



## Remembering Inninimowin: The Language of the Human Beings

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*Remembering Inninimowin*<sup>1</sup> is a documentary film project about my personal journey as an Inninu (Cree) woman to remember my first language, Inninimowin (Cree). Although my grandparents spoke Inninimowin to me when I was a young child, I lost the opportunity to use my language when I moved south to Ottawa. We were surrounded by Inninimowin (Cree), but my mother, a former residential-school student, chose not to speak it to me. In the film, I document more than two years of my process of remembering the language in both urban and rural environments. Inevitably, the process of remembering Inninimowin also means addressing the impacts of the residential-school system, which systematically severed the Inninuwak (Cree people) from their language. *Remembering Inninimowin* focuses on the Inninuwak who originate from the traditional territory of the Mushkegowuk in northern Ontario. My home community of Attawapiskat is considered central Cree, with approximately 4,500 speakers in the surrounding areas. The dialect is called Moose Cree, spoken at the southern tip of James Bay around Moosonee, in northern Ontario. The documentary captures stories of the Inninuwak from the Mushkegowuk and relates how the community expects to preserve its knowledge system, language, and traditional way of life in an ever-changing world.

The film presents an alternative perspective crucial to comprehending the history of Canada's shameful treatment of its Indigenous population and the horrendous consequences that communities have been left to deal with. *Remembering Inninimowin* not only acknowledges the breakage of our cultural

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<sup>1</sup> A copy of the film *Remembering Inninimowin* is available from Vtape, <http://www.vtape.org>. Some brief history about V tape: "Founded in 1980, V tape is an international distribution, exhibition and resource centre with an emphasis on the contemporary media arts. As a centre for over 900 artists ... V tape carries over 5,000 titles. V tape's in-office facilities include several study carrels for viewing and an extensive library of print materials available to the general public as well as to students, curators and researchers. In 1994, V tape began a working partnership with the Aboriginal Film & Video Art Alliance (Ontario) to encourage distribution of Aboriginally produced film and video publishing a second edition of the catalogue, *Imagine Native*, in 1998. Outreach workshops are regularly conducted throughout Ontario to increase awareness of Aboriginally produced media." Vtape, "History of Organization," <http://www.vtape.org/contact.htm>.

identities throughout colonial history but is concerned with the healing that needs to take place if we are to move forward. There has been a disruption in the sustaining of our cultural knowledge because our collective memory and identity was fragmented by tragedy. The film focuses on the importance of the Indigenous cultural practices, sacred stories, songs, and ceremonies and acknowledges the balance with the land that exists in the words of the Inninuwak. But my journey was not without problems. When discussion arose around the residential-school experience, some participants resisted sharing because they felt that they were going against the Church by speaking out. However, there seemed to be movement toward dialogue. All participants involved in the project said it was important to them to sustain their language and cultural practices. Combining personal and group experiences in the process of making *Remembering Inninimowin* allowed for a diverse exploration of emotions, values, and practices that included respect, protection, and the promotion of diversity. The film gave voice to both urban and rural Inninuwak stories, which are otherwise washed away by mainstream society. I sought people's opinions about and explanations of the experience of being severed from our language and decreased participation in Inninuwak cultural practices.

Although Inninimowin is considered the best-preserved Indigenous language in Canada, it is at risk of disappearing. Inninimowin carries the traditional knowledge, customary laws, identity, spirituality, and everything that is sacred to the Inninuwak; it embraces our ancient stories, our ceremonial practices, and the ancestral teachings originating from the Mushkegowuk area. Cree is also known to be a hunting and gathering culture, a culture on the move. For this reason, the language is diverse and complex, and is a means of transmitting knowledge carefully to the next generation. The Inninuwak knowledge system is distinct, directly linked to our home territory and reflecting its agriculture, astronomy, forestry, health, traditional medicines, and healing practices. Furthermore, it includes a cultural understanding of the ecological systems and how to make use of natural resources without devastating the balance of the environment. Yet in both rural and urban communities, fewer and fewer people are speaking Inninimowin. As a result, the knowledge that exists in the language is not being passed forward. Not only does the English language dominate in our communities, we are still dealing with the horrific effects of systemic racism that continue to plague our lives on so many levels—emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual. The reserve system, the Indian Act, and the residential-school experience play major roles in our experience of being severed from our Indigenous languages and cultural practices. Before colonization and the assault of residential schools, the Inninuwak life and ethos abounded with respect for ceremony, family, community, and the land. Now we find ourselves in a state of fragmentation, trying to put the pieces back together. *Remembering Inninimowin*, as an indigenized form of media, sheds light on these issues and is itself an example of new approaches and cultural representation, an alternative to the Westernized practices whereby, for the most part, our stories are told from outside the community. The film is also a means of

