As part of the verbal voyage through multiple contact zones of colonizers and colonized on which Stl'atl'imx poet-scholar Peter Cole takes readers of *Raven and Coyote Go Canoeing: Coming Home to the Village* he challenges Anglo-Canadian society’s control over English through its textual apparatuses of dictionaries and grammars, and implicitly the schools and other academic institutions through which the authority of these texts is principally realized. He writes:

> as a language person I do not acknowledge as ultimate authority of how I am to express myself 'correctly' using english dictionaries lexicons grammarabilia and other imported colonialist paraphernalia who owns this english language to whom is it deeded chartered who has given the university the government the viceroy intendancy over how documents are to be languaged over what counts as legitimate discourse within a sanctioned institution of post-knowing (Cole 23)

Elsewhere in the book, Cole’s practice of textualizing various forms of oral discourse and code-switching to and from his Ucwalmicwts language as modes of scholarly writing manifest his refusal to govern his tongue according to Anglo rules. The journey thus reanimates the autonomy of Indigenous people over the way they speak and write, providing a libratory model of Indigenizing English.
A growing body of evidence suggests that such Indigenizing is increasingly occurring in the contact zone of Cree and English cultures in Canada, producing a linguistic hybrid that literary critics; at least one writer, Emma LaRocque1; and social scientists interested in language education in Cree communities have taken to calling Creenglish. The word’s appearance in an article in an online newspaper from a Northern Ontario Oji-Cree community suggests the word Creenglish has entered the vernacular, too (Beardy).

An examination of these sources makes clear that the hybridizing is happening from both Cree and English bases, some versions of Creenglish introducing English into predominantly Cree language usage and others introducing Cree elements into predominantly English usage. Scholarly documentation of linguistic hybridizing in this particular geo-cultural context is as yet thin and certainly not adequate to answering the question of whether Creenglish is an interlanguage, or is attaining the status of a pidgin or creole.2 Thus, I am going to offer an expansive definition of Creenglish as any communicative practice that involves the mixing in a single verbal context such as a conversation, poem, or book, of phonological, syntactic, or lexical features of English and Cree or the partly Cree-based Metis nation language, Mitchif. Creenglish can thus entail

1. code-switching, that is an often purposive moving in speech or writing between two languages or two linguistic codes such as standard Canadian English and any Indigenous English vernacular;

2. using calques, that is loan-translations from another language (the English idiom “it goes without saying” is a calquing of the French “cela va sans dire,” for example; and

3. employing, in writing, variant spelling designed to communicate Cree or Michif speakers’ pronunciation of English.
With evidence of Creenglish coming from diverse sources, two pedagogical questions arise: how have educators responded to the existence of such linguistic hybridizing in communities where Creenglish is being spoken and/or written, and what should the attitude to Creenglish be among educators who teach English or Cree language as they work to increase mastery in either language? The slim documentation of Creenglish extant unsurprisingly suggests that language teachers in formal school settings may have negative attitudes toward it, but literary critics responding to its use in creative writing have been more welcoming. While in this paper I am advocating for acceptance of Creenglish as a legitimate communicative medium, I want to make clear up front that my advocacy is not meant in any way to displace the primary importance of revitalizing Cree, or nêhiyawêwin, as speakers of the language call it. Neither is my advocacy designed to suggest that the teaching of acrolectal English, that is, the most prestigious social dialect of the language and the most widely understood, is in any sense unnecessary for successful functioning in the wider world, given the reality of socio-economic hierarchies. What I am advocating is that, as teachers, we ask ourselves how Creenglish is functioning in speech or writing before we decide how to respond to it.

There may be good reasons for teachers who want to see a revival of Cree as a foundation for and a part of a larger renaissance of Cree culture to avoid depreciating, and indeed to show respect for, Creenglish, as there may be for teachers who want to enhance students’ ability to use an internationally readily comprehensible variety of English. Those reasons include that Creenglish may serve as an interlanguage, a stepping stone to learning and ultimately acquiring fluency in the speaking and writing of either nêhiyawêwin or
English, and that the work of writers of Cree ancestry demonstrates how Creenglish can be used in creative and politically important ways.

Yet indications are that currently in pedagogical contexts the depreciation of Creenglish is happening more often than the respect. Part of the reason no doubt is teachers’ laudable desire to equip students to function well in the privileged lect, that is standard English. However, also operational, I believe, is a fallacy related to the users and uses of English that the leading scholar of World Englishes, Braj Kachru, identifies in his article “Teaching World Englishes,” namely: “that the diversity and variation in English is necessarily an indicator of linguistic decay; [and] that restricting the decay is the responsibility of the native scholars [Kachru here means Anglophone Whites of English ancestry] of English and ESL programs” (358). “This fallacy,” Kachru remarks, “has resulted in the position that ‘deviation’ at any level from the native norm is an ‘error’ [and] . . ignores the functional appropriateness of languages in sociolinguistic contexts distinctly different from the Inner Circle [i.e. those contexts in which Anglophone Whites constitute the linguistic majority]” (358-59). What Kachru’s discussion grounds is the position that if we ask how Creenglish is functioning in, or as, a student’s communicative act rather than beginning with the assumption that any use of Creenglish by a student is a mistake in terms of acrolectal English, our pedagogy can contribute to decolonizing language practices.

