

Inspired by Language and Land

JOSÉPHINE BACON

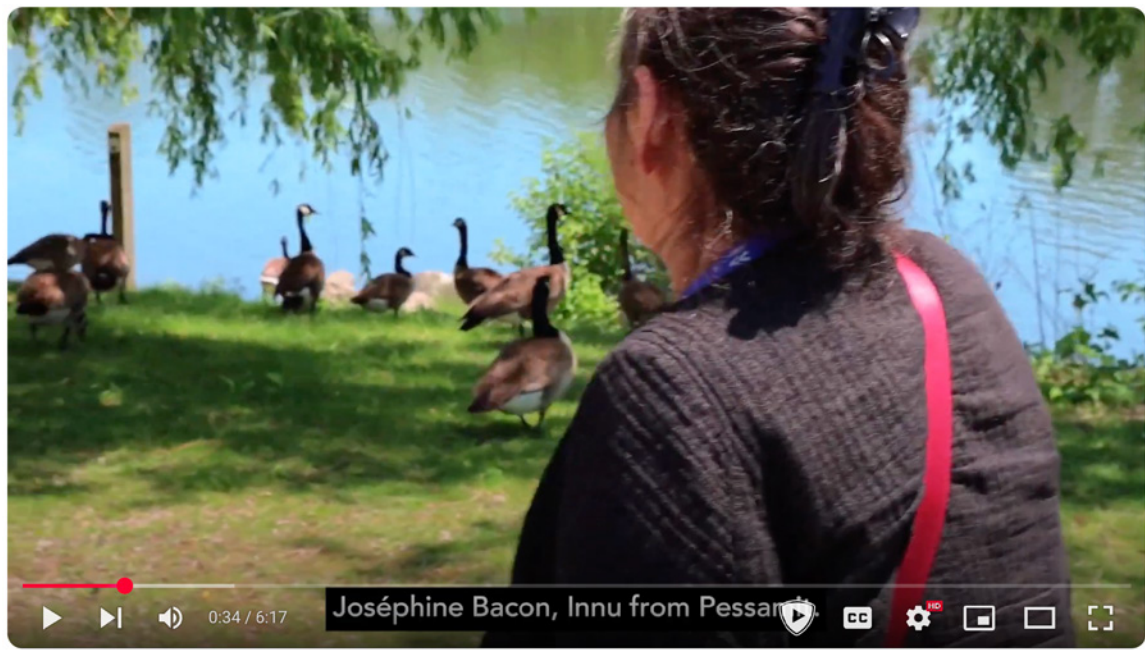
Suggested Grades: 4-8

Big Idea: Language is more than words — it is culture, identity, and connection to land. Poetry helps us honour and protect it.

Introduction

This lesson is based on a six-minute video of Joséphine Bacon, a poet and filmmaker from the Innu community of Pessamit, Quebec, located on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River.

Joséphine believes that our souls speak poems to us, and that our hearts can hear the Earth, if we are willing to stop and listen. In this video, Joséphine explains how poetry can make us feel at home, give us comfort, and help us feel better during difficult times.



Background Information

Who is Joséphine Bacon?

Joséphine is an Innu poet, Elder, filmmaker, and language activist, born in 1939 in Pessamit, Quebec, in Nitassinan, the traditional territory of the Innu Nation. She is a residential school survivor who has worked throughout her life to preserve and revitalize Innu-aimun, the Innu language, especially through oral storytelling, poetry, and film. Bacon is widely recognized for her efforts to bridge generations — bringing the voices of the Elders and the teachings of the land to younger people and broader audiences through her art.

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Themes of her Work

Language Revitalization

Bacon writes in both French and Innu-aimun, showcasing the importance of keeping Indigenous languages alive. Her work supports language learning and pride among Innu youth.

