British Columbia's
Office of the Human Rights Commissioner

Commissioner's Book Club: Discussion guide

Special selection for International Poetry Month

"Language" by Lee Maracle

From *Talking to the Diaspora*

Do you speak your language?
I stare—I just said: how are you?
I thought English was my language
apparently it isn't
I thought Halkomelem was gibberish
the devil's language
that's what the nuns said
apparently not

Some white guy sets me straight:
Aboriginal people are losing languages
Funny, I thought I had it just a moment ago
maybe it's in Gramma's old shoebox
maybe it's sandwiched between papers
in plastic bags hidden under mom's bed
Hey, has anyone seen my language?

Will my words dangle from empty raped mountains?
laid waste on dead seas
Or will they sing sweet from the skirt of winds
remembered songs of hope not realized?

I weave this imagined dream world onto old
Squamish blankets,
history-hole-punched and worn—
to re-craft today,
to re-member future in this new language.
And I sing I am home again.

Introduction

The prompts and questions that follow are meant to encourage discussion and support reflection. Human rights-related books highlight challenging issues and topics—take care of yourself in the ways that you need while you dig in.

In honour of International Poetry Month, and to recognize the contributions and impact of diverse literature, we are grateful to showcase a selected poem this month.

For more suggestions, including different ways to reflect and share, check out the Book Club How-to resource.

Author Bio

Lee Maracle was the author of a number of critically acclaimed literary works including Sojourner's and Sundogs, Ravensong, Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel, Daughters Are Forever and I Am Woman. Born in North Vancouver, Maracle was a member of the Stó:lō Nation, the mother of four and grandmother of seven. For her work promoting writing among Aboriginal youth, Maracle received the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal and, in 2014, was awarded the Ontario Premier's Award for Excellence in the Arts.[1]

Summary

Language by Lee Maracle tells the story of an Indigenous person rediscovering her native language, after being asked whether she speaks "her language."

Linking the poem to human rights in B.C.

Lee Maracle's poem Language speaks directly to one of the most enduring impacts of colonial violence in Canada: the attempted destruction of Indigenous languages, cultures and ways of knowing. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission described the residential school system as "cultural genocide," a systematic attempt to destroy Indigenous cultures and languages so that Indigenous peoples would no longer exist as distinct peoples.

Language touches and washes through so many elements of life and culture. Perhaps you can recall a time when you've heard of, or know a phrase, that expresses

[1] "Talking to the Diaspora," ARP Books, , accessed March 2026, https://arpbooks.org/product/talking-to-the-diaspora/.

a concept that is difficult to translate to another language. Language isn't just words: it holds worldviews, relations to one another and to land, memory, ceremony and humour. When Indigenous people were punished for speaking their languages, they also lost a part of their culture and spirit. Residential schools and laws forbade Indigenous people from speaking their languages, for decades and generations. Today, efforts to reclaim and revitalize Indigenous languages are increasingly recognized as part of reconciliation, further codified by the federal Indigenous Languages Act.

Discussion guide questions and prompts

Here are some questions to ignite discussion or thought on the connections between the poem and human rights. The provided prompts are not the only or complete answers, but some ideas you might want to incorporate into your conversation:

1. Language, ceremony and cultural genocide

Abuelaish reflects on forced displacement, writing that to be pushed from one's home is to be marked with "the scar of expulsion for life." He also recounts Israeli bulldozers destroying homes to widen roads for tanks, leaving families powerless to stop it. What does the memoir suggest about home as more than a building or a location? How are concepts of home, land and belonging connected? What is lost when people are forced from the places that ground them—culturally and emotionally, across generations?

- Cultural genocide can be understood as an intent to systematically attempt to destroy cultures and languages and to assimilate groups of peoples so that they no longer exist as distinct people. Language is a significant manifestation of culture. How do you think preventing people from speaking their language is genocidal in intent or impact? When language is suppressed, we lose meaning—entire ways of understanding land and family, spirituality and community. We also struggle to stay connected to families, and our ways of being. Traditions, ceremonies and spiritual practices cannot be wholly or fully expressed without a native language.
- Losing one's language is a form of forced assimilation and often requires state overreach into peoples' homes and schools.

2. Access and erasure

In Canada, Indigenous cultures have often been suppressed, stolen, consumed or romanticized—sometimes dismissed as historical, and not contemporary; other times treated as spiritually rich or politically compelling—when convenient. Where do you see Indigenous culture being made invisible, and where do you see it being consumed

or over-simplified? How can people engage with Indigenous language and culture in ways that are reciprocal, respectful and not extractive?

- For many people, meaningful engagement begins by showing up as a guest—at arts and culture events, film screenings, drumming circles or public teachings. Increasingly, days of significance like National Indigenous Peoples' Day and National Day for Truth and Reconciliation are commemorated with local and national events.
- Local context matters—there are hundreds of Indigenous communities and Nations across Canada. Learning whose land you are on, how to pronounce it in the Indigenous language, and seeking out community-led events and teachings, can help ground the engagement in relationship and respect–going deeper than curiosity.
- Across B.C., many communities have an Aboriginal Friendship Centre which might host local arts and culture events while providing community and social wellness programs.
- Canada's National Film Board has a large collection of Indigenous films; can you find a movie or documentary made close to your area?

3. Language, home and revitalization

Maracle closes the poem by writing, "I sing I am home again." What do you think it means to become "home again" through language? How might language revitalization be connected to healing, wellness and dignity—not only for individuals, but for families and Nations?

- This reconnection to language and culture sounds like a very powerful and regenerative experience. Shared language with people and communities you love and belong to can act to calm a heightened nervous system and strengthen and reinforce bonds.
- If you are non-Indigenous and come across an Indigenous word—you can practice saying it, and ask for help to pronounce it. It can be especially helpful if you practice names of Nations whose land you might be living on. Other people might learn a few phrases, like how to say thank you or hello. If someone introduces themselves with a traditional Indigenous name, take time and effort to repeat back what you heard. It's okay to ask for help, or for someone to repeat themselves—respectfully.