Anna Mongibello

Language Has Memory: Cre(e)ativity and Transformation in Louise Halfe's *Bear Bones and Feathers*

The indigenization of "the enemy's language"[1] in Louise Halfe's poetry may be exemplified by the video-performance by contemporary Cree and Métis artist from Canada Cheryl L'Hirondelle. *Mocikihtatan e-nehiyawiyak* is the Cree title of the performance presented for the first time at Western Front (Vancouver, British Columbia) in 2009. L'Hirondelle chooses not to translate the title in English, thus creating a distance between her work and the audience, but also suggesting the centrality of her first language in her performance. At the beginning, the performer is tied by a rope. Her body has been immobilized. Very slowly, almost imperceptibly, she starts to move, swinging as her voice breaks the silence of the white tent with an old song in Cree language. As the words grow into a warrior song, her voice gets stronger and she gains more freedom: suddenly, her struggle to resist immobility turns into a dance of shadows, with the smooth movements of her body following the rhythm of the drums. The violence of the rope is defeated through the intensity of her Cree voice. However, as soon as she frees herself, another rope begins to mortify her body. While fighting it, her resistance breaks the tent that finally collapses on itself.[2]

The ceremony of liberation that the performer enacts throughout the video-installation is deeply connected to her use of the Cree language; moreover it highlights the relationship between language and power, as well as between language and empowerment. The rope immobilizing the body symbolizes the biopolitical violence of linguistic imperialism that in Canada aimed at and partly succeeded in destroying Indigenous cultures such as the Cree and the Métis through several practices of cultural assimilation and control. The residential school system is a clear example of how the Canadian government attempted to detribalize and westernize Indigenous cultures throughout the country within institutes where "[the Indians] were expected to become like non-Natives – to serve

Fig. 1: Cheryl L'Hirondelle, *mocikihtatan e-nehiyawiyak*, 2009. Snapshot from *A Small Gathering for the Healing of Our Aboriginal Languages*, http://front.nfshost.com/gatheringlanguage, 13 September 2014. I have tried to contact copyright owner for the image. If I am in breach of any copyright, please contact me.

[1] Gloria Bird and Joy Harjo, eds., *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writings of North America* (New York: Norton, 1998).

[2] The whole performance can be seen online at http://vimeo.com/39231862, 13 July 2014.

as human resources for the developing of industrial Canada".[3] As Okanagan writer Jeannette Armstrong recalls:

> Many of our people were coerced and brutalized for speaking their language and practising their culture until their memory grew distant and dim.... There was a huge battle. There are newspaper accounts of this mini-war that happened in our community, right on our reserve. The traditional people who were not adherents of the Catholic Church just refused, said 'No, we're not letting our children be taken'.[4]

The writer is referring to the resistance opposed to the imposition of English as an alien language and culture in the Indigenous reservation of Penticton (British Columbia), where Okanagan children were 'deported' to Kamploops. In fact, "English language teaching was a crucial part of the colonial enterprise ... English has been a major language in which colonialism has been written".[5] As Robert Phillipson demonstrates in *Linguistic Imperialism*, in the areas subjected to the trauma of colonialism, linguistic imperialism has worked along with practices of conquest and control.[6] The imposition of English (or French, in the province of Quebec) has been counteracted by numerous struggles for the affirmation of the right to self-representation. Today, linguistic and cognitive imperialism is still present in schools and universities: "Under the subtle influence of cognitive imperialism, modern educational theory and practice have, in large part, destroyed and distorted the ways of life, histories, identities, cultures and languages of Aboriginal people".[7]

Nevertheless, the Canadian government actually failed to repress traditional people's voices, which turned into songs of freedom and livelihood. The voices of the subaltern re-appropriate the space of expression within the hegemonic discourses of power: the subaltern interrupts the rigidity of oppression through the counter-narrative of her body and her song of resistance. Hers is "a tongue of fire",[8] to use the evocative words by Chicano writer Gloria Anzaldùa, the linguistic nightmare resisting translation and setting fire to the linguistic hegemony of the English language. Anzaldùa's words, though coming from another place, could subtitle L'Hirondelle's performance: "I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue – my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence".[9]

In the last twenty years many Indigenous cultural associations have tried to revitalize Indigenous languages, recovering and strengthening them. The Native Canadian Centre of Toronto, for example, organizes free language classes and programs in Indigenous languages, also thanks to the contribution of the Elders that have offered their linguistic and cultural memory to the new generations.[10] Indigenous television and radio networks also play an important role: Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, for example, is the main radio broadcast in the province of Nunavut transmitting programs in Inuktitut; APTN, the Aboriginal People Television Network, is the only Canadian television network completely dedicated to and managed by Indigenous People, with a palimpsest that features 25% of its

[3] Celia Haig-Brown, *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1998), 11.