In the final report of “The Language Mastery Project” in Manitoba, E kakwe nisitôtamâk nisitôtamâwin: Making the Connection ‘Learning and Understanding through Language,’ William Dumas and his fellow researchers report, “While post-secondary education does not have a direct relationship with Aboriginal language mastery, it is related to positive attitudes about Aboriginal language use and negative attitudes towards the use of
Creenglish” (Dumas 25). Yet Dumas goes on to say, “Seventy-four percent of respondents indicated that they mixed English and Cree together in the same sentence some or all of the time” (24). The same 74% thought that keeping their Cree and English separate was not sometimes or always preferable. The investigators also found the most negative attitudes to Creenglish among those with at least some university education. Kirk Anderson’s study of what he refers to as successful education at Reindeer Lake in Ontario also points to a discrepancy between the use of Creenglish in the speech community (28) and the negative attitudes to Creenglish among the university-educated members of that community (25).

These statistics and studies suggest that post-secondary institutions may be directly or indirectly teaching students a bias against this linguistic hybrid. If such bias is being learnt by university and college students, the result would be that a relatively powerful group in Cree communities, including those who become elementary and high school teachers, could well end up depreciating the linguistic practices of what the study samples indicate is the majority of speakers in the communities where the research was done. The goal of those instilling the negative attitudes may indeed be the eminently laudable one of either revitalizing Cree/nêhiyawêwin or improving students’ ability to function in acrolectal English, but we might ask whether the devaluing of language as it is actually spoken in contemporary Cree communities has positive or negative effects on children, and whether attitudes to Creenglish possibly learnt in post-secondary institutions in some ways reproduce the former depreciation of Aboriginal languages under past colonial regimes?

Though an intuitive response to both questions may well be “yes,” they could only be definitively answered by social scientific research. Because I am a literary scholar, I cannot provide answers to such questions. What I can do is argue for the political and aesthetic
values of the code switching, calqueing, and variant spelling in writing by contemporary Cree or Cree-Metis authors. In this way, I am striving to make a case for the acceptance of Creenglish as a legitimate communicative medium.

Before turning to my own area of expertise, the writing of the oral in Canadian literature, however, I want to explain why I think it is possible that Creenglish, whatever else it may be, can function as an “interlanguage,” a stepping stone to learning or relearning either Cree or English. Rose Beardy of the Muskrat Dam First Nation, writing about why she is proud to be Aboriginal, recounts a sense of shame for having lost the Oji-Cree in which she was fluent as a child, but goes on to exult about her fluency in Creenglish:

When I was a child, my first language was Oji-Cree. My parents have videos of my sibling and I speaking away, or actually arguing in our native tongue. Now, I can’t even put more then [sic] three words together without it coming out all jumbled together. It makes me feel “broken” and ashamed that I lost language. It’s like losing a part of myself, a part of me that was so vibrant as a child. . . . I am slowly learning how to speak again, although I am proud to say I can read and write pretty well. But I sure can speak “Cree-nglish” perfectly!

(1)

Beardy’s remarks indicate that in cases of mother-tongue language loss of Cree, fluency in this interlanguage can provide speakers with a feeling of pride in their linguistic abilities, a pride that may help secure skills in the target language. However, if Creenglish is depreciated by those in positions of authority, it is less likely to be a workable basis from which English-speakers can build fluency in Cree or Cree-speakers can increase fluency in English.
The draft Alberta curriculum document “Nehiyawewin: Cree Language and Culture Guide to Implementation: Grade 10 to Grade 12” is the only curriculum document I’ve been able to find that recognizes, here in a section headed “Creative and Aesthetic Purposes,” that students might with benefit “examine the concept of Cree/English= Creenglish—a combination of Cree and English.” It then offers the following sentence to explain, by way of example, what it understands Creenglish to be: “niwî nitawi gasowin nicarim” (I am going to get gas for my car”) (227). In this case, Cree is clearly the first language into which English loan-words are being introduced. In the writing of contemporary Cree or Cree-Metis poets whose work I want to examine for evidence of politically powerful and creative uses of Creenglish, the base language is English, and Cree words, phrases, and sentences are introduced to serve a variety of functions.

Among the multiple functions of Creenglish in this poetry is its serving to

1) proclaim identity and mark both cultural differences and the contemporary presence of Cree or Cree-Metis people in their traditional territories where English discourse largely effaces this presence, and the dominant culture can make Indigenous people and their languages now seem alien;

2) differentiate primary and secondary audiences for the work;

3) recognize the inevitably hybrid condition of contemporary life in these territories;

4) satirize colonial and neocolonial institutions and behaviours, thus having fun with Creenglish while attempting to effect change;

5) establish the intimate connections of Cree and Cree-Metis people to the land and to each other;
6) maintain cultural appropriateness, whether in representations of Cree and Cree-Metis people and their ceremonies that make the representations come alive or in ensuring the “survivance”³ of oral traditions by textualizing them in print while also signaling the ongoing importance of the oral in Cree and Cree-Metis cultures;

7) serve as a way of coming home to self and community, and therefore of claiming kinship; and

8) signal a resurgence of Cree culture and its place within modernity and the future.

