

Daphne Odjig's Nanabush Series: Reclaiming Culture Through Children's Literature

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“Deeper meaning resides in the fairy tales told to me in my childhood than in the truth that is taught by life.”(*The Piccolomini*, III, 4.)

Prior to the 1960s the literature available to Canadian children was based largely on religious values. This fact is clearly evidenced by viewing some of the stories available in the magazine entitled *Northern Messenger* published in Canada during the 1900s.[1] This literature along with familiar folk fairy tales passed down through generations such as *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Hansel and Gretel* all share the commonality of an underlying moral lesson. What they also share is they are all geared towards white children and a good portion of them present to young readers the image of the Aboriginal in a white construction of Aboriginal life that is far removed from actual reality.

In 1971 artist Daphne Odjig set out to rectify this issue within her *Nanabush* series. This dissertation will illustrate how Odjig uses the Ojibwa cultural hero and trickster, Nanabush, to both revive Ojibwa culture and teach Ojibwa children about what it is like to grow up Ojibwa by presenting them with a character they can identify with.[2]

Prior to 1960, none of the literature available for children was geared towards or available to Aboriginal children. The literature often contained Aboriginal figures as the central characters, most commonly to illustrate how *not* to con-

duct oneself while propagating common stereotypes of Aboriginal people and their culture.

An example of how aboriginal people were used to illustrate negative values is presented in the book by Katherine A. Young entitled *Stories of the Maple Land Tales of the Early Days of Canada for Children* (1898). In this book the author proceeds to tell the history of Canada using a Maple and Chestnut tree as the main narrators of the story. While the story discusses aspects of colonization, it also depicts Aboriginal people who resisted the Christian missionaries and repression of cultural customs as wicked and savage, wanting to do nothing more than inflict death and harm to the 'holy' and 'pleasant' missionaries.[3] Aboriginal characters are also listed as being uncouth as well as dirty, and possibly the most disheartening aspect is that the term *squaw* is used to refer to female Aboriginal characters. The term *squaw* is *extremely* offensive and derogatory to any Aboriginal woman due to the fact that the meaning of the word implies the individual is sexually available to any man, lazy, uneducated and worthless. Literature such as this was widely available and has helped to propagate stereotypes of Aboriginal people that are still present in contemporary society. The most disturbing aspect of such literature is that it is very harmful to the self-esteem of Aboriginal children whom internalize these stereotypes that contribute to as well as harm the development of their own self-identity.

Child psychologist Dr. Bruno Bettelheim discusses the importance of fairy tales and literature for children in his book entitled *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976), in which he states that in order for children to have the ability to achieve healthy development they require an outlet that provides meaning not only to the child's existence, but to life in general. For Bettelheim "nothing is more important than the impact of parents and the others who take care of the child; second in importance is cultural heritage, when transmitted to the child in the right manner. When children are young it is literature that carries such information best." [4] This statement quite rightly addresses the importance that literature has on children and can continue to have throughout their lives. Literature is important for children because it allows them to access their imagination, to have something with which to structure their daydreams and to cultivate their future aspirations leading into adulthood.

Bettelheim also brings up the good vs. evil dichotomy that is ever-present within fairy tales. He explains that children often identify with the protagonist with-

in literature, not necessarily because the protagonist or hero is good, but because of the character's positive appeal to the child.[5] The important internal question that arises within this character identification is: who do I want to be like? Bettelheim believes that literature "represents in imaginative form what the process of healthy human development consists of." [6] By examining this statement, it is easy to discern that if a child does not have sufficient literature depicting a character of their own culture they can relate to, it will cause a dilemma. This dilemma is harmful especially when taking into account the amount of misinformed and stereotypical Aboriginal imagery that exists in mainstream society. These images can be found readily in brand names, logos of popular sports teams, Walt Disney movies, and household products such as butter; a large proportion of these images represent Aboriginal people as cartoons.[7] Young children's self-images are influenced by literature, media, and especially toys.[8] When young Aboriginal children are treated as lesser human beings they will believe they are inferior.[9]

In 1970 Ojibwa artist Daphne Odjig, with gentle persuasion by her sister-in-law Rosemary Fisher, made a move to correct the dilemma of the lack of literature geared towards Aboriginal children. Odjig recognized the need for children's literature geared towards Aboriginal youth, which not only provides a means for self-identification, but a tool for cultural revival as well. Odjig is a renowned storyteller amongst the people of her reserve, and although the artist had rendered previous art works containing the figure of Nanabush, it was only in 1971 that Odjig released a series of ten books documenting the adventures of Nanabush.[10]