[4] Jeannette Armstrong, "Words", in Sky Lee, Lee Maracle *et al.*, eds., *Telling It: Women and Languages across Cultures* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1990), 24. Issues regarding language and power were discussed by Armstrong and other Indigenous writers from Canada during the 1988 conference *Telling It: Women Across Language and Cultures* held in Vancouver (British Columbia).

[5] Alastair Pennycook, *English and the Discourses of Colonialism* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 9.

[6] Robert Phillipson, *Linguistic Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

[7] Marie Battiste, *Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and Vision* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2000), 193.

[8] Gloria Anzaldùa, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue", in *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Spinsters, 1987), 54.

[9] Ibid.

[10] In this regard, I would like to recall the Cree scholar Freda Ahenakew, born in Ahtahkakoop (Saskatchewan) who is still considered one of the most important scholars of the Cree language. Her book, *Cree Language Structures: A Cree Approach* (Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 1987), has been the first attempt to study the grammar structures of this language. For years, she has also organized summer camps at Muskeg Lake (Saskatchewan) to reconnect the new generations to their linguistic origins.

shows in Indigenous languages.[11] The intent is to rebuild an intimate connection between its audience and the languages of the Grandmothers, i.e. the Indigenous languages that bear the memories of the ancestors.

Nonetheless, these attempts to reaffirm worldviews through traditional languages seem to ignore the mixing of codes, and the influence of linguistic contact in the zones where languages meet and transform each other. The languages of the Grandmothers have undergone the trauma of erasure. Going back, Iain Chambers would say, is an impossible journey.[12] The relation between languages and cultures, though, is not an authentic one, as Bill Ashcroft remarkably points out; thus, varieties of English can 'carry' Indigenous worldviews. These may be defined as the languages of transformation, created by Indigenous writers in the ongoing process of finding a voice and accommodating their worldviews. In this sense, the appropriation of English is not necessarily the loss of the languages of the Grandmothers, but the gain of new systems of communication, "grammars of appropriation"[13] disseminated with the traces of the languages of the Grandmothers that can convey the very idea of cultural identities in translation.

As the visual art of Cheryl L'Hirondelle, the poetry of the contemporary Cree poet from Alberta Louise Halfe, also known as Skydancer, may further the movement towards a language that can overcome the tradition of silence while retaining both the memory of the Grandmothers' languages and the trauma of colonization. Halfe was born in 1953 on the Indian reservation of Saddle Lake, Two Hills (Alberta), where the bones of her ancestors whisper the stories of the Cree nation: "The prairie is full of bones. The bones stand and sing and I feel the weight of them as they guide my fingers on this page".[14] I had the chance to take part in Louise Halfe's readings three times: each time she didn't wear shoes, her skin touching and becoming one thing with the porous surface of the floors, the streets, the earth. As she told me during an interview in Italy in May 2011, there is continuity between the land and the body, and she is in constant communication with her ancestors. In this way, the stories are passed on. The dialogue with her cultural memory involves her transformation of English. In Drew Hayden Taylor's collection, *Me Funny,*[15] Janice Acoose and Natasha Beeds define "cree-ativity" as the ability to transform and indigenize the enemy's language in order to adjust it to Cree semantic and cultural needs.[16] I believe that Halfe's cree-ativity is also a cree-ACTivity in that it underscores a specific agency meant to preserve "the Indigenous political system and identity"[17] and "to undo some of the damage that colonization has brought".[18]

The search for a language than can retell the cultural memory of the Cree nation is one of the main knots of Louise Halfe's first collection of poems, *Bear Bones and Feathers*, published in 1994.[19] In fact the book traces the poet's interpellation and creative transformation of English: code-switching, code-mixing and neologisms are the strategies that Halfe chooses to interpolate the English language and create a metonymic gap, that is "that cultural gap formed when appropriations of a colonial language insert unglossed words, phrases or passages from a first language, or concepts, allusions or references which may be unknown to the reader. Such words

[11] Data provided by the APTN survey, November 2004, available online at http://www.aptn.ca/corporate/PDFs/Aboriginal_Language_and_Broadcasting_2004.pdf, 19 October 2012.

