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We Have the Right to Exist: A Translation of Aboriginal Indigenous Thought. By Wub-e-ke-niew

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weapon of faith. The fur trade was also a consideration in the relocation policy. Inuit who were moved and then sent out to find furs had no time to learn about hunting in the new area and no time to gather sufficient stores for the winter.

In this important book, Tester and Kulchyski skillfully weave the episodes of Inuit relocations into the fabric of general postdepression Canadian history. However, at times the text tends to drag, with an overuse of extensive quotations from government officials. These quotations should have been pared down to their most salient parts.

Also, I found the maps inadequate. The chapters are designed to be episodic, and each new relocation requires a map. The series of maps at the beginning needs to be integrated into the chapters.

The authors argue convincingly that the relocation policy was a dismal failure. In an attempt to control the lives of the Inuit, the government made decisions without consulting the natives themselves. The authors do an excellent job of revealing the complex relations between the government, the missionaries, the fur companies, and the Inuit. It is another excellent case study of the detrimental effects of governmental paternalism. This book will be particularly interesting for those who seek a scholarly account of the subject matter covered in Farley Mowat's *The Desperate People* and *The People of the Deer*.

*Ryan Madden*

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**We Have the Right to Exist: A Translation of Aboriginal Indigenous Thought.** By Wub-e-ke-niew. New York: Black Thistle Press, 1995. 366 pages. \$16.00 paper.

Wub-e-ke-niew, a.k.a. Francis Blake, Jr., is an indigenous Red Lake writer who recently published his first book *We Have the Right to Exist: A Translation of Aboriginal Indigenous Thought*. He argues—and it is printed on the front cover—that this is the first book ever published from an *Ahnishinahbaojibway* perspective. Wub-e-ke-niew raises polemical questions, and his tone, language, and ideas have created discussion in the American Indian communities of Minnesota.

After examining Wub-e-ke-niew's book, I went to see him at his Red Lake cabin home. The Red Lake Nation is thirty miles north

of Bemidji, Minnesota, a northern city of 1,100 population, in the middle of an abundant forest, with lakes and rivers, and with deer, eagles, and bears. Northern Minnesota has the largest wild wolf population in North America. Bemidji is encircled by indigenous nations such as White Earth and Leech Lake, to name a few. People refer to Bemidji as "Indian Country."

During the European peopling of the state of Minnesota, the northern white settlers infected the aboriginal people with fatal diseases. In the southern regions of Minnesota, during the 1862 conflict between the Lakota and the white settlers, whites hunted and killed many of the aboriginal people, often bringing in their hair as proof of the kill. Both collective experiences proved to be genocidal.

Wub-e-ke-niew told me that his audience is the U.S. government and policymakers. "I had to edit a lot of the genocidal material from my book," he said, "because of the publishers." The writer argues that the U.S. government's policy is to orchestrate a new identity to mask the genocide of indigenous people. Not surprisingly, Red Lakers and other native people are commenting on his published ideas, for they challenge the U.S. government's superimposed Indian identity. "This is done through the English language," he said. The majority of the Indian people in the Great Lakes region speak only English.

Wub-e-ke-niew told me that the word *Indian* is derogatory, and for many years indigenous people tried to live up to the stereotypes. "*Indian* is a fighting word," he said vehemently. In his book, he states that the idea of *Indian* has no connection to the aboriginal peoples of this continent (p. xiv).

At Wub-e-ke-niew's cabin, an American flag sways in the wintry evening. I asked him why he keeps it. "To keep the cavalry and Indians away," he answered. This statement reflects how he feels about being indigenous and not Indian. Then he said, "To say we're Indians is a conspiracy by the U.S. government to cover up the genocide of aboriginal indigenous people and to steal our land." The wiry, graying writer believes that the U.S. government makes use of the Indians against the indigenous people. "This is my land, aboriginal indigenous land. The government uses their Indians to sell it. Aboriginal indigenous people won't sell the land. It's our Grandmother," he said. These kinds of statements have initiated passionate discourse among the native people in Bemidji, at Bemidji State University, and in the surrounding areas.

Language is another polemical issue in Wub-e-ke-niew's book. He told me that, in the BIA boarding schools, "They beat the language out of me. The BIA schools were making Indians out of the aboriginal indigenous people." His dark eyes reflected the ordeal, as he spoke. Usually, we think that the BIA school experience was designed to make Indians into white people. Here, Wub-e-ke-niew contributes a fresh perspective to the discourse.

"Language is the problem," Wub-e-ke-niew said. Referring to Indians, he continued, "They're thinking in English, the colonizer's language." The lean and sinewy writer paused to give me time to think about what he said. "They're imprisoned by that language." His ancestral voice echoed in my mind. Then, he started to explain his words with more words. He told me how Indians are taught the Ojibwa language, but it is not the aboriginal language. "It's a corruption of the language," he said. In his polemical book, the writer says that language is more than mere words. "*Ahnishinahbeojibway* language is more than words. . . . Our language is in living time with Grandmother Earth" (p. 215). His claim is very convincing; language has a way of defining the world and our relationship to it.

The Red Lake writer reminds us that the idea of language has nothing to do with what they taught us in American grammar schools—subject-verb agreement, sentence structure, even the alphabet. It has to do with Western linear thinking, thinking in a straight line. In *We Have the Right to Exist*, Wub-e-ke-niew stresses that the aboriginal languages are holistic, that they provide a way of interpreting the world.

Moreover, the chapter entitled "Language" reinforces the ideas that I teach in my Philosophy in Literature or Native American Literature courses. Western linear thinking leads us on the road to destruction; holistic indigenous thinking is all-inclusive. The symbol of the circle is essential; nothing is outside the circle.

For years, I would worry when I heard a native child sing "*a,b,c,d,e,f,g. . .*" What comes after z? Nothing. That sort of thinking contributed to the current environmental crisis. Someone, for example, gets a great idea: chemicals to help the city lawns grow. When it rains, the rainwater trickles over city lawns and down storm drains. In Minneapolis, Minnesota, the rainwater, with its chemicals, empties into the Mississippi River at seventy-two outfalls. One million people in Minnesota make use of the Mississippi River for drinking water. This, Wub-e-ke-niew would argue, is the result of thinking in English.

"Our language is in harmony with nature," Wub-e-ke-niew writes, "while the hierarchical languages alienate their native speakers from reality, and lead them to destroy the very things that sustain their life" (p. 222).

Studying his words, one can see why existing clean water laws, task forces, and ordinances will not limit environmental damage. For people of indigenous ancestry, the writer argues, destroying water is beyond the bounds of thought. "*Ahnishinahbeojibway* has always been an egalitarian language," he writes. "The way that we kept the ecosystem typifies our language" (p. 235).

Wub-e-ke-niew also worries about the "English only" movement in this country. If language is about interpreting the world, new words, he thinks, need to be assimilated into the English language to fit the needs of our changing times. We need words that are harmonious with nature. The English only movement has to do with the supremacy of English thinking, linear thinking, and the suppression of all other languages, including aboriginal languages.

After studying Wub-e-ke-niew's book, we should be aware of the possibilities in examining languages from an aboriginal perspective. If nothing else, we may be able to turn our environmental crisis around through understanding the differences between Western and aboriginal languages. These ideas, I am afraid, are not to be found in American language textbooks for schoolchildren.

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