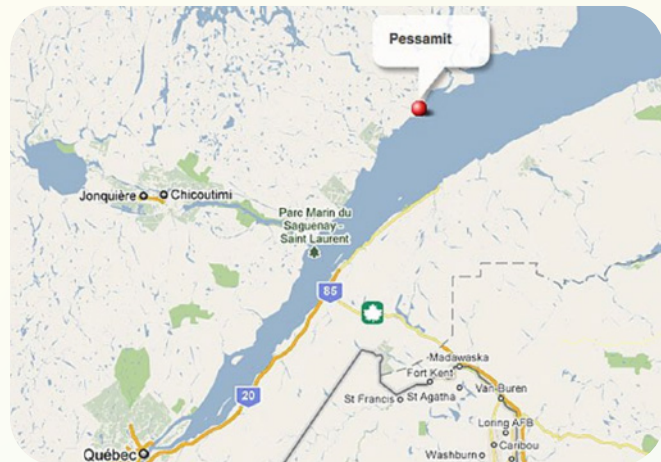
Land and Identity

Her poems celebrate Nitassinan (Innu land) and reflect deep respect for nature, seasons, animals, ancestry and people. In Joséphine Bacon's writing we see that land is not just a place — it is home, teacher, and memory.

Memory and Survival

Bacon often writes about residential school experiences, loss of Elders, and cultural endurance. Her poetry transcends cultural belonging and speaks deeply to the global human experience. Her tone is often gentle yet powerful, inviting readers to listen deeply and respectfully, while speaking to pain and peace.

Pessamit Innu Joséphine's Community



Pessamit is the home of the **Pessamit Innu Band** (formerly known as Betsiamites or Bersimis), whose registered membership was **4,185 people** as of May 2024. As of the 2021 Canadian Census, the on-reserve resident population was **2,428**, with about **86%** having an Indigenous first language (Innu-aimun), and approximately **9–10%** reporting French as their mother tongue; English speakers are rare.

The community spans around **245 km²**, giving a population density of roughly **9.9 people per km²**. It is located on the north shore of the Saint Lawrence River. The surrounding landscape is boreal forest, rivers, lakes, and coastal shoreline. Being tucked along the river where forest meets water, Pessamit is a place where heritage, nature, and community are one and the same. The community still practices traditional harvesting of Atlantic salmon, snow crab, sea urchins, and halibut, grounded in deep ecological knowledge. Unfortunately, climate change is impacting traditional land use: the melting snow, shifting shorelines, flooding, and disrupted migration for species like caribou threaten both ecosystems and cultural continuity.

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Innu-aimun

Innu-aimun (also spelled Innu-aiman or Innu-āimun) is the traditional language of the Innu people of northeastern Quebec and Labrador. It remains one of the most widely spoken Indigenous languages in eastern Canada today.

While the status of the language is vulnerable, it is relatively strong compared to other Indigenous languages in Canada. Some communities (like Pessamit and Uashat) still have high rates of fluency across all age groups.

Innu-aimun is spoken across 11 main Innu communities:

- **In Quebec:** Pessamit, Uashat mak Mani-Utenam, Ekuanitshit, Nutashkuan, Pakua Shipu, Unamen Shipu, Matimekush–Lac John, and Mashteuiatsh.
- **In Labrador:** Sheshatshiu and Natuashish.

Indian Residential School

Joséphine went to the Sept-Îles Residential School in Quebec when she was a child and a teenager. The institution opened in 1952 and operated until 1971 in the Innu community of Maliotenam, near Sept-Îles, Quebec. It was run by Catholic groups and was part of the Indian Residential School system set up by the Canadian government.

At this school, like other residential schools, children were not allowed to speak their own language or practice their culture. Many children were hurt in different ways, and life at the school was very hard because it tried to make them forget who they were.



After the school closed, the land changed into something new. Today, it is the home of Innu Nikamu, a big music and arts festival that celebrates Indigenous culture, strength, and pride.

In September 2023, Canada Post made a special Truth and Reconciliation stamp to remember the Sept-Îles school and help teach people about the history of Indian Residential schools in Canada.

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Preparing the Environment

Know yourself and your students:

The colonial impacts on Indigenous Peoples are historical, intergenerational and ongoing. It is important to take care of yourself during the unlearning, relearning and learning process. Be aware of your students and of the direct connections that they may have with these sensitive topics. Learning about sensitive issues can affect us emotionally, mentally, and physically. We need to be able to navigate our feelings while finding caring ways to restore balance in ourselves. Be prepared for emotional responses, especially if students have Indigenous ancestry or community ties.