[12] Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

[13] See Bill Ashcroft, "Grammars of Appropriation", in this issue.

[14] Louise B. Halfe, *Blue Marrow* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc, 1998), 2.

[15] Drew Hayden Taylor, *Me Funny* (Vancouver: Douglas e McIntyre, 2006).

[16] The expression also recalls the title of a collection of creative writings by Indigenous women edited by Bird and Harjo, *Reinventing the Enemy's Language.*

[17] Neal McLeod, *Cree Narrative Memory. From Treaties to Contemporary Times* (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing Limited, 2007), 21.

[18] Bird and Harjo, eds., *Reinventing the Enemy's Language*, 24.

[19] Louise B. Halfe, *Bear Bones and Feathers* (Regina: Cocteau Books, 1994)

become synecdochic of the writer's culture".[20] According to Susan Gingell, Halfe's code represents an example of "Creenglish", that is a variety of Canadian English used to register "Indigenous experiences on the page … catching the rhythms, textures, and vocabulary, the sound and spirit of how [Cree] people speak".[21] It must be pointed out, though, that the linguistic features of Indigenous varieties of English in Canada, such as Rez English, Creenglish and Michif English have still to be codified by official policies.

In her poems, Halfe uses Cree loanwords to represent such dimensions of Cree life as spiritual and kinship relations, but also food as part of the traditions she recalls in the very act of writing. Her lexical choices reveal that the most intimate and sacred aspects of life cannot be adequately represented in a language in which that life has been so often violated. In this sense, the poet's creative writing denotes a political project: the search for a linguistic code that can translate what Neal McLeod calls "Nehiyawiwin", a Cree word signifying "a lived memory which is held in stories and relationships", thus empowering such memory to speak.[22] The extensive use of Cree in these poems is also a signal of the primary audience to whom the poem is addressed. As Halfe herself explained: "I write for the survival of my children, my family, my community … I write to keep our stories, our truths, our language alive".[23] Nevertheless, she provides a Cree glossary so that, even if only belatedly, also non-Cree speaking readers can access her world.

In the poem that opens the collection, "Bone Lodge",[24] loanwords are used to signify the spiritual link between the *I* and the land:

> I sleep with *sihkos*
> In the fog she untangles
> my braids.
>
> I chant with robin
> the shawl dance of
> *iskwew*.
>
> I weave with spider
> the journey's *ahcahk*.
>
> I'm squirrel's mouth
> the first time of pleasure.
>
> I thunder *paskwaw-mostos*
> in ribbons of sage.
>
> I'm meat and bones,
> dust and straw,
> caterpillars and ants
> hummingbird and crow.
>
> Of these I know
> in the bones of the lodge.

[20] Bill Ashcroft, *Postcolonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001), 75.

[21] Susan Gingell, "Lips'Inking: Cree and Cree-Métis Authors' Writings of the Oral and What They Might Tell Educators", *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 32 (2010), 35.

[22] McLeod, *Cree Narrative Memory*, 37.

[23] Daniel David Moses and Terry Goldie, eds., *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English* (Toronto and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 396.

[24] Halfe, *Bear Bones*, 3.

The title of the poem, "Bone Lodge", expands the English lexicon according to the semantic constraint of the Cree language and culture. In fact, despite being a compound of two English words, 'bone' and 'lodge', the term describes a culturally specific place for healing, known and shared among Cree people. Indeed, traditionally, the bone lodge was a low, circular hut, with a structure made of buffalo bones, where ceremonies of spiritual and physical healing as well as initiation to spiritual life took place. 'Bone' is a recurrent keyword, also occurring in the title of the collection, *Bear Bones and Feathers*. The term itself is central: in fact, bones are metonymies indexing the *Nohkomak* (i.e. the Grandmothers of the Land according to the Cree worldview) and the cultural memory sustaining every ceremony of spiritual healing.

