and what they are and honors them."

Because of this critical link between the land and the stories, Angel found it difficult to communicate the spirit of Niimiipuu stories to her students in Western-style schooling. The stories simply don't come across as well in the written word, according to Angel, and students' attention spans are shorter these days, but even more problematic is how stifled the stories become while in an environment established by and for colonizers.

Angel's method of teaching is more than just telling our stories to Niimíipuu children. In order to engage the students, Angel embodies Coyote in her teaching, leading the students to explore

nimipuutímt through play; in her own words, she is "playing the game of teaching and learning," treating storytelling as a form of play. The students play games to help them learn our nimipuutímt, acting out the stories and doing play exercises to help solidify their understanding of the vocabulary. However, to tell the stories of the Niimíipuu in Western-style schooling demands intense energy and dedication from the teacher, and denies students the ability to truly connect with the stories.

Angel's solution to this problem was simple and highly effective: she took the students on field trips out to the land. While there, students engaged with the places the stories took place through play, as did Angel herself, once more "playing the game of teaching and learning." Angel shared that this style of teaching was very well received by students, saying that the students "are different people when they get to have a classroom outside," that the students would have fun playing in the places the stories came from and getting to learn where those places were, instead of just reading or hearing about them.

Despite the success she's found, Angel did note some struggles with this setup. First, funding is limited for field trips, as the language program is considered part of the humanities, an often-underfunded subsect of education. Secondly, and more critically, even when these field trips do have funding, only a small percentage of Niimíipuu children are receiving the education and culture that can only be gleaned from visiting the land and hearing its stories firsthand. Niimíipuu are scattered all across the country and across the world, and it would be extremely difficult to bring everyone together to the Niimíipuu's ancestral lands. Angel quoted Vine Deloria Jr. saying that "education is not Indian education if it's not based on the land"—while modern technology can help fill some of the gaps for Niimíipuu located around the world, granting them access to videos and other digital archives of nimipuutímt, it is a poor substitute for being there in person. However, despite these struggles, Angel is hopeful for the program's future and determined to keep the nimipuutímt alive.

Now that you've heard mine and Angel's stories, it's your turn. How can you be like Coyote and discover new ways of learning through play? What stories can you tell?

References

Angel Sobotta in discussion with the author, April 2025.

Author Biography

Jessica Chapman holds a BA in English from Meredith College. Aside from her interest in copyediting, Jessica is also pursuing creative writing, largely exploring themes of identity and self through the lenses of fantasy and horror.

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