Building the foundation:

It takes time to acquire and build knowledge about Indigenous Peoples. Most Canadians have been taught a one-sided story about the relationship between Canada and Indigenous Peoples. This lack of accurate and authentic information has resulted in Canadians believing misconceptions and stereotypes about Indigenous Peoples and not fully understanding their rich history and contributions to this country.

Centre Indigenous perspectives:

- Learn about Indigenous Peoples on whose territory your school is located (what communities/Nations are in your area? What are their languages? What relationships exist between your school and these communities/Nations?).
- Meet with Indigenous Peoples who know the territory you live on.
- Contact your School Board/Regional Indigenous Coordinator/Consultant or Indigenous School Advisor.
- Connect with local First Nations, Métis, and Inuit organizations for information or to arrange to have a speaker visit your classroom.
- Connect with your Province/Territory Treaty Commission Office or Indigenous Department, as several have Speakers Bureaus.
- Watch Indigenous documentaries, films, and webinars.
- Listen to Indigenous podcasts and music.
- Read Indigenous magazines, books, and articles.
- Attend or volunteer at Indigenous events, rallies, and gatherings.

Inclusion in the classroom:

Take the time and make the effort to teach about Indigenous Peoples throughout your instructional practice, so that it is not a one-off lesson or activity. Use every opportunity that you can to include Indigenous presence and pedagogy in your instructional practice or learning environment. There is Indigenous context, content and knowledge related to every subject, issue and topic that we could teach.

A safe environment has parameters to prevent the type of anti-Indigenous talk that can reinforce negative stereotypes and further harm Indigenous students (who may or may not self-identify because of past harms like residential schools).

Tips for this lesson:

Video Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAkqJBS-Vg>

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It is important to understand not all Indigenous people/Nations use the medicine wheel, while at the same time, many have adopted its use. Here it is being used to describe a holistic approach to learning.



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NORTH

Mind - Thinking - Reading

AFTER Watching

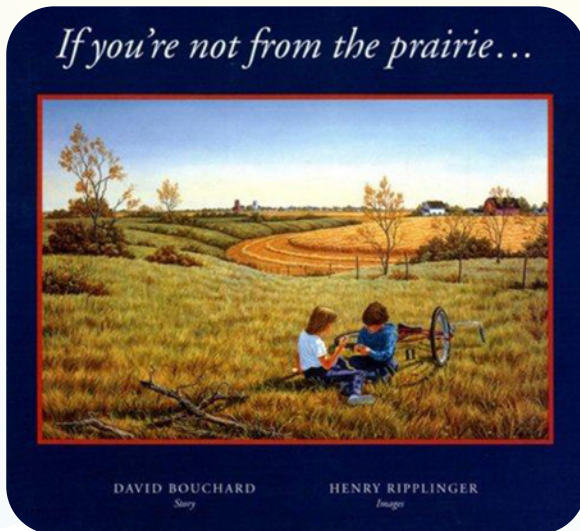
Discussion questions

- What do you think Joséphine meant when she said she went on a journey with the Elders through their stories?
- Joséphine said with a smile that if she lived in nutshimit, she wouldn't need anything because her life would be a poem. Explain what you think Joséphine meant by this.
- Joséphine says in the video that, "wherever you come from, art speaks to you in its own language." Explain what you think Joséphine meant by this.

Connections to Other Texts

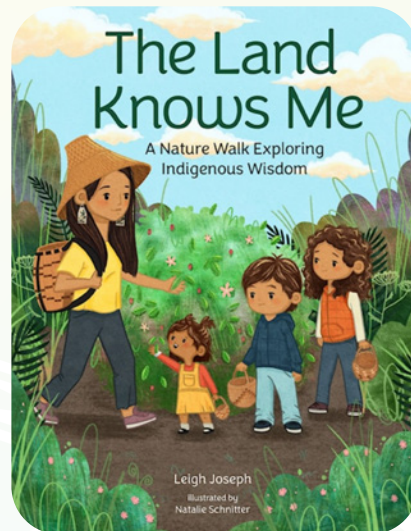
If you're not from the prairie...

