



Dadlibaajim

RETURNING HOME
THROUGH NARRATIVE

Helen Olsen Agger

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**Miigwech,
Nimaamaawens,
E'wiiji'ishiyen indanokiiwining,
E'miinishiyen gigikendaasowin,
E'gikinô'amawishiyen wenji
Ishpendaagwak i'i
Gigikendaasowin.
Giin, Nimaamaawens,
Gidinin,
Gichi miigwech.**

Thank you,
My dearest Mother,
For supporting my work,
For entrusting me with your
Knowledge, for teaching me the
Value of that
Knowledge.
To you, my dear Mother,
I express
My deepest gratitude.

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Preface

My mother, Dedibaayaanimanook, began to absorb the fundamentals of Anishinaabe philosophy as she listened to the dadibaajim conversations of her elders. From the time of my own birth and early childhood, I had the privilege of hearing her dadibaajim narratives as she spoke them to my siblings and me in Anishinaabemowin. But it was not until much later in life, after many years had passed, that I came to more fully understand the wisdom in her narratives and to realize that they are the iteration of what her elders had taught her as a child. As the means by which Anishinaabe people transmitted their knowledges, insights, and teachings from one generation to the next throughout the ages, dadibaajim, oral narrative, is a critical institution of learning. By listening to dadibaajim, not only can we as Anishinaabe people today learn about our ancestors and homelands, but non-Anishinaabe people may learn to reremember their ancestral places of origin. The language of that learning is Anishinaabemowin.

My extensive use of Anishinaabemowin may at first seem jarring, but the language continues to be the means for centring Anishinaabe thought—just as it animated and gave meaning to the world in which Dedibaayaanimanook and her fellow elders were born and raised. I also use Anishinaabemowin to demonstrate that oral tradition and the Western essay-writing convention can blend together to contribute to both the Anishinaabe and academic communities in ways that decolonize research norms and

expectations. Highlighting the importance of telling Anishinaabe history using an Anishinaabe frame of reference,¹ therefore, this work sets out a theoretical approach for colonial and neo-colonial studies that uses qualitative interdisciplinary research methodologies for engaging with the Anishinaabemowin language and the Anishinaabe narrative practice, teachings, and knowledges in the academic domain. It may even encourage readers to think critically about how researchers have historically interacted with Indigenous communities by suggesting alternative meanings commonly associated with the notion of inquiry to challenge settler-colonial histories, discourses, methodologies, and assumptions.

Nearly annihilated by the assault of European colonialism, Anishinaabemowin is no longer widely spoken today. John Nichols and Earl Nyholm's work² is useful for learning how the language functions and how its essential characteristics, concepts, and rules apply. Facilitating the process of translation from Anishinaabemowin to English and vice versa, the information they supply helps us to avoid erasing or altering the intended meanings of a dadibaajim speaker. This is of critical importance because an accurate understanding of the dadibaajim³ narratives is necessary to grasp not only the principles and philosophies of the aanikoobidaaganag foreparents but the practices that embodied them. With Anishinaabemowin being foundational to this work, I have included a glossary of key words wherever an explanation of their meanings in terms of the contexts in which I use them is required.

Anishinaabemowin sounds somewhat similar to the English language, and its written form typically uses roman orthography. In Tables 1 and 2 below, English words indicate the approximately equivalent sounds of Anishinaabemowin's short and long vowels. There are differences worth noting, however. One is the long vowel e. More drawn out than the English short vowel e, it sounds similar to the first part of the diphthong a in the English word "ate" (a diphthong being defined as the sound formed by a combination of two vowels in a single syllable in which the sound starts with one vowel and ends with another). Unlike English, Anishinaabemowin always pronounces the e at the end of a word. "Name" (sturgeon), for example, is a two-syllable word that sounds somewhat like nu-meh with the accent on the second syllable. In terms of o, I use ô to represent the sound that is similar to the first half of the o diphthong in the word "vote."⁴ Some Namegosibii Anishinaabe speakers also pronounce ô as either waa or wô or both. In such cases, Gichi-jôj (Big George) would be pronounced and spelled as Gichi Jwaaj or Gichi Jwôj. Elder Dedibaayaanimanook uses all three pronunciations while others of the Namegosibii Anishinaabe community tend to favour one over the others.