The use of Creenglish in the writing of contemporary Cree or Cree-Metis poetry provides plenty of evidence to support the Alberta curriculum writers’ contention that Creenglish can be used in creative and aesthetic ways that respond to what Trinidadian-Canadian writer Nourbese Philip refers to as “the anguish that is english in colonial societies” (11). The use of Creenglish in the poetry of Louise Bernice Halfe/Sky Dancer, Maria Campbell, Gregory Scofield, and Neal McLeod offers models of imaginative language practice that can have positive effects in enhancing the prestige of Cree language and people and in making English more accommodating of Cree and Cree-Metis world views. These effects include challenging the stereotypes associated with non-standard English use among contemporary neo-colonized and hegemonic groups alike; offering a dignified, decolonizing alternative to “Tonto talk” (Womack 155) or cigar store dialect (Littlefield cited in Womack 155); and potentially persuading people of the power of mixing codes while honoring the linguistic realities of Indigenous peoples everywhere following the European Imperial era.

In this way, the work of imaginative writers to bring their people’s speech to the page in what I am calling “lips’ inking” works in a vein different from but parallel to that of professional sociolinguists studying Englishes. Working within the variationist paradigm first
articulated by William Labov in 1969, books like Braj Kachru’s *The Other Tongue: English across Cultures* and essays in the journal *World Englishes*, have for years argued explicitly or implicitly that we need to recognize that what was once thought of as a decidedly singular “proper English” (Crowley 8) should in fact be understood as just one variety of English, itself changeable over time, and no more grammatically correct than any other used widely by a cultural group.

Such revaluation of varieties of English spoken and written in decolonizing contexts is a project that has thus far not gained much purchase on the way Canadian educators think about language, however. As a group we are still much invested in defending standard English, but we might be given pause by the knowledge that the word *standard* in the term *standard English* links the term to the idea of a coercive imposition. The etymology of *standard* is rooted in the name for the military pole with identifying forms or symbols used to indicate to soldiers where they should gather and stand while in later related usage the word *standard* signified a rallying point for armies or navies. Max Weinreich’s old saw that “a language is a dialect with an army and navy” (qtd. in Childs) thus chimes well with the concept of a standard language.

When one version, or lect, of a language is elevated to the status of a standard, skill in its use provides the speaker with what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls linguistic capital, that is, the socio-economic profit a person derives from being able to use the privileged lect proficiently. In the Canadian context, Anglo-Canadian English is the privileged lect, the one with the most linguistic capital, and Aboriginal varieties of English are often depreciated and devalued. However, when poets code-switch between languages like English and Cree and linguistic codes such as standard and Cree-inflected English, they both enhance the linguistic
capital of subordinated languages like Cree and depreciated lects such as Creenglish and tap into mamáhtâwisîwin. This is the power and the “great mystery” that Cree poet-scholar Neal McLeod explains is “a central process of Cree consciousness and knowing. . . and important in articulating a Cree concept of land” (*Cree* 30) because *nêhiyawêwin*—“the process of making Cree sound” (6)—links Cree people to the land (30). By using *nêhiyawêwin* in a predominantly English-language poem that represents contemporary Cree experience, then, Cree poets writing out of their peoples’ traditional territory also serve notice to Anglophones that this land once belonged to the *nêhiyawak*. Their language practice further points to the Cree having a continuing claim to this territory, though the land, as Edwin Tootooosis reported, “môy é-kistawêt—it does not echo” (qtd. in McLeod 6) in the way it did before the advent of invader-settler peoples from Europe.

The greatest sense of the land being again made to echo with the sound of *nêhiyawêwin* in Louise Halfe/Sky Dancer’s first book, *Bear Bones and Feathers*, comes in the poem, “Sister,” which concludes from the brutal, fatal abuse of an Aboriginal woman the need for healing among the *nêhiyawak*. More than half the poem is constituted by a transcription of the words of a Cree morning song to rouse her people to healing themselves, so that the speaker is strongly identified with the *nêhiyawak*, while readers who don’t understand the language are positioned as outsiders who must make recourse to a glossary at the end of the book to grasp the meaning of the extended passages of *nêhiyawêwin*. Here the use of Cree serves a ceremonial function signalled also by the circular nature of the words’ movement as the opening stanzas are repeated at the end of the poem:

Pasikōk, pasikōk

Pehtāw, pehtāw
Kisimsinow pikiskwew

Akosiwak aisiyiniwāk

Piko matotsānihk ta pimātisīyahk

Kīpā kīwek

Race with your spirits

Kākīsimotāk, to heal, to heal.

Iskwew atoskewin kimiyikonaw.

Kakweyāhok, kakweyāhok.

Pasikōk, pasikōk

Pehtāw, pehtāw

Kisimsinow pikiskyew [sic?] . . . (11-23)

The extensive use of Cree in this poem is a clear signal of the primary audience to whom the poem is addressed, but there is also the sense that nêhiyawêwin is the language of the heart, of intimacy, what Emma LaRocque would call “soul language” (185).4

However, in the opening lines of the poem, the one word of Cree surrounded by English words clearly marks cultural difference as Halfe reproduces the effects of the attempted “linguicide” the colonizers practiced but also the nêhiyawâk refusal to let their language die. The line “In the morgue e-pimisik, on a steel table” (1-2) features the isolated Cree word meaning “she lay,” thus suggesting the woman is lying in a foreign environment
as a result of being denatured by violence tied to the colonizers’ culture by the synecdoche of the work boots that trampled her and the beer bottle that has been used to rape her.