David Bouchard



The Land Knows Me

Leigh Joseph



Read other texts where the author makes connections between land, identity and emotions. In the video, Joséphine says "when they (the Indigenous authors) spoke, I went on a journey with them in their stories." How do these authors take you on a journey? Which words do they use that help you understand their land/community?

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EAST

Spirit - Feeling - Listening

During Video (5 min)

- Encourage students to listen for emotion, repeated sounds, and visual symbols (e.g., land, people, cultural items).
- While watching, ask students to jot down 2–3 words or images that stand out.

“Echoes of Home”

Describe the sounds, smells, sights, and textures of a place you call home. How do these sensory details connect you to memories, people, or parts of yourself? What emotions or feelings do these details bring up?

Land-Based Learning

1. Choose images from around your community to display/share with your class. Work together to brainstorm words and emotions they feel when they see that image, consider how these words/feelings define or explain their connections to their community.
2. Take students outdoors to write a “Poem from the Land” incorporating sensory observations and words they use to describe their observations.

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SOUTH

Emotion - Watching - Speaking

BEFORE Watching

- Find Joséphine's community on a map.
- Discuss the location and geographical/ecological region where her community is located.

Video text connection:

Innu Aimun (NFB, 2009) – https://www.nfb.ca/film/innuaaimun_the_innu_language/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

A beautiful music video featuring the talented group Uashtushkuau singing an emotional song, in Innu, about the importance of protecting Indigenous languages.

Encourage students to listen for repeated phrases or words, and pay attention to feelings the video conveys.

Guide whole-class discussion with questions like:

- How does the music make you feel?
- Why might singing in Innu-aimun help people remember and cherish the language?
- What can happen when a language isn't used by the next generation?

Language Learning

Teach greeting phrases:

- Kuei! Tan eshpanin? (Hello! How are you?)
- Tshinashkumitin (thank you) (singular)

For more phrases and pronunciation guides visit the online Innu-aimun dictionary:
<https://dictionary.innu-aimun.ca/>

*Note dialect can be different community to community.

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WEST

Physical - Doing - Writing

Activity: Nature's Paintbrushes



What you will need:

- Rubber Bands (or string)
- Local Plants
- Sticks



Step 1: Take a walk with your classroom outside to find plants and items, i.e. tips of spruce trees, flowers, grasses, feathers.



Step 2: Gather your found items into a neat bundle around the tip of a stick.



Step 3: Take the rubber band and tie it around the bundle and stick to create the paintbrush.



Step 4: Your paintbrush is ready to use and also looks like a tiny broom.

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Activity: Watercolour Landscape

What you will need:

- Paints (watercolour preferred but acrylic or oil will work too)
- Painting surface (watercolour paper, canvas, wood panel)
- Paintbrushes
- Writing Tool
- Paper

Step 1: After having your students view the film, ask the class to think about where their ultimate place of comfort would be. Where is it? What colour is it? Is it inside or outside?

Step 2: Ask the students to write down 3 or 4 adjectives describing this place, their peaceful comfort place that makes them happy.

Step 3: Once the students have written down the descriptive words, have them pass the paper to another student.

Step 4: This swap will initiate the students to create an artwork landscape. Using the description words from another classmate, they must now create what they think this landscape or place may look like.



Step 5: Create an abstract painting with paints and your paintbrushes.

Step 6: Once the students have created their artwork, have the class look at each piece and try to interpret what words they think may have been used to describe this place.

Extend Your Learning

Use this link to learn to speak Innu:

[Les Sept Îles - Small Phrase Book](#)

Use this link to learn more about Innu Nikamu Festival:

<https://www.innunikamu.ca/>

Use this link to learn a song in Innu:

[Ninan Tshitauassimuaat](#)

Use this link to study the animals in Joséphine's traditional territory:

[Canadian Geographic – Our land: Mapping Nitassinan](#)

GLOSSARY

Nutshimit: the physical and social space to practice traditional activities and language.

Residential school: a type of government-sponsored school designed to assimilate Indigenous children into European-based culture. These schools operated between 1880 and 1996.

Transcribe: to put thoughts, speech, or data into written words.

Translate: to change words or text into another language.

Tshiaminniun: the word for “peace” in Innu-aimun.

Urban: related to a town or city.