The foregnizing effect of the poem's title, "Bone Lodge", is sustained and deepened by the use of Cree loanwords, such as *Sihkos* ('weasel'), *iskwew* ('woman'), *ahcahk* ('soul and spirit'), and *paskwaw-mostos* ('buffalo'). These stand in a metonymical relation with the Cree worldview. *Sihkos*, for example, has a specific connotation for the Cree people; as one of the most ancient Cree stories recalls, the weasel defeated the Windego, a terrible monster, managing to sneak into his body. *Sihkos* is thus a symbol of resistance, but also signifies the practices of good medicine and initiation. As a matter of fact, the choice of using a Cree word for the weasel suggests the poet's attempt to recall the very story narrated by her *Nohkomak*. Another cultural reference to the animal world is provided by the word *paskawaw-mostos*, that does not simply correspond to the English 'buffalo'; instead, it implies a complex chain of connotations that link the buffalo to values such as survival, spirituality, strength and resistance. Both loanwords pertain to the semantic field of the animal world that in many Indigenous cultures is the main source for stories. In his afterword to to to the collection of stories *Keepers of the Animals*, Native Studies scholar Vine Deloira explains that the observation of the animals among North American Indigenous peoples is fundamental in the construction of the *Traditional Ecological Knowledge*:

> The technical skills of birds, animals and reptiles were such that Native North Americans could take cues from them for their own welfare. If birds consistently built nests out of certain materials, it meant that they recognized and adjusted to the fact of harsh or mild weather in a certain location. The building of beaver dams in certain parts of rivers gave information on the depth of water, its purity, the kinds of fish and other water creatures in the locale and the kinds of roots, berries and medicine roots that would be available at that place.[25]

[25] Quoted in Michael J. Caduto and Joseph Bruchac, *Keepers of the Animals: Native American Stories and Wildlife Activities for Children* (Golden: Fulcrum Publishing, 1997), 12.

Other references to the animal world occur in the poem, though not in Cree but in English: 'robin', 'spider', 'squirrel', 'caterpillars', 'ants', 'hummingbird', 'crow' all signal, at a semantic level, the colonizer's linguistic imperialism.

Ahcahk and *iskwew* belong to the semantic field of spirituality and kinship. *Ahcahk* registers the overlapping of two terms, soul and spirit, and indicates that, according to the Cree worldview, each person's soul intertwines with the

spirits of the *Nohkomak*. The word also functions as the linguistic evidence of the interconnectedness between individuality and collectivity, which informs Cree identity and self-determination. Actually, the tension between the individual and collectivity has been an imposed dichotomy within many Indigenous nations of North America. As a colonial creation, established through language and power, it has gradually displaced the Indigenous sense of community and collective self. This has not been just a consequence of the imposition of a non-Indigenous worldview, but a strategy purposely intended to divide and fracture larger Indigenous nations into smaller political units within reservations.[26]

Similarly, the occurrence of *iskwew* in the poem suggests the impossibility of using the English term 'woman' to refer to the women of the Cree nation. The word in Cree recalls the spiritual and social role that women traditionally have within the Cree nation; in fact, *iskwew* is the lexeme forming *iskwahtem*, meaning 'doorway', which symbolizes the role that women have as thresholds connecting worlds, memories and people.

The same word reoccurs in the verses of "Sister".[27] The poem features the transcription of an old song in Cree that alternates with English, and is central in the process of mourning and healing. In fact, the speaker describes the dead body of a Cree woman and invites her people to listen to the voices of the Grandmother to heal themselves. At the same time, the poem remarks the cancellation of Cree and the possibility of recovering the language through spiritual ceremonies and songs.

> In the morgue *e-pimisik*
> on a steel table
>
> Scarred face
> crushed.
> Work boots
> trampled her in.
>
> Her arm crooked
> limp by her side
> vagina raw, bleeding
> stuffed with a beer bottle
>
> *Pasikok, pasikok*
> *Pehtaw, pehtaw*
> *Kisimisinow pikiskwew*
>
> *Akosiwak ayisiyiniwak*
> *Piko matotsanihk ta pimatisiyahk*
> *Kipa kiwek*[28]
>
> Race with your spirits
> *Kakisimotak*, to heal, to heal.
>
> *Iskwew atoskewiw kimiyikonaw.*
> *Kakweyahok, kakweyahok*[29]

[26] Val Napoleon, "Aboriginal Self Determination: Individual Self and Collective Selves", *Atlantis*, 29.2 (2005).