A nasalized vowel is pronounced before ns, nz, and nzh in Anishinaabemowin. Examples are the second e in "ikwezens" (girl), the oo in "moonz" (moose), the ii in "agaashiinz" (small), and the e in "enha'" (yes). Hence, the n in these types of words is not pronounced as it is in words with non-nasalized vowels such as the n in "enigok" (with energy) and "giinawaa" (you all) and the English

“into.” It should be noted that many Anishinaabemowin writers do not include the nasalized n in their writings and would thus spell “moonz” (moose) as mooz. It should also be noted that according to how Namegosibii Anishinaabe people use the language, there is no nasalized vowel in the word “oshkazhiin” (someone’s fingernail).

According to Nichols and Nyholm,⁵ the consonants b, d, g, j, and the zh consonant cluster are often voiced. They occur at the beginning or in the middle of words (with the exception of zh, which becomes sh) and are considered to be “hard.” By contrast, the “strong” consonants p, t, k, s, and the ch / sh consonant clusters are voiceless and do not generally occur at the beginning of words. An example of an exception occurs when speakers in regions to the south of Namegosibiing say “chi miigwech” (thank you very much) rather than “gichi miigwech.” In Anishinaabemowin, b sounds very similar to p; the d, to t; the g, to k; and the j, to ch. For example, the b in Bejii (Betsy) sounds halfway between a b and a p. However, the b sound in imBejiim (my Betsy) may be heard as a definite b. To illustrate further, when the word “diindiinsi” (blue jay) becomes “indiindiinsim” (my blue jay), the first d is closer to a d sound than a t.

Therefore, the letters b, d, g, and j are used instead of p, t, k, and ch at the beginning of words. This convention maintains consistency in spelling and avoids confusion.⁶

Many words contain both the hard and strong consonants, serving to illustrate pronunciation differences. The d and the t in “Detaginang” (Frank Keesick), the b and the p in “bepegwajizhaagigamiiwan” (the ice on the lake is

open here and there), and the g and each k in “gakiiwekana” (portage trail) are examples. Incidentally, some consonant sounds are aspirated, with their pronunciation preceded by a slight expiration of air. The p in “aapiji” (quite) is an example of an aspirated consonant. Conventionally, the letter h, used to show aspiration, is omitted when spelling words with this feature.

The glottal stop, indicated by an apostrophe (’), serves at least three important functions in Namegosibii Anishinaabemowin. It shows the possessive case for certain words ending in a vowel, such as in “oniijaanisa’” (his/her children). It is a means for separating vowel sounds within a word, as in “ma’iingan” (wolf) or “dewe’igan” (drum), thus avoiding the need to insert a w or y between the vowels. For some speakers, the glottal stop affirms past tense, such as in “gii’ maajaa” (she/he left) or “gii’ nigamowag” (they sang).

These are basic Anishinaabemowin elements of pronunciation and spelling, although there are characteristic ways of speaking the language. Some Namegosibii Anishinaabeg speak the language with little inflection and a slower, more even rate of speech. Today’s language learners often use the same intonation and rate with which they speak English as a first language. Another variation is the use of certain verb endings. Some say “gaa-nigamod” (the one singing) with a d while others, including Dedibaayaanimanook, would say “gaa-nigamoj,” with a j. Often, these speech distinctions are immediately evident only among fluent speakers. Having just cited these characteristics, I must point out that my use of

Anishinaabemowin is based on my understanding of and desire to accurately reflect how Namegosibii Anishinaabeg used the language.

In various places throughout the text, I use Cree writings to illustrate particular arguments that are applicable to Anishinaabe people. For instance, I refer to Louis Bird's community-based story work, Belinda Daniels-Fiss's logic, and Freda Ahenakew's findings on language. Namegosibii Anishinaabe narratives support the use of these Cree examples. According to the oral tradition of the community's most senior elder, Dedibaayaanimanook Sarah Keesick Olsen, for example, her father, Dedibayaash William Keesick, hunted and trapped as far away as Memegweshiwi-zaa'igan Mamakwash Lake, in the territories of the Oji-Cree and Swampy Cree northeast of Namegosibiing. Dedibaayaanimanook has also stated that her uncle Naadowe Robert's wife's name was Omashkiigookwe, which translates as Swampy Cree Woman. According to the historical record, Omashkiigookwe was from the vicinity of Osnaburgh, now known as the Mishkeegogamang First Nation. Dedibaayaanimanook's narratives reflect the commonalities in the culture, territories (in some cases), history, language, and experiences that exist among Cree and Anishinaabe communities.