In her book-length poem *Blue Marrow*, Sky Dancer acknowledges the land’s changed echoing without ceding either Cree geographical or linguistic territory. She does so by using English as the primary language of her poem but then inserting Cree insistently into her text even when she cites the English language’s most sacred texts. In this way, she disrupts the uniform governance of the Imperial language with an English-Cree hybrid discourse as she syncretizes spiritualities:

\begin{verbatim}
Glory be to okâwîmâwaskiy            [Mother Earth]
To the nôhkom âtayôhkan            [my Grandmothers]
To pawâkan                        [Dream Spirit]
As it was in the Beginning,
Is now,
And ever shall be,
World without end.
Amen. Amen. (1)
\end{verbatim}

Among the âcimowinis/little stories that this praise singer gathers into the medicine story bundle that is *Blue Marrow* is one in which the speaker in the poem identifies herself as a chameleon—a creature that changes colour as a form of protective adaptation to new environments—and her children and grandchildren as culturally hybrid. When she lists family and things that make up the fabric of contemporary urban Aboriginal life, she encodes the protective hybridity of her condition, and by extension that of other contemporary Aboriginal people:
A chameleon. Round dancing,  

the Give-Away. I lift my feet,  

For Usne Josiah. Omeasoo Kirsten Marie.  

Josiah Kesic. Alistair William Aski. (65)

Leaving aside the obviously multicultural names of the grandchildren Josiah and Alistair, if we investigate the origins of the names of her children, Usne Josiah and Omeasoo Kirsten Marie, we find that they are polyglot because *asiniy* (Usne) is Cree for rock, and Josiah is Hebrew in origin, while *omiyasiw* (Omeasoo) is Cree for the beautiful one, Kirsten is Swedish and Danish, and Marie, French. The names are thus one way in which the little story functions as synecdoche—a trope in which the part stands for the whole—for the hybrid condition of people and cultures in traditional Cree territory of the present day. In such circumstances, a linguistic hybrid such as Creenglish is obviously appropriate to the cultural circumstances about which she writes.

Sometimes Halfe marks traditional Cree territory, not with *néhiyawêwin* itself, but with a textual simulation of the voice of a *néhiyaw* speaking English. She has made clear that she has transcribed what many might think of as the broken English of these poems in order to invest this mode of speech with dignity by putting it into a poem, a culturally prestigious genre (Gingell, “When X” 458). When Sky Dancer was a social worker with First Nations women, she heard again the Cree-accented English that her mother spoke and wanted to use it in her poems because of its connotations of maternal love: “it isn’t that I’m making fun of the language and our way of speaking English. To me it’s very endearing. I love to hear my mother speak in thick Cree. The dialect is my mother’s tongue, my mother tongue. So I think
my main concern is not to be misunderstood about why I use dialect, particularly dialect from an already shame-based society” (Spalding 44).

Halfe’s explanation of her motivation for using dialect is remarkably close to one of the reasons Jamaican poet Louise Bennett offered for using Jamaican dialect, or what Kamau Brathwaite, convinced that “caricature speaks in dialect” (13), would call the nation language of Afro-Caribbean people. In the TV Ontario video Louise Bennett, Miss Lou reports that the idea that Jamaican Creole was bad seemed to her utterly unconvincing because the people around her, who were “nice, nice people,” were speaking this language. The intimate associations of the language were key in recommending Creole to her as a poetic medium.;
“You can express yourself so much more strongly and vividly than in standard English” (Interview 45). For Halfe, as for Bennett, the challenge was to find imaginative strategies to simulate in print the everyday talk of community members and to increase the linguistic capital of their respective depreciated lects.

However, in Sky Dancer’s poems “Der Poop” and My Ledders,” Creenglish is instrumental in satirizing colonial institutions and neo-colonizing behaviours while playing with language in a way that Janice Acoose and Natasha Beeds refer to as Cree-ativity.” “Der Poop” takes the form of a poetic letter to the pope on the occasion of his apology to Aboriginal people, a letter in which Halfe uses body-based humour in transforming “Dear Pope” into “Der Poop.” Her variant spelling of pope initiates the line of scatological diction and imagery that runs as a satiric current through the poem. The First Nations woman composing the letter chooses to write on newspaper from the outhouse, thereby suggesting that she is less aligned with those of her “indian friends” (5) who say the apology is good, than with those who “say your sorry don’t walk” (6). The latter phrasing, which exhibits
what Kachru refers to as the bilingual’s creativity (“Bilingual’s”), is an unusual formulation for an English-speaker. Likely, therefore, a calque on a Cree idiom, the phrasing is certainly a memorable way to suggest an apology with no real legs, no power to get around and convince people of genuine contrition. The satirical force of the scatological diction and imagery in this poem is sustained through puns, culminating in the letter-writer’s exclaiming, “say, i always want to dell you stay / out of my pissness” (9-10). The pun here is enabled by the Creenglish of the poem’s speaker, which reflects the Cree sound written as \( p \) but in speech sounded more like the English \( b \).

In “My Ledders,” another of Halfe’s epistolary poems written to the pope, her choice of words and her spellings are part of her meaning-making and political strategies.\(^5\) A white therapist who is appropriating and commodifying sweatlodge ceremonies is called a “darafist” (18) to suggest the violence he is doing, and in Halfe’s explaining why this behaviour is so objectionable, her diction, lineation, and orthography combine for maximum satiric effect:

i don’t dink you like it
if i dook you
gold cup and wine
pass it ’round our circles
cuz i don’t have you drainin
from doze schools (29-34)

By choosing the word \textit{training} rather than \textit{education}, \textit{instruction}, or the more Cree-specific diction \textit{teachings}, and by breaking the line after \textit{drainin}, Sky Dancer communicates the idea that residential schools drained Cree culture out of its students while the reference to “doze
schools” wryly suggests a pedagogy and curriculum that sent students into a kind of sleep, both a doze of boredom because of the alien form of instruction and a doze in terms of being alive to the students’ Cree culture.

