

Reinscribing the Landscape: Bilingual Signage and Revitalization of the Ojibwe Language

Language is inextricably linked to notions of culture, identity, and tradition.

Such is the case for Ojibwe, a tongue spoken by the Ojibwe tribe in the Great Lakes region straddling the US-Canada border. Sadly, one language dies roughly every fourteen days, many of them being indigenous languages like Ojibwe (1). With fewer than a thousand fluent speakers estimated to be left in the United States in 2012 (2), various groups have recently undertaken initiatives to not only ensure the preservation of the language but to increase its use and public visibility well into the twenty-first century.

‘Counter-Mapping’

In the words of the late geographer Bernard Nietschmann “More indigenous territory has been claimed by maps than guns. This assertion has its corollary: more indigenous territory can be defended and reclaimed by maps than by guns”(3). A map is an incredibly powerful tools that simply illustrates one representation of the world. The Decolonial Atlas, a project started by cartographer Jordan Engel in 2013, is a compendium of maps that offer alternative geographic representations to the dominant settler colonial

maps that we consume almost exclusively in our schools and our daily lives. Figure 1 of this atlas spread highlights one such map that solely uses Ojibwe place-names as the geographic markers of the Great Lakes region. Indigenous place-names are often descriptive of geographic features and symbolize the profound connection native people feel to the land of their ancestors, an emotional attachment that developed well before the arrival

“Language is a cornerstone of sovereignty.”

Anton Treuer

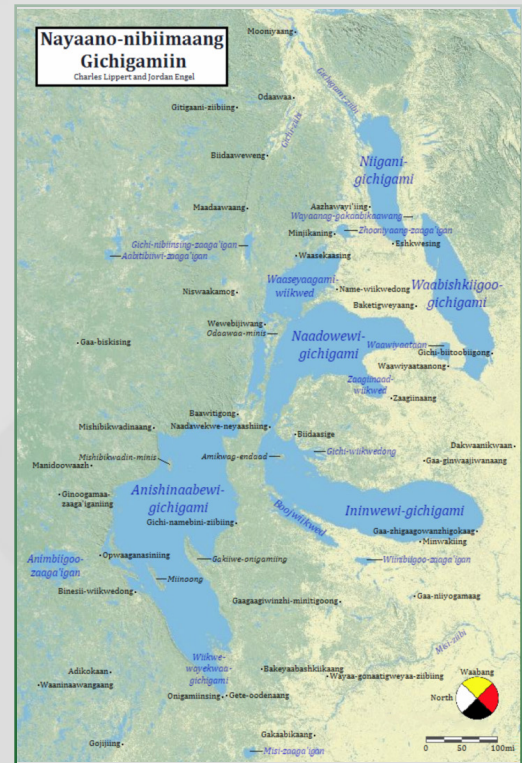
(Professor of Ojibwe at Bemidji State University and enrolled member of the White Earth Ojibwe Nation)

“[Indigenous] names embody a sense of belonging to place...they anchor the past to the present.”

Indigenous Corporate Training, Inc.

<https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/the-relationship-between-indigenous-peoples-and-place-names>

Figure 1 The Decolonial Atlas map of the Great Lakes region labeled solely with Ojibwe place-names. Notice the map is oriented east unlike most settler colonial maps which orient north. (Source: The Decolonial Atlas <https://decolonialatlas.wordpress.com/2015/04/14/the-great-lakes-in-ojibwe-v2/>)



of European settlers. With this in mind, the map ultimately helps to bring Ojibwe culture ‘out from the shadows’ and reclaim the territory it has inhabited for centuries.

‘Boozhoo’! ‘Miigwech’!

In 2005, Bemidji, Minnesota resident Michael Meuers enlisted the help of two fellow community members, Rachel Houle and Noemi Ayelsworth, to kickstart a grassroots campaign now referred to as the Ojibwe Language Project. These three nonnatives set out with the mission to incorporate bilingual signage that includes Ojibwe as well as English words in institutions throughout the Bemidji area. Today, over 200 government buildings, storefronts, hospitals, and schools have partnered with the project (4). As a re-



Figure 2 Shared Visions flyer of the Ojibwe word for hello, “Boozhoo”. Shared Visions is the umbrella program that encompasses Bemidji’s Ojibwe Language Project. (Source: Guntram Herb)



Figure 3 Bilingual signage at the Sanford Health facility in Bemidji, Minnesota. (Source: Bemidji’s Ojibwe Language Project Facebook Page <https://www.facebook.com/185140938185759/photos>)

ult, the signs have successfully opened doors for both native and nonnative residents to engage in more meaningful dialogue with one another and to create more welcoming, inclusive, and tolerant spaces within the community (5).

The Next Generation

Considering a large number of the remaining fluent Ojibwe speakers are in later years of life, tribe members view education as the best avenue through which they can preserve

the language and many public schools in Bemidji and the Great Lakes area now incorporate Ojibwe instruction into their curricula (6). These schools are using a novel approach to language instruction by situating elder Ojibwe speakers in the classroom to assist teachers with language instruction and provide corrections when necessary. Both teachers and elders are also working diligently to devise new terminology for modern English words that otherwise do not exist in an indigenous language like Ojibwe. Additionally, both Bemidji State Uni-

versity and the University of Minnesota now offer a Bachelor of Arts in Ojibwe language studies in the hope that graduates will return to their communities and move forward with the effort to revitalize the language (7).

References

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Figure 4 Bilingual road signage at the entrance of Red Lake, Minnesota, a town roughly 40 miles north of Bemidji. (Source: Bemidji’s Ojibwe Language Project Facebook Page <https://www.facebook.com/185140938185759/photos/a.186059181427268.45889.185140938185759/243851425648043/?type=3&theater>)