Even at the age of ninety-eight, Dedibaayaanimanook continues to provide me with her assistance. Whenever I seek confirmation of the accuracy of a Namegosibii Anishinaabemowin word, for example, I write down my question in syllabics which she reads aloud and then

responds to by writing down her answer. Recently, I inquired if dadibaajim was accurate for the act of telling a narrative and she nodded in the affirmative. Use of syllabics works particularly well because Dedibaayaanimanook has difficulty hearing and even enunciating certain words. And she is not particularly fond of hearing aids!

Table 1.

Eight Vowels of Namegosibii Anishinaabemowin.

Short vowels	Anishinaabemowin	Equivalent sound in English
A	asemaa (tobacco)	Up
I	nisin (three)	Pin
O	opin (potato)	Full
Long vowels	Anishinaabemowin	Equivalent sound in English
Aa	aaniin! (hello!)	Far
E	namegos (trout)	Ere
Ii	giiwe (goes home)	Seem
Oo	oodenaang (in town)	Move
Ô	Gichi-jôj (Big George)	Order

Table 2.

Consonants of Namegosibii Anishinaabemowin.

Consonant	Anishinaabemowin	Equivalent sound in English
B	biboon (winter)	Bacon
Ch	gichi (large)	Child
D	debinaak (carelessly)	Debt
G	gaawiin (no)	Girl
H	enha' (yes)	Hat
J	maamakaaj (amazing)	Jest
K	makwa (bear)	Pack
M	miinan (blueberries)	Milk
N	nigig (otter)	No
P	aapiji (very)	Pen
S	asin (rock)	Soft

T	aab ita (half)	T ab
W	w iinge (very)	W ent
Y	wii y aas (meat)	Y es
Z	z iibiins (creek)	Z ebra
Zh	mewin z ha (a long time ago)	Meas u re

Dadibaajim

Ninamegosibii

Anishinaabewimin

We Are the People of Trout Water

Namegosibiing Trout Lake nudges against the eastern rim of Oshedinaa. Deep in the thickest regions of the lofty ridge, three large depressions known to the Namegosibii Anishinaabeg as Binesiwajiing remain hidden from view. These are the nesting sites of binesiwag Thunderers. Associated with powerful forces that presided over the Namegosibiing region, Oshedinaa is a timeless reminder of how the people's identity is rooted in the homelands. The epistemologies of the wemitigoozhiwag European settler people reckon Oshedinaa to be the Trout Lake terminal moraine.

For sports fishers, Namegosibiing may seem typical of other northwest Ontario lakes because its unique attributes remain largely invisible to visitors unfamiliar with the history of the area. Most do not have knowledge about what was once a sturdy log house, now partly hidden by growths of boreal trees and grasses (see Figure 1). Few are aware of another structure, now in the process of fading into the flora somewhere in the northwest quadrant of Namegosibiing (see Figure 2). Although guests may have

noticed the headstone with the 1916 inscription, they probably have no knowledge about the individual whose name appears on it (Figure 3). Who built these cabins and what caused their abandonment? Who are the people lying at rest in the cemetery and are there any living descendants today? Indeed, are these questions of any relevance and, if so, for whom?

Despite the volumes of historical documentation about Indigenous peoples, next to nothing has focused on the Namegosibii Anishinaabeg of northwest Ontario. Mainstream narratives dominated the discursive landscapes of the region, leaving little space for the people to articulate their sense of self, name the aanikoobidaaganag ancestors, and tell their dadibaajim narratives. The political, cultural, social, and economic forces of the colonial state denied, ignored, and effectively erased their essential beingness. With the notion of erasure implying recognition of existence and denial, non-recognition of existence, these forces reduced to nothingness the presence of Anishinaabeg as the people for whom the homelands of Namegosibiing are a rightful inheritance. The latecomers have regarded the Namegosibii Anishinaabeg as little more than another exploitable resource.