It is Cree-Metis culture that is brought alive through the vernacular voice that speaks from the pages of Maria Campbell’s *Stories of the Road Allowance People*. Campbell told Hartmut Lutz and Konrad Gross in an interview that although she would have loved to be able to preserve the stories in the Cree and Michif languages in which they were originally told, that was not possible: “I can’t write in our language, because who would understand it?” (48). When I asked her in an interview what made her put the stories of her people on paper, she revealed that the impulse to translate came from “my father telling me a story [in Cree] and my daughter walking in and wanting to know what was so funny. I remember thinking after I’d translated for her that my children would never hear these stories. I think that was the first time I thought I should be translating and publishing stories” (188). When she found that translating the stories into “‘proper’ English” left “a critical element missing” (189), she became convinced that it was rhythm that was lacking because the “soul of a story, the heart, is associated with rhythm” (189). Only when listening to her father tell stories to her children in Metis Creenglish did she realize that she needed to tell these stories in “the voice and rhythm of his generation” (190), what she called in her interview with Lutz and Conrad, “village English” (Lutz 48).

Though from the point of view of prescriptive grammarians, this language would seem “very broken English” (48), she learnt in working with it that it was “[v]ery beautiful . . . very lyrical” and allowed her “to express [her]self much better” (48) than standard English did. The further advantage she reports is that “I can also express my community
better than I can in ‘good’ English. It’s more like oral tradition, and I am able to work as a storyteller with that” (48). The ironizing of “good English” here points to the fact that for her purposes, for the functions she needs English to serve in textualizing Metis stories, Metis Creenglish is the superior lect.

Using the vernacular and capturing the rhythms of the storyteller by lineating the text as poetry, Campbell translates and transcreates the oral storytelling experience onto and through the page. I say through as well as onto because the variant orthography of the text pushes readers to decode the written text through sounding out the words on the page. This re-oralizing in order to work out what some of the sequences of letters not readily recognizable as English words in fact mean is exemplary of the survivance of Cree-Metis culture. When, for example, Campbell textualizes the storyteller of “Dah Song of Dah Crow” characterizing the title character by saying “Hees a good man / one of dem peoples dat belong in dah ole days / you know dah kine I mean” (5-7), the challenge to silent reading practices which depend on visual recognition of words is clear, and the silent reader is transformed into reader/listener/speaker. The privileging of the ear over the eye is particularly evident when the sequence of letters on the page is a signifier for a standard English word, as for example kine is in this passage. Yet another way that the text suggests an Indigenous speaker is through the reduplication in such structures as “Me I was scared we was turning white” (10) and “nobody he knowed” (15), the doubling of the subject being a feature of both Cree and French, and therefore, of Mitchif (Ahenakew and Wolfart cited in Gingell 453). Through such means Campbell indigenizes the English grapholect, the written version of the language, to reflect the Indigenized English of Cree-Metis speech communities.
The aesthetic of decorum, that is using a language appropriate to speaker and subject matter, further explains the use of Metis Creenglish in Campbell’s textualizing of Cree-Metis oral traditions. A sense of oral storytelling is created at the outset of “Dah Song of Dah Crow” through the opening formula that is the oral equivalent of a title, “I’m gonna tell you about” (1), and the narrator’s revealing his knowledge of Crow came chiefly from stories, “I heerd lots about him over dah years” (3). The text further simulates oral storytelling by directly addressing the listening audience as “you” and reacting through exclamations to implied signs of reader/listener disbelief. The conclusion of the following description of Crow, for example, reflects audience incredulity: “You know / dey even say dat man he can talk to dah eagles. / Dats true!” (22-24). By using an Aboriginal vernacular to textualize Metis oral traditions, Campbell is, like Peter Cole, refusing the authority of colonialist language paraphernalia that “prescribe how a document is to be languaged,” and the eye vernacular Campbell employs can be read as her linguistic response to the situation summed up in the lines “Me I was scared we was turning white / but a few years ago / dah times dey start to change” (10-12). By “Mitchif-izing” the Whiteman’s English to create Metis Creenglish, Campbell makes convincing the claims that the Metis have begun to reverse the trend to whitening and that the carriers of her people’s traditional culture are indeed “starting to come back again” (8).

Like Halfe and Campbell, Metis poet Gregory Scofield uses Cree-accented English to be true to the speaking voices of community members, sometimes with comic but political effect. His poem “Conversation My Châpan Mary Might Have Had with Mrs. Sarah F. Wakefield” is counter-colonial discourse that contests through Creenglish the depreciation and savaging of the Metis, and writing Metis self-worth and values into a form of hybrid
English discourse. The body of his poem responds to the allegations and insulting statements in the epigraph from Wakefield’s *Six Weeks in the Sioux Tepees: A Narrative of Indian Captivity*: “Most of the half-breeds are treacherous. Such is the way with the part breeds, or many of them. I would sooner trust a full blood than any of them. There is too much art and duplicity in them” (12). The angry response Mary dishes up is well salted with imprecations and occasionally peppered with Cree or Mitchif. It derives a good part of its gusto from the sense that Mary couldn’t care a dog’s rear end for the proprieties Mrs. Wakefield lives by, including the “proper” English she speaks and writes:

