

‘YOU HAVE TO LIVE IT’  
PEDAGOGY AND LITERACY  
WITH  
TEETL’IT GWICH’IN

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**Abstract**

This thesis concerns the Gwich’in, Dene from Northern Canada, and the land they inhabit. Based upon fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork (December 2005 - March 2007, April 2008), I elaborate on personal experiences with Gwich’in pedagogy on the land and in the Teetl’it Gwich’in community of Fort McPherson, North West Territories, Canada. These experiences have ranged from travelling, hunting, trapping, fishing, cooking, cutting wood, building cabins, digging graves, searching for a disappearing elder, attending meetings and feasts, living in a Gwich’in household, visiting, storytelling, to making trails. I further discuss historical and political processes that have taken place outside and, more specifically, in the North. I turn to the Hudson’s Bay Company fur trade and British explorers, to Anglican and Roman Christian missionaries, to previous anthropologists, to Government initiatives that concern trapping and mineral exploitation, and to the Gwich’in Tribal Council. Finally, I examine the role of literacy in Gwich’in lives, both historically and contemporary. In some detail, I expand on the work of Archdeacon Robert McDonald and Gwich’in women in transcribing the Bible into the Gwich’in language. The Gwich’in accentuate the importance of this Bible for language revitalisation and for making sense in life. This thesis illustrates that Gwich’in have been actively involved in many of these processes and have challenged or incorporated them. There remains, however, a consistency in these processes to undermine Gwich’in understandings in life. This thesis provides a possible answer by connecting pedagogy, history, and literacy. I argue that outsiders and Gwich’in have been reading the land quite differently, and that this subsequently has influenced historical narratives, policy-making, co-management boards, and travelling on the land. These differences are also brought forth in reading and writing texts. This has become clear in the publications that have been written about the Gwich’in and which deny or dismiss the pedagogy of Gwich’in. I have taken a different stand and have started with the premise ‘you have to live it’. Doing so, this thesis contributes to anthropological and ethnographic literature concerning the Canadian North and Dene people, specifically the Teetl’it Gwich’in of Fort McPherson.