This lack of Anishinaabe self-description in the written record historically collaborated to remove them physically from the homelands. The latecomers convinced themselves to view the land as empty of any human presence. Speaking unambiguously, however, eight Namegosibii Anishinaabeg recently agreed to discuss themselves in terms of the

deeply rooted sense of connection that they have maintained with Namegosibiing and its surrounding regions, as did their aanikoobidaaganag ancestors across time and generations. These individuals concur that dadibaajim must be disseminated and heard.



Figure 1.

Family residence of Gweyesh Annie Angecone. Gweyesh and her family and relatives lived on what began to be called Trout Lake Lodge Island in the early 1940s. Located in the northeast quadrant of Namegosibiing, the island was

where Dedibaayaanimanook's uncle Jiiyan and his family resided before proceeding south during the spring.



Figure 2.

One of the Dedibayaash family's winter homes. This was where Dedibaayaanimanook's first child, Aaliz Alice, was born in 1945.



Figure 3.

Ezhi-bimishinowaaj Namegosibiing, the traditional cemetery of the Namegosibii Anishinaabeg. Still in use today, the cemetery indicates that the Namegosibii Anishinaabe izhitwaawin culture was affected by the forces of European influences.

An explanation of the name Namegosib(iing) illustrates the linkages that exist between Namegosibii Anishinabeg and their places of home, helping to clarify how the ancestral belief systems and homelands were interlocked. “Nibi,” for example, is generic for water, but the “sib” in

“Namegosib” specifies the clear, pure quality of one of the lake’s most striking features. “Namegos” being the word for trout, “namegosib” is literally clear trout water. The inflow of only streams and creeks, rather than rivers, confirms the defining name of Namegosib as a spring-fed lake with sufficient depths to sustain the refreshingly cool temperatures that namegosag lake trout prefer. Although the standard word for a lake is “zaaga’igan” or “zaa’igan,” as in Wanamani-zaa’igan for Red Lake or Ikwewi-zaa’igan for Woman Lake, the aanikoobidaaganag ancestors deemed Namegosib a more accurate depiction with which to articulate who they were as the Namegosibii Anishinaabeg—the people of pristine trout water.

Maps are useful for explaining various aspects of the relationship Namegosibii Anishinaabe people have had with the land. The map in Figure 4 depicts Namegosibiing’s location in northwest Ontario. Next, Figure 5 shows where the lake is situated in relation to the Wanamani-zaa’iganing municipality of Red Lake and the route the aanikoobidaaganag grandfathers took for their two and one-half days of travel to town from Gaa-minitigwashkiigaag. A line traces their approximate course across the frozen Namegosibiing to the lake’s western shores, where they spent the first night of their journey. Having negotiated snow-covered Oshedinaa, the Trout Lake Ridge north of the Binesiwajiing residence of the Thunderers, they reached East Bay on Red Lake as they neared the end of their second day. The aanikoobidaaganag grandfathers arrived in Red Lake halfway into the third day of their trek. It was a strenuous journey, undertaken after

the lake had frozen over in late autumn. Originally, aanikoobidaaganag embarked upon these travels only to sell furs and purchase manufactured goods. As relatives began moving to Red Lake in pursuit of work, however, these outings became opportunities to visit and exchange the latest news. To contrast with today's descendants' travel style, these same distances are attainable at any time of the year in less than thirty minutes using a Cessna 180. It is, of course, comparatively less healthful for both the traveller and the aki. Other places of significance for Namegosibii Anishinaabeg appear in Figure 6.