Nanabush is not only the central character in these series of books, but in the Ojibwa culture as a whole. Nanabush is one of several powerful beings that exist within this culture. All of these powerful beings are believed to belong to the spirit world and are referred to as *manitos*. Nanabush is a rather important manito, as he holds the position of creator of the present world, securer of the right for Ojibwa people to hunt, and institutor of the cultural elements that facilitated the formation of Ojibwa identity.[11] Nanabush is also commonly referred to as Nanabozho, and is known to be able to morph into many different forms. This ability has gained him a reputation as a trickster, the flip side of the cultural hero.[12] There are many variations upon examining the myth of Nanabush that surface in the telling of his origins; tales of his great feats as well his family dynamics. Dr. Christopher Vecsey, a scholar of Native American religions,

points out that these variations are due to years of assimilation throughout which pieces were added to or taken from the telling of this oral tradition; in some cases there is a missing link between generations, leading to loss of knowledge of the complete story of Nanabush.[13]

Taking this discrepancy into account, and upon analysis of the available sources on Nanabush, there are a few commonalities within the tales of Nanabush. He was immaculately conceived by a mortal woman, when she faced the wrong wind after being warned by her mother not to face in such direction. She died during childbirth, after which Nanabush was taken in and raised by his Grandmother, Nokomis. Other common threads present are Nanabush's role as securer of the right for Ojibwa people to hunt, his creation of the second world after the first flooded, and his pilfering of fire to give to his Grandmother which in turn gave fire to the Ojibwa people.[14]

The telling of the story of Nanabush within the tradition of Ojibwa culture was a means to explain and secure Ojibwa identity. Upon colonization, however, these oral traditions took on a whole new meaning. This is evident in the case of Reverend John Ingham Hindley who documented the tales of Nanabush in 1885, declaring his self-proclaimed authority to do so, granted by the fact that his information was taken from his experience within missionaries in direct contact with the 'Indians', not a book source.[15]

Indian Legends: Nanabush, the Ojibbewa Saviour was written by the Reverend as a means to 'document' Ojibwa oral traditions. This becomes very problematic because it was written in Old English, save for a few Ojibwa words thrown in for good measure, possibly as a way to show authenticity. The words left in Ojibwa are marked with an asterix and at the end of each page translated to English, another problematic aspect due to the questionable authenticity of the translations, and possible errors that may be present within the translations. While the purpose of this text is presented by the Reverend as a good intentioned attempt to preserve a dying culture, it is written and translated by a reverend of the Catholic religion, not an Ojibwa individual. This begs the question: whom is this reverend documenting for? Is he documenting for the Ojibwa people? Or is he documenting in an ethnographic way? This key aspect demonstrates how Odjig's mission to retell the tales of Nanabush is diametrically opposed to the Reverend: she is salvaging a culture that is still alive and exists in contemporary society by educating a new generation, while the Reverend is providing docu-

mentation and record of a race that was expected to reach extinction due to natural selection and the Christian missionary process.

In her Nanabush series, Odjig presents this cultural hero as a young boy, and documents his adventures growing up in an Ojibwa culture. While Nanabush is presented in a mischievous way typically associated with young boys and girls, there are always deeper moral lessons within these stories. These morals are pivotal values to Ojibwa culture and include concepts like: sharing and the problems associated with being greedy, respect for elders and the importance of not being idle. These stories also depict Nanabush as a good hunter, a brave hero, and a compassionate soul. All of these aspects may be observed in Odjig's series.

In *Nanabush and the Dancing Ducks*, the lesson of why not to be greedy is taught when Nanabush decides he is hungry. Instead of hunting one or two ducks to satiate his hunger the manito tricks twelve ducks into taking part in dancing within a fire, though before eating he decides to nap. Nanabush awakes to discover that while he was sleeping March whirlwind, in an attempt to teach a lesson, stole the roasting ducks, leaving behind burnt legs in their place. Through this experience Nanabush realizes that he was being greedy and two ducks would have been sufficient for him to feast on. This book illustrates values of both respect for nature within hunting practices and the downfall of greed, aspects that are part of Ojibwa life.

