Whose Story? Story ownership, voice and responsibility

NBE3U, Unit 2: Behind the Image, Lesson 10. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

In 1990, Anishinaabe writer Lenore Keeshig-Tobias asked non-Indigenous writers in The Globe and Mail to stop stealing Native stories. Stories belong to the families and Nations that carry them, she argued; when outsiders' versions fill the shelves, Indigenous writers struggle to be heard. Her argument changed Canadian literature.

What students do: Students learn what Keeshig-Tobias argued and how Canadian writers' organizations responded (summarized), connect her argument to Johnson's character Charlie, the collector of “Indianology,” examine how the under-representation of Indigenous writers shapes what Canadians read, and work out how they can learn from stories that are not their own without taking them.

Curriculum expectations

Code	Students will…
A3.3	analyse and compare the ways in which the diversity of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit lives, knowledge, cultures, and world views is represented or under-represented in various contemporary and historical text forms
A2.3	make inferences of increasing subtlety about attitudes towards First Nations, Métis, and Inuit content in various contemporary and historical text forms, providing explanations that draw on a range of appropriate evidence to support their opinions
C1.5	extend their understanding of texts from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, and, as appropriate, relevant texts from non-Indigenous sources, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, by making rich connections between the ideas in them and in other texts and to their own knowledge, experience, and insights
B2.2	select and use the most appropriate active listening strategies when interacting in a range of oral communication contexts related to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures

From The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (2019), English: Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Voices, Grade 11, University Preparation (NBE3U). A = First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Perspectives and Text Forms in Canada, B = Oral Communication, C = Reading and Literature Studies, D = Writing, E = Media Studies.

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Learning goals and success criteria

Learning goals	Success criteria
• We are learning why Indigenous writers have called for control of their own stories. • We are learning how under-representation shapes what a society reads.	• I can summarize Keeshig-Tobias's argument accurately in my own words. • I can explain how outsiders' versions can crowd out Indigenous voices. • I can connect her argument to a text we have read. • I can listen and respond respectfully in a discussion.

Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** Whose Story? deck.
- **Handouts:** The Argument (page 1), Respectful Reader (page 2).
- **Optional:** Teacher-chosen interview with a contemporary Indigenous writer on voice (preview first).

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–8	**Hook**	What is owed?	Discuss.	
8–25	**1990 and after**	The argument and responses.	Note.	Accurate summary.
25–40	**Charlie the collector**	Johnson, 1893.	Read.	
40–62	**Discussion**	Structured talk.	Discuss.	Active listening.
62–75	**Respectful reader**	Guidelines.	Write.	

Differentiation

- **Support:** A timeline card for 1990 to 1994.
- **ELL:** Vocabulary: appropriation, voice, protocol, permission.
- **Challenge:** Research one Indigenous-led publisher or writers' organization (see Unit 5) and explain how it puts Keeshig-Tobias's point into practice.

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Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	The Argument and Respectful Reader	Under-representation (A3.3), attitudes (A2.3), connections (C1.5) and active listening (B2.2)

Whose story: key points

- **Keeshig-Tobias (1990):** Outsiders who take Native stories and voices take cultural property; meanwhile Indigenous writers' own books get less attention and support.
- **The aftermath:** A Writers' Union committee (1991), a motion against appropriation (1992) and the Writing Thru Race conference (1994).
- **Charlie in Johnson's story:** A collector of “Indianology” who studies a people as objects and treats his wife as a relic: knowledge without respect.
- **Under-representation:** When outsiders' versions dominate shelves and courses, readers meet Indigenous lives mostly through others' eyes.
- **A respectful reader:** Seeks Indigenous-authored texts first, learns protocols, credits sources, and doesn't retell stories that aren't theirs.

Teacher notes

- Lenore Keeshig-Tobias (Anishinaabe, Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation) published “Stop Stealing Native Stories” in The Globe and Mail on January 26, 1990 (Broadview Press, reprinted in Introduction to Indigenous Literary Criticism in Canada, 2016). Summary: non-Indigenous writers and filmmakers who take Native stories and voices are taking cultural property, while Indigenous writers' own work receives less attention and support. She named Basil Johnston's Indian School Days and Maria Campbell's Halfbreed as examples of Indigenous work that deserved more attention (Wikipedia, “Lenore Keeshig-Tobias”). Paraphrase only; do not quote her article.
- In 1991 she became founding chair of the Writers' Union of Canada's Racial Minority Writers' Committee; in 1992 the Union's membership passed a motion against cultural appropriation (June 6, 1992), and in 1994 the Union hosted the Writing Thru Race conference in Vancouver (Wikipedia).
- Teach this as Indigenous writers' argument about cultural property, permission and access, not as a two-sided debate for the class to decide. Students are not asked to judge whether Indigenous peoples' concerns about their own stories are valid; they learn the principles and how to act on them as readers and writers.
- Students learn about ceremonies, protocols and oral traditions; they do not imitate or perform them, and they do not retell community stories. Leave sacred knowledge to the people who hold it.
- Do not ask Indigenous students to speak for their communities, to share personal or family histories, or to act as experts. Every student's participation in sharing is optional.
- We strongly recommend reviewing this unit with your board's Indigenous education lead and, where possible, inviting a First Nations, Métis or Inuit Elder, Knowledge Keeper or guest speaker following your board's protocols (including offerings and honoraria). Local Nations' own sources come first.

Coming up

Lesson 11, Building the Analysis.

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