

# An Important Gift: Blackfeet Language and History

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## The Piegan Institute

**P**iegan Institute began initially in the mid-1980s by a group of Blackfeet citizens interested in studying Blackfeet history and language. A century of “outsiders” studying the Blackfeet engendered a fundamental concern—who was defining our community? Piegan Institute set out to identify and develop expertise from within our own community as a critical step in defining ourselves. Piegan Institute formerly incorporated in 1987 and for its first eight years the primary goal was to increase community knowledge by collecting archival materials for community use, educating adult community members about history and language, and developing and publishing materials such as documentary film and monographs on language.

However, after attending the Native American Languages Institute Conference in Hilo, Hawaii in 1994 the focus of Piegan Institute’s efforts were modified to include programming for children. In Hilo, Piegan Institute was introduced to Aha Punana Leo, a private not-for-profit with a similar mission of language and community revitalization. Their approach is to start the community development process with the youngest members of the community and work up from there. Piegan Institute returned to the mainland awakened with a new possibility and added a new component to its many on-going programs—to start a Blackfeet medium program for children.

Nizipuhwahsin (Real Speak) opened in 1995 with a small group of pre-school age children. Nizipuhwahsin’s mission is to use the Blackfeet language as the medium of instruction (not subject) within a local context to produce proficient speakers of the Blackfeet language. Nizipuhwahsin offers full day programming for children grades K-8. Our objective is to develop highly skilled learners who are knowledgeable in both Blackfeet and mainstream academics. The children at Nizipuhwahsin are thriving in many endeavors, including mastery of the Blackfeet language as well as English. Those who have graduated and gone on to public school all arrive as top-performing students. After 10 years, Nizipuhwahsin is now recognized as a successful and effective model for community-based education. What is important to Piegan Institute though is that our children incorporate the values found within the language of our community.

Research indicates that learning a language involves more than learning a linguistic code to label the physical world or to refer to abstract concepts; it

entails learning how to use the code in socially appropriate and effective ways. Anyone who has learned a second language as an adult and has tried to use it with fluent speakers in a community will appreciate that it is not enough to know the words and grammar of the language—you must also know how to use them in socially acceptable ways. The specific values, beliefs, and relationships which comprise the life of a community whose language a child is learning shape the patterns of language usage in that community in complex and important ways. Thus, the children of Nizipuhwahsin, through the process of learning within the Blackfeet language, begin to embody the values, beliefs, and ways of interacting within our community.

Nizipuhwahsin attempts to move beyond teaching a curriculum of separate subjects and instead to reflect upon our community values found within the language. For example one of the themes taught is the importance of “place” names within the Blackfeet world. Why are “places” important to the Blackfeet? Author J. J. Gibson (1950) has remarked in an epigraph that is sometimes cited that “we do not live in space, instead we live in places.” He means, of course, that we are place-bound, that we are tied undetachably to places and that places identify and define us. The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) phrased this same idea in the form of an equation: space plus culture equals place. The particularism of human places rests on a human contribution. Places identify us, and, of course, we identify places.

D. H. Lawrence (1961) wrote an essay entitled “Spirit of Place” in which he noted that “every continent has its own great spirit of place. Every people is polarized in some particular locality, which is home, the homeland.” The Blackfeet are polarized in the shadow of “The Backbone of the World” as the Rocky Mountains are called. Mountains and the Northern Great Plains are central to Blackfeet worldview. The Blackfeet accumulated in our places immense amounts of geographical, environmental, historical, natural, and cultural knowledge that is encoded in the names attached to particular places. Frequently names became stories as events in particular places were repeated. After generations the landscape filled up with names, stories, and songs. The landscape itself became a text as to how the Blackfeet relayed information regarding travel, natural resources, creation, and moral direction. Settled in place, at home, the Blackfeet stayed put like few others. We have not moved. Because we stayed put, we became intimate with our landscape and the identity of places became our own. Our identity is our places.

Stories and places, places and stories, rendered both landscape and cultural identity intelligible in an anchored, non-abstract way. Both landscape and cultural identity could be learned through the names people originally have given—in our own, original language. Language is the key. Here is power.

Today, the Blackfeet language is threatened and the “mnemonic pegs” of place names, songs, and stories—those elements that gave direction and that rendered the Blackfeet distinct and intelligible to its members—are about gone as well. Place names, like songs and dreams, were guide posts and with their steady erosion have come cultural loss and the loss of community identity.

In the process, although the Blackfeet are still where we have always been, the natural landscape has been visually erased of its older meaning. It is a form of geographical dispossession. Blackfeet people no longer know our own names for things; no longer know the old stories that were attached to places, no longer sing the songs that in certain places made this happen. The elders and ancestors have become silent. The younger generation, not knowing the names, the stories, the songs have to struggle with a pervasive disorientation. *They do not know where they are.*

Nizipuhwahsin's mission is to begin to teach children where they are. Knowledge of the landscape and places in our original language and the values found within our history will again allow Blackfeet children to reconnect with elders and ancestors, to link present and past, to permit a degree of co-habitation that identity is based upon. How can Blackfeet people hold on to something, be it language or culture, story or song, they cannot name, they cannot pronounce, they cannot remember. Teaching children in our original language is a place to begin.

Margaret Running Crane, one of the Blackfeet elders teaching in the classroom until her passing stated:

*When I was small, I learned English in the mission school. They beat me if I did not learn. Later, I had eight children, but only two can speak the Blackfeet language. They say that it is my fault, and they are right. When they were small, I should have taught them our language. That is what I am doing now. I am teaching the children. I am teaching them how to become Blackfeet. It is an important gift.<sup>1</sup>*

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#### Endnote

<sup>1</sup>Margaret Running Crane. Interview with Darrell Kipp, at Piegan Institute, September, 1996.

#### References

- Gibson, J. J. (1950). *The perception of the visual world*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
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