[27] Halfe, *Bear Bones*, 93.

[28] "Get up, get up/ Listen, listen, as in hear, hear/ our younger sibling speaks/the people are sick/ We must go into the sweatlodge to be alive/ hurry home/ pray, implore".

[29] "A woman delegated work to us/ hurry, hurry".

Pasikok, pasikok
Pehtaw, pehtaw
Kisimsinow pikiskyew.

Akosiwak ayisiyiniwak
Piko matotsanihk ta pimatisiyahk
Kipa kiwek
Race with your spirits
Ta kakisimoyahk, to heal, to heal
Iskwew atoskewin kimiyikonaw
Kakweyahok, kakweyahol
Ahaw.

The poet chooses her first language to signify the female subject of the poem: *e-pimisik*, meaning 'she lays' suggests that the Cree identity of the woman resists in the active form of the verb *e-pimisik* even if her body is dead. The code-switching traces a contrast between the alienation caused by the imposition of English, that can only recount death, and the Cree language that symbolizes life and a sense of belonging to land and memory. The description of the bleeding, raped body recalls both the wounds inflicted on the Cree nation and, on a metapoetic level, the amputation of the ancestral tongue. The whole poem is built on the juxtaposition of the morgue as a place of death, and the Cree song as a source of life and healing. The Cree prayer explodes and occupies the remaing stanzas of the poem, marking the victory of cultural memory over erasure, the triumph of life over death. Cree sourrounds English, defying the linguistic boundaries between the two languages: enfolded by the language of memory, English is appropriated as another tool for healing. "Race with your spirits/ *Kakisimotak*, to heal, to heal" is the poet's invocation. The same line is partially repeated in the last stanza: "Race with your spirits/ *Ta kakisimoyahk*, to heal, to heal", highlighing the circular structure of the poem. *Ta kakisimoyahk* meaning 'let's all pray' conveys an invitation to make English a healing language rather than a language of violence and cancellation. Such transformation can only happen by means of the appropriation and the de-familiarization of the colonizer's language enacted through the encounter with Cree memory and lexicon.

In "Nohkom's Ice Cream and Syrup"[30] the English/Cree code-switching signals a shift from the poetic voice of the 'I' to the memory of her *Nohkom*'s voice:

She'd sit on her bed
a huge broody hen
rolling long slim cigarettes
grinning through smoke-stained teeth.

"*Nohkom*" I'd say, "Ice cream and syrup"
"*Haw, Kiskiman, asam picikiskis is*" she'd say.
And *Kiskiman*, my cousin, a minature *nohkom*,
would scuttle about, a cockroach
setting the table.
…

[30] Halfe, *Bear Bones*, 37.

"*Nohkom*, ice cream and syrup"
She'd crack the rabbit head open
hand me a spoon and I'd scoop and eat
the ice cream dish.

In a chipped stone saucer
she'd pour muskeg tea
stir in *amomey* and
I'd slop slabs of bannock in my syrup treat

Here, as in the previous poem, the words in Cree are used to convey kinship ties that find no immediate correspondence in English. The main and most recurrent example is *Nohkom*, a term that has already been mentioned in its plural form. As Halfe herself suggests, the closest translation of the term into English is 'grandmother'; nonetheless, *Nohkom* does not signify a scientifically accurate biological tie; on the contrary, being a culture-bound word, it outlines a cultural relationship based on memory and tradition. In fact, to many Indigenous cultures of Canada, identity as well as kinship do not only rest on some kind of blood ties, but on cultural links sustained through and enforced by memory. As Native Studies scholar Mark Rifkin notes:

> Kinship as an active principle of peoplehood … also reorienting it away from reproductive notions of transmitted biological substance or privatized homemaking. Instead it marks extended forms of "interdependence", which remain largely unintelligible within interlocking settler notions of politics and family.[31]

In this sense, *Nohkom* identifies both the elders biologically related to the speaker and the ancestors and the spirits of the ancestors who are as much connected to her as her biological relatives, filling the semantic gap left by the distance between English and Cree worldviews.