mâmaskâc! dare I shay  
*it is foolish or surprising*

you shtupid ole biddy

Mish Shara

what you got to blab about

wooman

you got home shafe an

you ole man

he found you to be—how you shay

in your Anglaish?—

not boddered, not molested
so how come dat Mish Decamp
dat udder gaptive wooman

she dell everyone you far from
dah lamb-a-God

in gaptivity
but an ole durkey hen

rufflin up you fedders
pumped up wooman

like you got no shame

but me Mish Shara
I got doo mutz art

—what you shay?—
doo mutz tuplicity in me

do be drust-wordy

but you
you shtupid ole biddy
I mate you a fiddle dune

galled dah “Mish Mahkesîs
in dah Chicken Coop Jig” (1-29)

Creenglish in this poem is a defiant declaration of identity in the face of a baseless sense of superiority, and though Scofield translates the Cree words for contemporary readers, the poem’s Mary makes no such concessions to the non-Cree-speaking, and likely unilingual, object of her wrath. If Wakefield in fact spoke only one language, Mary’s ability to code-switch would make her intellectual attainments exceed Wakefield’s in the linguistic field at least. In any event, this ability, linked to her being Metis, and therefore having two genetic and cultural pools to draw from, may account for her ironically appropriating the idea of her duplicity. The Oxford English Dictionary states that while the earliest and still most common meaning of duplicity is “The quality of being ‘double’ in action or conduct . . . ; the character or practice of acting in two ways at different times, or openly and secretly; deceitfulness, double-dealing,” the literal meaning of the word duplicity is “The state or quality of being numerically or physically double or twofold: doubleness.” Though Mary may be claiming she is a double-breed in the sense of being doubly endowed, she does not deny her identification with her people by abrogating the name half-breed, forthrightly declaring “me I am a half-breed” (49). Her wit in naming the fiddle tune she claims she could compose for the English woman and her ability to compose further substantiate her closing claim that she has . . . more art
more duplicity

in my liddle doe, damn right
you stupid ole biddy,

den you got wooman
in you whole hungry

atimocisk bones.

(65-71)

Scofield also regularly switches between Cree and English in his poems that don’t use this kind of Cree-accented English. His declaredly autobiographical poem is in fact named in both Cree and English, “ni-âcimon / Autobiography”, but the priority he gives to Cree in the title is surely a politically significant one. In the context of his life story the order of languages also marks a coming home and a claiming of kin through language. The opening section of this poem is headed by the year of his birth and establishes that his sense of self is founded on his mother’s storytelling, narratives for which he says he thirsted:

The mâmîtonêyihcikâna [memories]
spilled from her mouth
and trickled
in spurts, me a dry bed
thirsting ácimowina.  

La Ronge, Lynn Lake
were dots on a map
revisited by my finger.
The pipísis before me
floated around blue inside
and went silently with her
to the grave.

But kîwetinohk
I remember
Whitehorse
we lived in an old trailer
until the house was built. (“1966” 1-17)

Scofield’s book-length memoir *Thunder through My Veins: Memories of a Métis Childhood* reveals that Scofield’s mother did not speak Cree because her fair-skinned but dark-haired and dark-eyed father had been made to feel ashamed of his Metis origins and wanted to protect his children from the racism he had experienced (6-9); so he, like many Metis after the Northwest Resistance, identified as French, denying all connection to Aboriginal peoples. Thus it was that Gregory Scofield had to learn Cree as a schoolboy from his adoptive Auntie Georgina. The use of Cree in this early section of his autobiographical poem can be read, then, as him as an adult claiming kin, refusing to accept the mantle of shame that the
colonizing culture encouraged Metis people to wear and accepting instead the invitation of the unnamed brown-skinned woman he refers to later in the part of the poem headed “1986.” She told him her own story of wandering for years “homeless / in her bones” (24-25), took him for dinner on his twenty-first birthday and “planted a garden in [his] heart” (28-29) by later driving him north past Duck Lake, a key site of Metis resistance, and whispering to him “‘Greg, pekiwe’” (38), Greg, come home. Using Cree thus becomes one of his ways of homing.

Not surprisingly, then, Cree also has a ceremonial presence in Scofield’s work, as it does in Sky Dancer’s. “Prayer Song for the Returning of Names and Sons” begins with an epigraph that transliterates the syllables of a Cree prayer song taught to Scofield by his adopted brother, Dale Awasis. The song functions in ways that have some similarities to, but also an important difference from the way the morning song functions in Halfe’s “Sister.” Because the epigraph is empty of semantic content, its place as epigraph immediately sets up two different sets of relations between poet and reader, as does the Cree prayer in “Sister”: on the one hand there’s the small group of those who know the Cree chant and how it functioned in prior contexts, and for whom it would thus have culturally determined affective power; on the other hand are those who might guess from its relationship to the title that it could be a prayer song, but would need Scofield’s indication at the end of the epigraph to confirm that the epigraph is, indeed, a prayer song. For most readers of the poem, therefore, the sequence of ideophones—auditory symbols that are syllables without semantic content that can nevertheless function as cultural signifiers—will remain amputated from their contextual meaning. What Barbara Godard memorably wrote of a textualized chant of an Inuit spiritual leader, Aua, would also be true of the Cree prayer if syllables were substituted
for *words* in Godard’s assertion: “held fast against the floods of time the words are unmoored from their meaning which has lodged in a specific context as much as in the text” (Godard 94).