A warning of what happens to those who are idle and would rather play than do chores and help out is given in *Nanabush Loses his Eyeballs*. The manito, after waking from his nap, decides he would like to have fun and play Travelling amongst his friends squirrel and beaver he discovers they are busy with chores, but he does not stop to help. He instead carries on, happening upon a group of ducks playing a game of catch with their eyeballs. Nanabush is granted permission to join in after he has promised to play by the rules of the game. He does not abide and throws his eyeballs too high, losing them in the process. He is eventually fashioned a new set of eyeballs by a spruce tree out of the gum of the tree, though what this story brings to the readers is the lesson of both taking the time to help with chores and the warning that if you do not follow the rules, you just might lose your eyeballs, or worse.

While the above mentioned books incorporate warnings of straying from the

moral path, the book *Nanabush and the Mandomin* presents Ojibwa children with a brave and compassionate hero that they can identify with. In this adventure, Nanabush, after speaking with his grandmother Nokomis, sets out to meet a brave warrior named Mandomin that his grandmother foresaw in a vision. The purpose of his quest was to help his people in a great way. In order to fulfill this task, Nanabush must wrestle with the great warrior spirit for three days.

Nanabush finally defeats Mandomin, after which Mandomin instructs Nanabush not to allow weeds to grow on his grave. Nanabush tends the grave and after a few days a wondrous plant began to grow which would come to be known as sweet corn, a substance to feed the Ojibwa people. This tale is important because it allows the Ojibwa child to imagine themselves as Nanabush, a very brave character that stands in the face of adversity in order to help save his people from the realistic plight of starvation that faced Ojibwa nations. This series of books allows the Ojibwa child to become by relation a character of importance and bravery; a character to strive to be like, as opposed to earlier literature for children that showcase the Aboriginal child in a white construction of Aboriginal life that is far removed from actual reality. This attribute enhances the importance of this book series.

Each book within the series has an introduction on the inside cover written by the artist and author addressing her viewers. The underlying and important message that is most striking within this address is the last sentence in which Odjig states: "I hope that besides being of entertainment value, the moral truths that were so important to Indians will continue to exist in years to come." [16] Within this statement it is easy to discern the importance of reviving and preserving the Ojibwa culture both to Odjig and the community as a whole.

Along with her personal address inside each book in the series, Odjig also signs every page containing an illustration. This signature serves as a message of how involved in the project and how important these books are to the author and artist. Odjig uses very few colors within her illustrations, which at first suggests possible budget constraints put on the project, rather than by choice of the artist. Upon closer examination, however, it appears as though the color choice and rendering of illustrations within these books was a conscious move on the part of the artist.

Odjig discusses and characterizes the traits commonly associated with Ojibwa

art in her book entitled *A Paintbrush in my Hand* (1992). She touches upon how contemporary Ojibwa art has evolved from earlier forms of rock art and birch bark scrolls.[17] This particular style of art consists of strong contour lines of even width outlining organic forms that float on a monochrome field with little relation to the frame found in earlier renderings of birch bark scrolls. The colors included a black outline accented with burnt sienna.[18] An interesting characteristic of the illustrations in Odjig's Nanabush series is that they recall the images of birch bark scrolls which are used in Ojibwa tradition even today as a means to document traditions and pass histories on to newer generations. Birch bark scrolls are pieces of birch bark that are engraved using a type of stylus tool with pictographs representing trade routes, oral traditions and migration routes (see endnotes).[19] The discernible similarities between Odjig's illustrations and the illustrations depicted on birch bark scrolls are: the darker outline of the figures, the figural outline on the inner area of the figure, and the simplistic shapes of the figures and animals depicted. These similarities can be viewed in an illustration of Nanabush taken from the book entitled *Nanabush and the Rosebushes* (1971).[20]

When comparing the two-color figures of Odjig's Nanabush series with the vibrant illustrations of Nanabush in her drawings outside of the books, this conscious decision is made evident. Examples of Odjig's earlier works that depict Nanabush are her 1967 pastel rendering entitled: *Nanabush and His Friends*, [21] as well as her undated acrylic on paper featuring *The Chipmunk's Reward*. [22] Both of these works include the figure of Nanabush and both are shown in vibrant color, a stark contrast in comparison to the same figure represented within her book series. The difference in color and rendering between Odjig's earlier images of Nanabush and the image of Nanabush included in her book series shows a discernible progression in the development of the main character. The inclusion of the thick black outlines of the organic shapes of both Nanabush and the other characters and animals presented within these books, along with the choice of one other color, recall the traditional forms of Ojibwa rock art and birch bark scrolls that have been studied by Odjig. Possibly one of the most appropriate examples that illustrate this similarity within the Nanabush illustrations and ancient birch bark drawings is the traditional use of burnt sienna incorporated by Odjig in *Nanabush loses his Eyeballs*. [23]

