Poems Now: Contemporary poetry and the power of language

NBE3U, Unit 5: Stories Now, Lesson 5. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

Contemporary First Nations, Métis and Inuit poets often bring their languages into English poems: Cree, Anishinaabemowin, Michif, Inuktitut words that resist translation. Reading these poems asks us to notice what a word carries, and what it means for a poet to reclaim a language once punished in schools.

What students do: Students read two or three teacher-chosen contemporary poems (for example, by Louise Bernice Halfe – Sky Dancer, Rita Joe or Marilyn Dumont), explore unfamiliar and Indigenous-language words with reliable resources, analyse sound, line and image, and connect the poems to their novels.

Curriculum expectations

Code	Students will…
C3.3	use a variety of strategies, with increasing regularity, to explore and expand vocabulary, focusing on words and phrases that have particular significance for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities and evaluating the precision with which these words are used in the texts they are reading
C2.3	identify a variety of elements of style in texts from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, and, as appropriate, in relevant texts from non-Indigenous sources, and explain, with increasing insight, how they help communicate meaning or reflect a world view and enhance the effectiveness of the text
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

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.

Learning goals and success criteria

Learning goals	Success criteria
• We are learning to read contemporary poems closely. • We are learning to explore words that carry particular significance.	• I can use strategies to explore unfamiliar words. • I can explain why a poet uses an Indigenous-language word. • I can analyse one poetic device and its effect. • I can connect a poem to my novel.

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Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** Poems Now deck.
- **Handouts:** Word Work (page 1), Poem Connections (page 2).
- **Poems:** Two or three teacher-chosen contemporary poems from board-approved anthologies (titles only; not included). Suggestions: Rita Joe, “I Lost My Talk”; a poem from Halfe's Burning in This Midnight Dream (2016); a poem from Dumont's A Really Good Brown Girl (1996).
- **Resources:** Reliable online dictionaries made with language communities (for example, the Online Cree Dictionary, the Ojibwe People's Dictionary); check what your board recommends.

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–8	**Hook**	A word that carries more.	Discuss.	
8–30	**Read**	Poems aloud.	Listen and annotate.	
30–50	**Word work**	Strategies.	Explore.	Strategy named.
50–65	**Devices**	Sound, line, image.	Analyse.	
65–75	**Connect**	To the novel.	Write.	

Differentiation

- **Support:** One poem, read twice, with a glossary.
- **ELL:** Compare a word in your first language that doesn't translate.
- **Challenge:** Research how the poet describes her language in her own words.

Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	Word Work	Vocabulary (C3.3), style (C2.3), connections (C1.5)

Poems now: key points

- **Code-switching:** Moving between languages in one text; Halfe, for example, is known for weaving Cree into her English poems.
- **Untranslated words:** Leaving a word untranslated can say: this language is alive, it belongs here, and not everything is for outsiders.
- **Strategies:** Context clues, a glossary or note, a community-made dictionary, the author's own explanations; never guess and never invent.
- **Devices:** Line breaks, repetition, images of the body and land, white space and silence.

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- **Connections:** Language loss and reclamation appear across the course: Zitkála-Šá, Johnson's mission school story, and many novels.

Teacher notes

- Louise Bernice Halfe – Sky Dancer, raised on Saddle Lake Reserve and a survivor of Blue Quills Residential School, was Canada's Parliamentary Poet Laureate for 2021–2022, the first from an Indigenous community.
- Poems are not reproduced here: use board-approved anthologies. Read each aloud twice. If a poem is about residential school, name it first. This course discusses colonization, residential schools and their effects. Some students and families carry this history personally. Support: Hope for Wellness Help Line (for Indigenous people across Canada, 24/7, by phone or online chat at hopeforwellness.ca; English and French, with Cree, Ojibway and Inuktut on request at certain times), 1-855-242-3310; Kids Help Phone, 1-800-668-6868 or text 686868; 9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline (call or text 988); National Indian Residential School Crisis Line, 1-866-925-4419.
- Students do not attempt to pronounce or use Indigenous-language words as decoration; they learn what the word means and why the poet uses it. If a student speaks the language, they may choose to share; never ask them to.
- 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 6, Circle Meeting 1.

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