As the title of the poem suggests, food is a central topic. In fact, the 'I' is recalling a conversation with her *Nohkom* where she asked for "ice-cream and syrup". Nonetheless, the "ice-cream and syrup" she is going to get are those made by her *Nohkom*. Here the poet appropriates words from English and, through a semantic shift, informs them with meanings coming from Cree food culture and the 'I"s memory. In fact, *Nohkom*'s ice-cream version consists in rabbit brains the kid eats with a spoon, while the syrup is made of muskeg tea and *amomey*, which means 'honey', or, literally, 'bee shit'. As for *muskeg*, it is a loanword that underwent a phonetic variation from the Cree *maskek*, indicating the so-called Labrador tea plant used by the Cree people as a medicine plant, that has now entered the English vocabulary. In drawing food maps by means of the language of memory, the poet's intent may be twofold.[32] On the one hand, she recalls the ceremonies of food preparation as well as the very traditional food her nation used to eat in order to assert Indigenous food sovereignty as a reaction to the erasure of Cree cultural traditions, including food preparation; on the other hand, she uses the semantic field of food in a nostalgic discourse that structures her relation to the

[31] Mark Rifkin, *When Did Indians Become Straight? Kinship, the History of Sexuality, and Native Sovereignty* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 10.

[32] According to Linda Marte, food maps "are maps of relations; they are perceptual models of how people experience their boundaries of local home through food connections … the word foodmap could be assigned to any representational trace related to food, produced by a specific person: a plate of food, an actual map emphasising food connections, a food narrative". Linda Marte, "Foodmaps: Tracing Boundaries of 'Home' Through Food Relations", *Food and Foodways*, 15.3 (2008), 49.

past while also conveying a sense of group belonging. In fact, food is connected to the Traditional Ecological Knowledge, passed on from one generation to another, that Cree people share and use as medicine knowledge.

The Cree words used in the poems discussed so far suggest the poet's attempt to hybridize English with her cultural memory. In this light, indigenizing English with Cree culture and language is not just a project to resist linguistic imperialism, but also and more importantly an effort to create a space of enunciation where Cree cultural memory can be passed on.

In poems such as "In da name of da fadder"[33], "Der poop"[34] and "My ledders"[35] Halfe linguistic experiments are specifically meant to accommodate the memory of the trauma of colonization making English a hybrid and 'ungrammatical' language. The three poems are linked as a triptych that features not only shared contents but also similar linguistic choices. As for the themes, the poems creates a poetic epistolary addressed to the Pope, while the linguistic choices suggest that the violence and aberration carried by the religious beliefs imposed by Jesuits to detribalize Indigenous people can only be narrated in an undefinable, hybrid language. Such language is itself a wound on the body, the tangible evidence of a scar. At the same time, the deviations from the grammar and phonetic norms of Standard English represent an attempt to rebel against the hierarchical power of both the linguistic and religious heteronormativity imposed on the kids in the residential schools. From the linguistic point of view, the three poems mark a change in register and tone compared to the previous poems: in fact, the language presents colloquialisms and variations both at a phonetic and a morphosyntactic level. Such variations make the language different not only from Standard English, but also from the language used by the poet in the remaining part of the collection. In "In da name of da fadder", for example, the words, as the title itself suggests, have been transcribed following the oral pronunciation, thus unsettling and defaminiarizing one of the most recurrent formulas of the Christian Church, "in the name of the Father". The sentence, which, in the Christian religious tradition, marks the beginning and the end of every prayer, is repeated in the first line of each of the four stanzas composing the poem; the dental consonant /t/ is replaced by the the nasal sound /d/, as in "da" standing for 'the', "fadder" instead of 'father' and "dem" instead of 'them':

[33] Halfe, *Bear Bones*, 100.

[34] Ibid., 102.

[35] Ibid., 103.

> In **da** name of **da** fa**dd**er, **poop**
> on my knees I pray **geesuz**
> cuz I got mad at my husband for
> humpin' and makin too many babies
> I 'pologize cuz I mad and cried I
> didn't have no **bannock** and lard
> to feed **dem** cuz my husband
> drank all da soniyas for wine ….