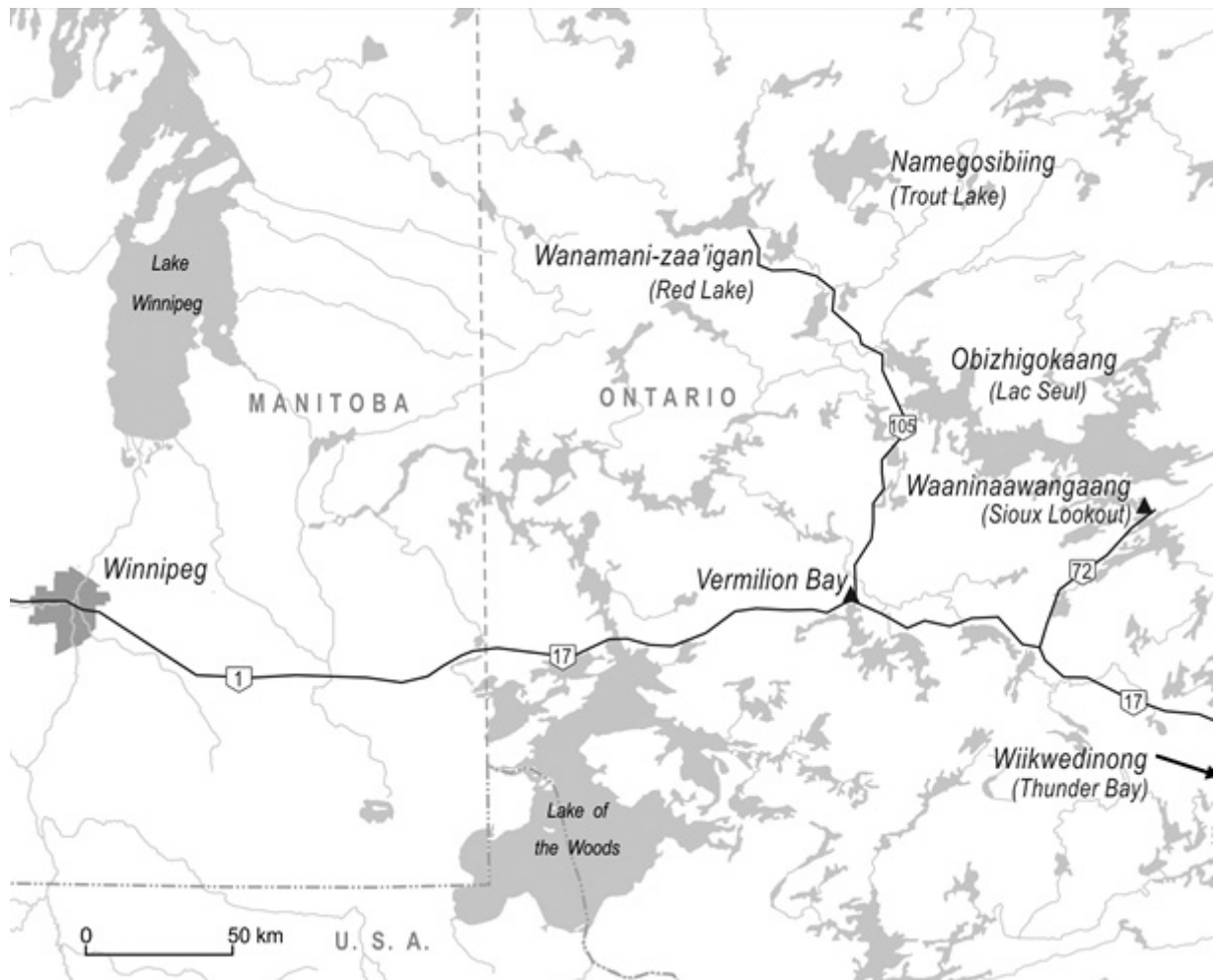


Figure 4

Namegosibiing's location: Northwest of Waaninaawangaang Sioux Lookout and northeast of Winnipeg.

