

**DadibaaJim: Returning Home through Narrative.** By Helen Olsen Agger. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2021. 256 pages. \$70.00 cloth; \$27.95 paper; \$25.00 ebook.

This unusual and accessible book by Anishinaabe scholar Helen Olson Agger is a combination of epistemological study, historical archive, and story anthology. *DadibaaJim* is the Anishinaabe word for stories that convey knowledge about the nature of the world and its people. Agger's aim here is to fill in omissions in the North American historical record—omissions that have effectively denied Agger's people's existence, both pre- and postcolonialism.

The book focuses modestly but persuasively on the Trout Lake (Namagosibi) Anishinaabe people of northwestern Ontario. Agger begins by situating Anishinaabe people on their ancestral land through stories of their lives on it and on early trading post records. Clearly, however, this work is merely a preliminary foray; the need for similar correctives across North America is implied.

Like all stories, *dadibaaJim* take many forms: significant events, teachings, belief systems, observations on human nature, humorous stories, lists of family lineage, and descriptions of the land. For Agger, these stories constitute the tellers' distinct identities as Namagosibi Anishinaabe. In sum, they not only possess but *are* invaluable cultural capital. From a European perspective, depending on the stories of a few living individuals for corrective truth is unconvincing: these are anecdotes, and thus unreliable. Anticipating this objection, Agger takes pains to explain the Anishinaabe belief that the *dadibaaJim* are founded in “debwewin truth,” a veracity built on experiential knowledge and connection to ancestral land.

One of Agger's most effective strategies is to insert Anishinaabemowin (Anishinaabe language) terms throughout the text, followed without commas by the English. This choice places the Anishinaabemowin word before the English, though without subordinating the latter. “Our Obizhigokaang Lac Seul brethren,” she writes, “are on ingichiniking my right, past Goggiwaawangaang where my ancestors are resting, in the zhaawanong south” (46).

Agger's focus on Anishinaabemowin in itself illustrates differences in worldview: in Anishinaabemowin, for example, there is no separate word for *hand*: the terms for *your hand* and *my hand* are separate words. This, Agger explains, is because “Anishinaabemowin conceptualizes certain words by embedding them within a relationship rather than in isolation” (33).

Likewise, every short narrative by the project's eight mentor-participants includes both the Anishinaabemowin and an English translation, preceded and followed by explanations that situate the story within the Anishinaabe worldview. (Agger also provides a brief but helpful Anishinaabe glossary.)

The book's first chapters are written in a deliberate, plain style, devoid of the jargon or syntactic convolution that characterizes much academic writing. Her prose

is reiterative, sometimes taking on the slowed-down rhythm of someone speaking to a rather daft reader. Although in description this sounds wearying, in practice it creates a gravity and urgency that engenders suspense: What is Agger up to here?

The remaining chapters are the reader's reward. Here are stories from eight Anishinaabe elders, old enough to remember their grandparents' stories of life in the late nineteenth century, in addition to their own experiences of displacement. In late nineteenth-century Ontario the Anishinaabe still lived nomadically, but they were progressively feeling the impact of colonial culture through the fur trade and incursion into their traditional lands. Some were forced to attend boarding schools and to leave their homes on Trout Lake when they had their land appropriated in a series of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century treaties.

Agger's mother, Dedibaayaanimanook, born in 1922, is a primary source. Her inability to remember clearly the journeys taken through her homeland is a poignant reminder of the dissolution of the Anishinaabe way of life. Dedibaayaanimanook says, "As we well know, Anishinaabe people took care of their responsibility to the land. That's why it's so true, all of it. They never intentionally destroyed any part of their homelands" (128). This fastidious respect for the land included "celestial and terrestrial dwellers alike," Agger writes, and resulted in "special kinds of knowledge, abilities, and skills" (128). Thus, the Anishinaabe worldview contrasted with the *wemitigoozhi-iiwaadiziwin*, which for Agger describes the "characteristic behaviors, attitudes, and systems of the colonizing settler immigrants and their descendants . . . [which is] largely with us today in the form of the globalized capitalism of neoliberalism" (131). Dedibaayaanimanook's story represents exasperation in what the Anishinaabe saw as the settler's irrationally destructive behavior.

This disbelief exists as well in Dedibaayaanimanook's description of a logging operation in 1928: "The number of workers was beyond counting. Logs were floating at the top of the falls over there. I do not know how it was done. But I used to see the logs all floating there" (136). Agger notes the use of *inaakwagonjinowaaj*, which translates as *logs*, but has a much more poignant and devastating meaning; it "describes the trees in a prone, limbless state, stripped of their natural grace, beauty and dignity" (136). This inability to fully translate basic concepts is one of many expressions of critical differences between Anishinaabe and colonial ontological thought.

*Dadibaajin* evince a detailed understanding of natural occurrences, such as changes in the weather or lunar alignments. For example, Dedibaayaanimanook describes moon phases as an expression of time: "This is the new moon of bald eagle moon. Next will be Canada goose moon, then the next one, loon moon, and after that, frog moon." (125).

Native readers, variously aware of and removed from the traditional knowledge of their people, would find this book revelatory. Non-natives might benefit even more, as Agger's accessible descriptions of Anishinaabe ontology, along with the stories that illustrate these beliefs, can only enrich their understanding of the valuable but now largely inaccessible knowledge of North America's earliest inhabitants. From a larger perspective, this work is a critical reminder of the erased spaces in human history—spaces that encompass entire parallel universes of human experience.

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