In Scofield’s epigraphic prayer the syllables become metonymic of the poet’s affiliative intentions in the poem as he reconnects with his female Cree or Cree-Metis ancestors and with this Cree genre. He invokes his ancestral grandmothers in Cree, though they bore Christian names: “â-haw, ni-châpanak Charlotte, / Sarah, Mary ekwa Christiana” (1-2). He explains he does so to throw back the names “birthed from the belly / of their ships, . . . taken // from their manitowimasinahikan” (literally, God’s book, i.e. bible). His foremothers are not really the people their Christian names suggest; they are not white women:

nadomya kiyawaw [you are not]

Charlotte, Sarah, Mary

ekwa Christiana [and]

nadomya kiyawaw móniyaskwewak (32) [you are not white women]

Scofield’s song is therefore a “renaming song” (32) to restore to his châpanak “the spirit of your iskwew / names” (15-16). These latter names are calques from the Cree that declare the women as *nêhiyawâk* even through the obscuring medium of English:

I am singing

five generations later,

natohta [listen]
my prayer song

so you will be called,
sung as:

Tattooed From The Lip To The Chin Woman,
êy-hey! Sung as:

She Paints Her Face With Red Ochre,
êy-hey! Sung as:

Charm Woman Who Is Good To Make A Nation
Woman, êy-hey! (35-44).

To convey the full ceremonial effect of this poem through excerpts is very difficult; that effect is really only attainable by experiencing the poem as a whole with its increasingly powerful repetitions, its movement from the opening Cree salutation to the closing Cree salute êy-hey! But as Scofield sings home the names of his grandmothers and the bones of their stolen sons, his Cree marks the territory in which they lived as territory of the nêhiyawak, making it again resound with nêhiyawêwin.

It is also to do the political work of making the land again echo with Cree that Neal McLeod so often weaves nêhiyawêwin into his poems, characteristically giving precedence to its words, which he then juxtaposes with English glosses. Though he sometimes gives bilingual titles to his poems, as he does for example in “nimosôm asiniy / my grandfather rock” (Songs 61), at others, Cree words alone serve as title. In “ê-sâh-
sâkiniskêpayihot,” the meaning of the title is not revealed to non-Cree speakers until late in the poem, and the Cree title is followed by a complete line of Cree before McLeod begins to gloss and launches into an English-language telling of a story about his great-grandfather:

\[ \text{nicâpànîpân kôkôcîs kî-nîhta-kistikânihkêw} \]

my great-grandfather \( kôkôcîs \)

a successful farmer went

to \( kîstapînânihk \), Prince Albert

to get farm parts and other things (1-5)

While the bilingual quality of his poems acknowledges the need to cushion the use of Cree by translating into English and to use more English than Cree so as not to alienate readers who don’t know Cree, the language politics of his writing contests English as the prestige lect in the territory about which he writes. \( kôkôcîs \) goes to \( kîstapînânihk \), not to Prince Albert. The latter is given as a gloss, not the authentic name. McLeod’s use of Cree also creates a politically powerful situation for Anglophone readers such as myself because my stumbling pronunciation of \( nêhiyawêwin \) reveals a shift in the usual power relations between \( nêhiyawak \) and English-speakers. This shift goes some way to redressing the imbalance between the dominant English and the \( nêhiyawêwin \) in the poem, an imbalance produced by colonial governance, including language policies and practices, and still evident in the situation that in order to have much of an audience, McLeod must write primarily in English. Still, his use of \( nêhiyawêwin \) has the power to confront those who don’t know Cree with reminders that they are on territory originally held by others, and his code switching on the space of the page or in speech when the poem is read aloud encodes the coming together of two cultures on now
shared territory with the inequities of that “sharing” made evident by the far greater prevalence of English in the poem.

The whole poem becomes a dual celebration of McLeod’s great-grandfather and Cree’s expressive power through its narration of the story of kôkôcîs getting “all gussied up” (11) to go into town, and for all his inability to read English signs, emerging triumphant from what could have been a deflating encounter. McLeod describes kôkôcîs and his contemporaries as dandies who “walked in style, proud as peacocks / marching down the streets of Prince Albert / like Alexander through Babylon” (17-20). This description and especially the simile comparing kôkôcîs’s swagger to that of Alexander function to subvert the stereotype of the defeated Indian by recasting him as conquering hero. In the anecdote at the centre of the poem, which features him driving down the bridge in the centre of Prince Albert while it is under construction, kôkôcîs’s inability to read the English signs results in him driving down a lane into incoming traffic.

But McLeod’s is not the story of Cree man as failed modern. Instead, the poet represents his great-grandfather in triumphal procession, also comparing the situation to the futuristic fight in the 1999 film The Matrix. That McLeod chooses the moment of making this comparison to reintroduce Cree contradicts the idea that this language has no part in early twentieth-century modernity by establishing a place for Cree not just in the present of the poem but also in a highly technologized computer world at the turn of the next century:

he was happy to beat all hell
riding down the street in all of his regalia
catching the sun in the chrome of his car
the gloss of the metal radiating out
everything in slow motion
as he passed by the metal railing, time stood still
as he was crossing the bridge
like the fight scene of The Matrix
but ê-kî-wâstïnamâkot, they were waving at him
at least that’s what he thought
he smiled and waved back: ê-sâh-sâkiniskêpayihot (27-37)

McLeod makes evident the economy and grace of Cree expression by comparing it with the awkward English calquing of the latter Cree word: “the way you would say in English / is he kept showing his hidden hand quickly” (38-39); but in the pragmatically repetitious style of oral storytelling, McLeod drives the point about Cree home by concluding his poetic anecdote by repeating the nêhiyawêwin word for “he waved” and remarking on its encapsulating power: “ê-sâh-sâkiniskêpayihot, / a whole story in one word” (48-49).