Odjig often uses black outlines in her works. While the black outline exists in many of the works in Odjig's oeuvre, when comparing her book illustrations

with works such as her 1988 silk screen print entitled: *In Tune with the Infinite*, [24] there are discernible differences. These dissimilarities are apparent in the choice of color and the softer, thinner, contours. This comparison serves as evidence that there is an apparent conscious effort on the artist's part to fashion her renderings of Nanabush in the pictograph style of the birch bark scrolls; this further strengthens a connection between the character illustrations and Ojibwa culture. The choice to illustrate these books in such a way combines the tradition of older forms of Ojibwa art with innovation, which in turn helps to meld the character of Nanabush as these cultural stories change and develop over time.

Upon examining Daphne Odjig's *Nanabush* series it becomes evident how important these books are to the preservation of Ojibwa culture, the development of Ojibwa children's self-identity and self-esteem, and the teaching of morals and values to Ojibwa children. With her series, Odjig is revitalizing the tradition of storytelling that is crucial to the Ojibwa way of learning by reiterating oral traditions that have become fragmented throughout the years. Odjig's use of birch bark inspired illustrations relate back to preservation of culture, while her rendering of the main character Nanabush as a young boy experiencing life as an Ojibwa child allow her young readers to engage in character identification. All of these elements work cohesively to successfully meet the goals of the author and artist in ensuring that these tales will exist for many years to come. Much like birch bark scrolls, these books can be passed down from generation to generation. Odjig has given cultural revival not only within her own series of books but in paving the way for many other Aboriginal authors to create their own literature for Aboriginal children. By leading the forefront in Aboriginal children's literature, Odjig has sent the message that Aboriginal culture is alive and thriving — it has not died off or been assimilated entirely.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig. 1. Daphne Odjig, "In Tune with the Infinite", 2004, 20"x16", silk screen print. Image copyright Daphne Odjig and courtesy Hambleton Galleries

Fig. 2. Daphne Odjig, "Nanabush and His Friends", 1967, 18.5"x23.5", pastel Image copyright Daphne Odjig and courtesy Hambleton Galleries

Fig. 3. Daphne Odjig, Illustration from page 14 of the book "Nanabush Loses His Eyeballs", 1971, book illustration print Image copyright Daphne Odjig and courtesy Stan Somerville

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Endnotes

[1] Evidence of this can be viewed via Early Canadiana Online Database at: <<http://0-www.canadiana.org.mercury.concordia.ca/ECO>>. One such example can be viewed in the story published within Northern Messenger Vol. 33, number 11 from March 18, 1898 entitled: *Swapping Feet and Eyes*. In this story, a boy who lost his feet when a train ran over them decides he will help an old man — who recently lost his eyes — to see again. Because of the boy's unselfish partnership, the old man decided to leave his house and half the earnings of his hennery to the boy and his single mother. The boy attributes his good fortune to following the golden rule, which states: Do unto others as you wish done unto you. He also states that God has in fact bestowed this house on him and his mother because he followed this commandment.

[2] The character of Nanabush may take on either the role of Cultural hero or the role of a trickster, depending on which tale is being told. On the side of the cultural hero, Nanabush accomplishes feats that help the Ojibwa people such as in *Nanabush and the Mandomin*, in which he secures the growth of corn to feed the Ojibwa people. In his role as trickster he often tricks other *manitos* or sometimes animals into doing his bidding, such as in the case of *Nanabush and the Dancing Ducks*, in which Nanabush tricks the ducks he intends to eat into dancing within an open fire. Often within the stories in which Nanabush is portrayed as a trickster an underlying moral is present; for example, not to be greedy and respect the animals which you hunt for your meals.

[3] Reference taken from page 49-53 of *Stories of the Maple Land Tales of the Early Days of Canada for Children* by: Katherine A. Young.

[4] Quote taken from page 4 paragraph 2 in book by Bruno Bettelheim entitled: The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales.

[5] Page 10, in book by Bruno Bettelheim entitled: The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales.

[6] Quote taken from page 12 Paragraph 1 of book by Bruno Bettelheim entitled: The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales.