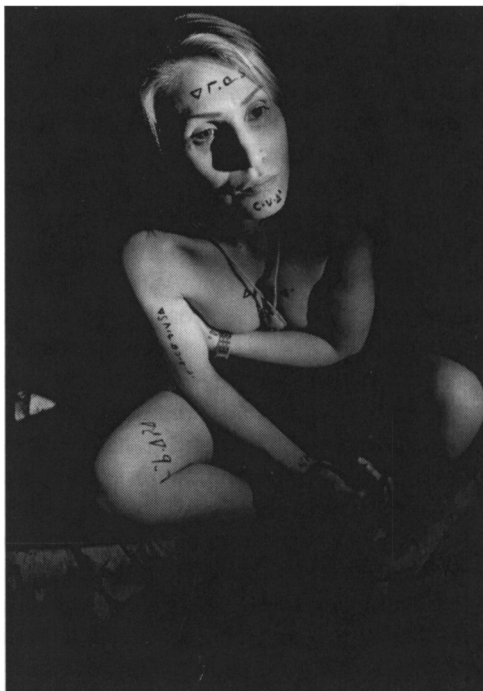
storytelling, an oral and visual record of how we as Indigenous people can use media to sustain and preserve sacred ways and languages, as well as how we can use media to inform and create social change. During the pre- and post-production stages of the film, special attention was paid to ensuring that the participants in the film had the opportunity to speak without interruption, as they would in a more traditional setting, although of course during the editing process more relevant points pertaining to language preservation were kept for the final cut. Not only is *Remembering Inninimowin* produced and directed by an Indigenous person, focusing on Indigenous subject matter, it also speaks to identifying a political struggle from an Indigenous perspective and how to work toward cultural sovereignty. Accordingly, the film speaks to the importance of Indigenous self-representation in media and the importance of regaining control over misrepresented images.

The filming of my journey of remembering began in the winter of 2008. At the conception of *Remembering Inninimowin*, my original goal was to document my first conversation in the language with my grandmother, Zabeth. She passed away suddenly before this could happen. As a result, the documentary film begins with the loss of Zabeth, and with the family preparing to go to Attawapiskat First Nation for the funeral service. We are introduced to my family as they deal with their devastation at the loss of Zabeth. In particular, the documentary shows my own realization that I had lost any opportunity to finally address my grandmother in Inninimowin and, in turn, to hear her stories. After a few months, I changed my focus to my mother, hoping to reconnect with her emotionally and spiritually and, more importantly, to resolve the growing strain on our relationship. But before this process could occur, I had first to begin Inninimowin lessons at the Native Canadian Centre in Toronto. After a few months in class, and on a part-time basis, I was surprised how quickly I picked up the basics of Inninimowin. Although I had been exposed to fluent speakers all my young and adult life, I could never grasp the language. My instructor, Christopher Hunter, an Inninu from Winisk First Nation, taught Inninimowin with a new and unique approach, providing a homelike, safe, and enriching environment in which his students could learn and develop basic language skills efficiently and within a short time. Christopher used repetition, syllabics (the Cree writing system), and song, and even allowed entire families to attend his classes (a practice that has been frowned on in other types of Cree Language classes I have attended over the years). After successfully completing the first level of Inninimowin lessons, I went on a quest up to the Mushkegowuk territory in the summer of 2009, in hopes of exploring why the language was not being used as it had been in the past.