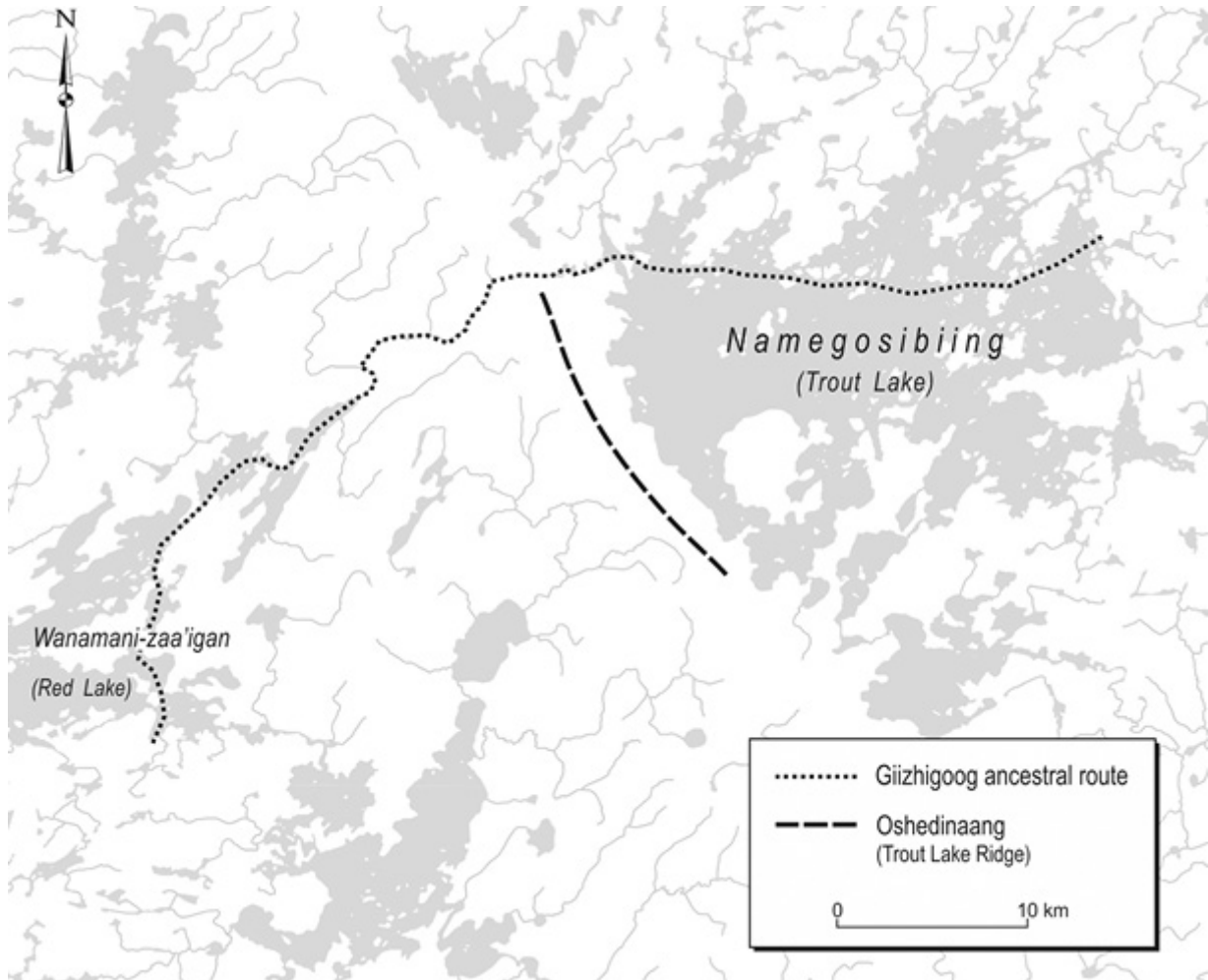


Figure 5

The ancestral route of the Giizhigoog grandfathers to Red Lake.

The dotted line represents the ancestral route from Namegosibiing to Wanamani-zaa'igan Red Lake. The dashed line indicates the orientation of Oshedinaang, the Trout Lake Ridge.



Figure 6

Map of Namegosibiing, showing places of significance for Namegosibii Anishinaabeg. The line marks the Oshedinaang Trout Lake Ridge terminal moraine.

Namegosibiing's senior elder Dedibaayaanimanook explains that she, her mother, and her nephew Gichi-jôj spent several days alone at Jibayi-zaagiing (Figure 6) Jackfish Bay while her father and brother Jiins travelled

north to trap and hunt at Memegweshiwi-zaa'igan. This map also shows the family's winter residence (see Figure 2), close to what is now referred to as Minnow Bay (Figure 6). It is the birth place of Dedibaayaanimanook's first child, Aaliz Alice. Awaiting the arrival of spring, the Giizhig family journeyed to Gaa-minitigwashkiigaag Keesick Bay, where Dedibaayaanimanook herself was born in 1922.