[7] Common examples in sports teams can be viewed with the Atlanta Braves and the Cleveland Indians. Walt Disney movies such as Pocahontas incorporate lyrics within the movie soundtrack that include the use of words such as ‘savages’, ‘heathens’, ‘disgusting filthy race’(Needs citation). In common household products Land o Lakes butter shows an image of a cartoon Indian Princess on the cover of the box in which the figure is topless holding a bar of butter, images like this are especially troubling because they link Aboriginal women with sexual availability while being marketed to households nationwide.

[8] Reference taken from pages 5-6 in *The Pocahontas Paradox: A Cautionary Tale for Educators.*” Published in the *Journal of Navajo Education* vol. 14 (Fall, Winter 1996-97): 20-2. Within this article Dr. Cornel Pewewardy discusses the negative effect of Disney’s Pocahontas on Aboriginal children and self esteem.

[9] Reference taken from pages 5-6 in *The Pocahontas Paradox: A Cautionary*

Tale for Educators.” Published in the *Journal of Navajo Education* vol. 14 (Fall, Winter 1996-97): 20-2.

[10] Within chapter 7 in her book entitled: *A Paintbrush in my Hand*, Odjig discusses how gaining the right for Aboriginal people to vote in 1960 opened up a whole slew of opportunities for Aboriginal communities to use their voice as well as reclaim old traditions that had been previously suppressed through Government Law. Upon visiting her home reservation Wikwemikong, Odjig was overjoyed with the public demonstrations of powwow dancing and the talk about rights and identities of Aboriginal people. Wanting to contribute to this revival she decided to write and illustrate the Nanabush series.

[11] Page 78, Paragraph one, in book by Christopher Vecsey entitled: Traditional Ojibwa Religion and It's Historical Changes. This book is very informative because it traces Ojibwa culture from conception to contemporary society, documenting the changes that have occurred. It must also be noted, however, that Dr. Vecsey is a white male writer, not of Ojibwa descent. This can be problematic, though he appears to present an unbiased, straightforward and thorough examination of Ojibwa culture; a culture that is still in the process of reclaiming old traditions and culture.

[12] Due to the fact that in the series of books I am examining Daphne Odjig refers to Nanabozho/Nanabush as the latter, I will use Nanabush throughout the dissertation when referring to the *manito*, unless reference is made to another scholar whom uses the term: Nanabozho.

[13] Page 98-100 in book by Christopher Vecsey entitled: Traditional Ojibwa Religion and It's Historical Changes. Dr. Vecsey explains how though the myth of Nanabush still exists in some Ojibwa regions, no contemporary storytellers are known of that are able to recite the complete story of Nanabush. He also touches upon the fact that older oral traditions are more fragmentary and there is ever-present fear among the Ojibwa elders within these communities that the younger generation is turning away from what traditions are left.

[14] These (varied or various?) tales within the Nanabush saga were observed throughout the book by Christopher Vecsey entitled: Traditional Ojibwa Religion and its Historical Changes, Daphne Odjig's children series on Nanabush, and a documentation written by Reverend John Ingham Hindley entitled: Indi-

an Legends Nanabush / The Ojibbeway Saviour. There are various other stories involving Nanabush, but elements tend to change from storyteller to storyteller. Most interesting is that Daphne Odjig appears to be the only documented account that was found of an Ojibwa individual telling the tales of Nanabush without the involvement of a white ethnographer or religious individual associated with the church.

[15] Page 5, Introduction in the documentation by Reverend John Ingham Hindley entitled: Indian Legends Nanabush / The Ojibbeway Saviour. It is worth pointing out that while Reverend Hindley points out that his writings were taken from his experience with Ojibwa peoples, he does not give any credit or mention his sources of this knowledge or any Ojibwa individuals but instead gives his indebtedness to John L. Lister whom “laboured for years among the Ojibbewas” (Hindley, Pg. 5, Para, 2)

[16] Inside front cover of book entitled Nanabush and Mandomin by Daphne Odjig.

[17] Reference taken from page 59 of Daphne Odjig’s book entitled A Paintbrush in my Hand.

[18] Page 59 of book by Daphne Odjig entitled A Paintbrush in my Hand.

[19] For image visit website <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic-art/665630/100837/Detail-of-Ojibwa-birch-bark-scroll-showing-ceremonial-dance-in>>. Information on the birch bark scrolls can be found in the journal article by Kenneth E. Kidd entitled: “Birch-Bark Scrolls in Archaeological Context” *American Antiquity*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Apr., 1965), pp. 480-483. Published by: Society for American Archaeology. <<http://0-www.jstor.org/mercury.concordia.ca:80/stable/277950>>.