The 'I' is addressing a prayer to the pope who, in Halfe's poetic variation, undergoes an ironic phonetic transformation in "poop". The same desacralizing intent is

evident in the spelling of 'Jesus' as "geezuz": in both cases, besides the phonetic alteration, the poet intentionally refuses to capitalize the religious names.

On a semantic level, two remarkable choices occurr in the first stanza: the code-switching to the Cree word *soniyas* and the use of *bannok*. The terms contribute to differenciating Halfe's language from other variations, pidgins and creole languages that, though presenting similar phonetic and morphosyntactic features, belong to geographic and cultural locations other than Cree. *Bannok*, for example, is an English loanword that signifies a typical Indigenous dish (a sort of fried bread). *Soniyas* means 'money' and recalls *moniyas* ('white man') that occurs twice in the last stanza:

> In da name of da fadder, poop
> I **dought** da geezuz kind but
> I is no good. I can't read **hen** write.
> I don't understand how come **moniyas** has
> clean **howse** and **lottsa** feed and he don't
> share it with me and my children.
> I don't understand why geesuz say I be
> poor, stay on welfare cuz **moniyas** say
> I good for **nuddin'** cuz I don't have
> wisdom. Forgive me poop I is
> big sinner.

Though appearing in two different stanzas, *soniyas* and *moniyas* seem to echo each other: therefore, the code-switching is used to create a connection between 'money' and 'white man'. This is a critique of capitalism imported by *moniyas* that becomes more evident in the last stanza where noun phrases such as "clean howse" and "lottsa feed", symbols of a rich lifestyle, are used in opposition to "poor" and "welfare". The intensity of the poet's accusation determines an increased 'ungrammaticality' in her language. As a matter of fact, in the last stanza, phonetic variations such as "dought" ('thought'), "howse" ('house') and "nuddin" ('nothing'), among the others, meet some morphosyntactic features mainly related to the lack of subject-verb agreement, the conjugation of verbs and the omission of the copula. "I is no good", in the third line of the last stanza, for example, presents an agreement asymmetry that reoccurs also in the last line "I is big sinner"; similarly, "he don't/ share it with me" features a lack of third person singular verbal agreement with regard to the negative form of the auxiliary 'do', while in "I good for nuddin" and "I dought da geezuz kind" an omission of the copula 'am' and 'was' can be noted.

In "Der poop" and "My ledders"[36] Halfe proposes similar phonetic and morphosyntactic variations that compete to create continuity in the three poems. It is worth noticing, though, the occurrence of some Cree words in the last verses of "Der poop":

> … i don't hask forgiveness not want
> hand many's, or a step ladder to heaven
> me is happy with da sky, da bird *Iyiniwak*,

[36] Ibid., 102 and 103.

four-legged *Iyiniwak*, i is happy
sorry mean dat i don't need yous church
and yous priest telling me what to do
sorry mean dat i free to dalk to *Manitou*
the spirits and plant *Iyiniwak*.

While the religious names related to the Christian Church are not capitalized (as also in "In da name of da fadder"), the two Cree words *Iyiniwak* and *Manitou*, meaning 'the People' and 'the Creator', are keyed in capital letters. The choice emphasises the opposition between Christian dogmas, meaningless to the poetic 'I', and the priciples of Cree culture, also exposing the dichotomy between an imposed religion and Cree spirituality transmitted from one generation to another, based on *isistawina*, the rituals performed during spiritual ceremonies recalled in the third stanza of "My ledders".

To conclude, the language of the Other is unsettled by the presence of the poet's first language; her Grandmother's language unfolds to contaminate, transform and hybridize English. The "languelait",[37] as Hélène Cixous would say, returns from the world of the spirits, from the silent limbo where it had been relegated to. The uncanny disturbs the linearity of the imposed language, and here memory finds its place. The creative transformation of English results in a language that is haunted by the poet's linguistic memory, while also allowing the journey of such memory from the oral to the written domain, by means of untranslated words and specific knowledge that pertain Cree traditions and worldview. The new language serves as a clear identity marker. It asserts the poet's will to own rather than be owned by language, and her attempt to build a "bone lodge" within the English language that can bear "bones and feathers".

[37] Hélène Cixous, *Entre l'écriture* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1986), 32.