Since the completion of *Remembering Inninimowin*, many viewers and supporters of the film have told me that it carries a personal significance for them; many have also said they could relate to the story of loss and reclamation. Others have commented that because the story is told from within an Indigenous community, and by a woman, the film allowed them to be part of the distinctive story and to relate to the unique personalities featured. In



**Photo 1** A family photo taken in Moosonee, Ontario, in late 1970s shows me (second from right) with my brother, Frank Galipeau, and my grandparents, Abraham and Elizabeth Paulmartin



**Photo 2** “Survival” (promotional image for *Remembering Inninimowin*), 2009 (photo: Summer Garcia)

particular, I shared my experience of living both with my traditional Inninu grandmother, who was untouched by the residential-school experience, and with my mother, who continues to struggle to live with the trauma of her childhood in a residential school. The film addresses what it is like to live in between both worlds, giving insight into the intergenerational effects of the residential-school experience. In response to these intergenerational effects, I wanted to honour the local knowledge intrinsic to Inninuwak communities and to preserve the personal stories of many of our Inninuwak Elders and community members for future generations to explore.

Ultimately, *Remembering Inninimowin* is not only about remembering a language but also about tackling the psychological barriers associated with the original reasons for language loss. This chiefly became evident when I spoke to my mother for the first time in Inninimowin and recorded the conversation. An unexpected and intimate moment was miraculously captured after I addressed my mother in Inninimowin for the first time. I spoke to her of my personal experiences of being the daughter of a survivor; my mother remained silent. But just as the cameras were being turned off, she started to respond, and she responded in Inninimowin. This was the first time in my life that my mother had ever looked me in the eyes and spoken to me in the language. Although I couldn't fully understand her words, the emotional communication between us was quite clear: all was forgiven. It is this moment in the film that seems to have had the most impact on viewers, possibly because it demonstrates the power of healing through words, and how much this healing is needed within our Indigenous families and communities. In retrospect, it is apparent to me that the sacred circle, our spiritual wholeness, was damaged a long time ago; but this doesn't mean that we can't mend the hurt and work toward reconciliation within our families and communities. We still have a strong foundation; we are just in a state of guaranteeing that our truth can be spoken freely and in its entirety, and heard by one another.

The language and culture has had a detrimental impact on Indigenous people across the country and around the world, and this is demonstrated by the responses of viewers when *Remembering Inninimowin* was screened in places such as Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. Since the film's release, I have seen that media can start a wave of positive universal change: they can be used as a tool to break down racial barriers, to open up much-needed dialogue, and to challenge existing general viewpoints and damaging stereotypes about Indigenous people. As I travel with the film, I see that many communities are suffering from the same types of loss and struggle; it is a shared Indigenous problem. I have received requests to screen the film in classrooms, home communities, and other events; people hope that they too can confront the aftermath of the evils of oppression and systemic racism.

There was more involved in my journey than just remembering the language; it also included the full and active participation of both urban and rural Inninuwak communities. Making the film involved understanding

how to support and respect the rules, distinct cultural values, and behaviours of both Inninuwak worlds. From the start, it was crucial to communicate the story from an Indigenous perspective. Because our Inninuwak oral narration was traditionally a portable art form, using film to capture the stories in *Remembering Inninimowin* has been a successful approach to creating an Indigenous archive to ensure that our stories cross international borders and are passed on to future generations. Documenting my personal journey allowed a safe environment for an authentic voice to be heard, blending the voices of a shared experience between fluent speakers and non-speakers hoping to be invited back into the circle of Inninimowin speakers. Sadly, many do relate to the story told in *Remembering Inninimowin* and have had similar experiences. But through discussing and naming the problems at hand, healing can begin. It's through opening the door of communication that people can begin the important conversations that have been silenced for too long.

#### **Abstract**

*Remembering Inninimowin* is a two-year-long documentary film project on the personal journey of a Cree woman, Jules Koostachin, a member of Attawapiskat First Nation, as she starts to remember her first language, Inninimowin (Cree).

**Keywords:** Indian Residential Schools, intergenerational effects, media, Indigenous language and culture

#### **Résumé**

Le film documentaire *Remembering Inninimowin* suit pendant deux ans le voyage personnel d'une femme Cris, Jules Koostachin, membre de la Première Nation d'Attawapiskat, lorsqu'elle commence de se souvenir de sa langue maternelle, l'Inninimowin (Cris).

**Mots clés :** pensionnats indiens, effets intergénérationnels, média, langue et culture autochtones

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