While this portrayal describes only a portion of the Namegosibii Anishinaabe traditional-use lands, it provides a useful backdrop for listening to the speakers' dadibaajim narratives. Their reports about countless cases of unacknowledged responsibilities and accountabilities inject the historical record with greater balance in knowledge production by contributing an Anishinaabe perspective. When, for example, the construction of the Otawagi-baawitig Ear Falls dam flooded Obizhigokaawi-zaa'igan Lac Seul Lake, numerous customary landmarks disappeared. Dedibaayaanimanook and I once drove to Gojijiing, located on Lac Seul Lake where the English River begins its journey westward, to visit the various places of her childhood. Not realizing the island where she and her family often stopped to rest no longer exists, however, Dedibaayaanimanook expressed dismay and sadness to learn it had been submerged when the wemitigoozhiwag latecomers turned the lake into a reservoir. The record of her reaction is an important component of the region's historical narrative.

A more accurate account of the Namegosibiing homelands includes Anishinaabe people's description of their experiences and responses to the activities of the

European settlers and their descendants. The documentation of Namegosibii dadibaajim is particularly important now, when there are community members who still recognize and are able to describe historical events from a first-hand Anishinaabe perspective.



Figure 7.

The homelands as teacher. The Namegosibiing homeland territories provided people with scenes of inspiration, tranquility, beauty, and the prospects of tomorrow's opportunities on a daily basis.



Figure 8.

The homelands as provider of health. Wild rosehips were a source of vitamins for the Namegosibii Anishinaabe people as they journeyed home in late autumn.

What Is Our Dadibaajim?

Eight community members shared the dadibaajim narratives that are the foundation of this book, presenting events, teachings, belief systems, and descriptions of lands that together constitute their sense of distinctiveness as

the Namegosibii Anishinaabeg. As a gichi-Anishinaabe senior elder, Dedibaayaanimanook Sarah Keesick Olsen presents her in-depth knowledge about the physical lands of her ancestors where she was born, raised, and lived most of her life. She uses the language of their foreparents when, for example, she refers to Anishinaabe appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of the homeland territories—the fresh air, clear water, invigorating activities, and healthy foods that people once enjoyed on a daily basis. She notes that even the seemingly trivial act of brushing against a conifer bough becomes an exquisite gift of healthiness as the tree releases its medicinal fragrances.¹ Having now lived through almost 100 winters, Dedibaayaanimanook has a deep sense of appreciation for the largesse of the ancestral homelands as both instructor and provider of life's many necessities (see, for example, Figures 7 and 8). These are among the qualities and perceptions that characterize gichi-Anishinaabe senior elders.

Oo'oons John Paul Kejick, who passed in 2017, was born on the land of his forebears but had to leave his community as a young child to attend boarding school. Still, he retained his Anishinaabemowin speech. Gwiishkwa'oo Eliza Angecone, also born on the noopimakamig boreal territories, experienced the traumas of boarding school attendance but has similarly held onto her ancestral language and many of her parents' teachings. Oo'oons Kejick's younger brother, Niinzhoode Kejick (also now deceased), spent many summers in Namegosibiing with his cousin William King. They too learned Anishinaabemowin, although they grew up during a time when the cultural and

economic challenges of displacement kept them from living on the homelands as the ancestors had done. Martha Angeconeb is younger than Niinzhoode. Having kept the language of her ancestors, she cherishes childhood memories of time spent with her paternal grandmother. The two youngest participants, Riel Olsen and Martha's daughter, Janae Fiddler, have early experiences of life in an urban setting, attending public schools where they learned from a Western perspective. They both indicate enthusiasm for and interest in Namegosibii Anishinaabe dadibaajim.

At the core of dadibaajim and experiential knowledge as spoken by the senior elders is debwewin truth.² According to Anishinaabe thinker Basil Johnston, the notion of debwewin truth comes about in the following manner: "When a man or woman is said to be speaking to the ends of knowledge and to the ends of language, they are said to be speaking the truth."³ It is about the "highest degree of accuracy" that a speaker seeks to achieve.⁴ Using a combination of Anishinaabemowin and English, Dedibaayaanimanook speaks to the debwewin truth concept when she says, "That's why it's so debwemagak gakina gegoon" in her conversations. She explains that the land underpins Anishinaabe understanding, that the land and its constituent parts set the standard for the highest order of truth, not humans. Ultimately, the profoundest and most encompassing of truths reveal themselves to those who live in a balanced relationship with the natural world. The veracity and reliability of dadibaajim as an institution of learning derive from this Anishinaabe debwewin principle.