In using Creenglish as they do Halfe, Campbell, Scofield, and McLeod recreate Cree’s verbal economies because these poets introduce Cree into English texts in ways that serve multiple functions. In colonial or neo-colonial situations, the use of a linguistic hybrid such as Creenglish is always political, serving as a means of proudly reclaiming a colonially pejorated identity and a way of both marking cultural difference and constituting a dialogue between cultures. As the present discussion has shown, Creenglish may be a way of coming home and claiming or reclaiming kin, territory, space, and place within contemporary Canada or even the nation of the future. Choosing Creenglish is a way of respecting and being intimate with the people about whom the poets are writing and to whom their words are sometimes primarily addressed because this linguistic choice refuses the colonial devaluing
of Cree and Cree-Metis people and the way they speak, whether that be in nêhiyawêwin or a Cree-inflected English. Moreover, extended passages of Cree in a poem or in a book of predominantly English-language poems establish different relationships to Cree-speaking and non-Cree-speaking audiences, allowing the poets to sometimes designate Cree or Cree-Metis peoples as their primary audience. Creenglish is chosen as the most culturally appropriate medium for the voices of people of Cree ancestry and for honouring the place of oral traditions in Cree and Cree-Metis cultures while ensuring their survivance. Also among the functions of the Creenglish in the poems I have discussed is its deployment to satirize colonial and neo-colonial institutions and behaviours.

I have drawn on the work of poets at considerable length here to try to make the case that Creenglish can be used to powerful effect, and to argue that it has a place within classrooms because it has a place within contemporary Cree and Cree-Metis communities and contemporary culture. If we as teachers dismiss it as simply bad English, we not only ignore its power when used well, as it is by the poets whose work I’ve sampled, but, I submit, we also risk replicating the colonizing language practices from which Indigenous peoples in this country and around the world have already suffered quite enough. We might ask ourselves, then, if we really want to stamp out such varieties of English like the anglophilic Mas(ter) Charlie character of the poem “Bans a Killin,” by Jamaican nation language poet Louise Bennett aims to do, or do we want to heed Bennett’s warning of what the attempted linguicide that he threatens would produce:

So yuh a de man me hear bout!

Ah yuh dem seh dah teck

Whole heap a English oat seh dat
Yuh gwine kill dialec!

...............  

Dah language weh yuh proud a,
Weh yuh honour an respect—
Po Mas Charlie, yuh no know seh
Dat it spring from dialec!

Dat dem start fi try tun language
From de fourteen century—
Five hundred years gawn an dem got
More dialec dan we!

...............  

When yuh done kill ‘wit’ and ‘humour’,
When yuh kill ‘variety’,
Yuh wi haffi fine a way fi kill
Originality!

Rather than viewing Creenglish as a decaying of English, and its use by students as necessarily a mistake, then, let’s remain mindful of how useful it could be as an interlanguage and, as the poets Halfe, Campbell, Scofield, and McLeod have demonstrated, how powerful it can be as a communicative medium.
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LaRocque was prompted to use the term Creenglish by interviewer Hartmut Lutz’s wondering whether she might ever try the kind of linguistic hybridizing that Chicana and Chicano writers using Spanglish have introduced into their work (Lutz 185).

An interlanguage is an emerging linguistic system developed by a second-language learner who, as yet lacking mastery of the new language, approximates featurew of that language while retaining other features of her or his first language. A pidgin is a language with a simplified grammar and lexicon developed when peoples come into recurrent contact but do not share a common language. While not the native tongue of either people, it does have norms of usage. A creole develops out of a pidgin to become the mother tongue of a speech community.

Survivance is the term Anishinaabe author Gerald Vizenor uses to signify not just the survival or simple continuance into the present and future of Indigenous cultures but also their flourishing in and through the process of the continuous change by which all living cultures are shaped. See Manifest Manners: Narratives of Postindian Survivance.

Halfe’s positioning of the nêhiyawâk as her primary audience through the use of an extended passage of Cree is a strategy she will repeat in her second book, Blue Marrow, when she summons the Grandmothers to come and heal (16-17).

For a fuller discussion of Halfe’s strategies in the Creenglish poems, see Gingell, “When X Equals Zero.”

Eye vernacular is my modification of Peter A. Roberts’ term eye dialect, a modification made because I agree with Tom Paulin’s assertion in the introduction to his anthology The Faber Book of Vernacular Verse, that “the term dialect [. . .] has a certain archaic, quaint, over-baked remoteness that really belongs in the dead fragrance of a folk-museum” (xii). He glosses vernacular as “a term used in sociolinguistics to refer to “the indigenous language or dialect of a speech community, e.g. the vernacular of Liverpool, Berkshire, Jamaica, etc.”

For a more complete discussion of Campbell’s strategies for creating Creenglish as part of her textualizing of orality, see Gingell, “When X Equals Zero.”

See Shelley Stigter, “The Dialectics and Dialogics of Code-Switching in the Poetry of Gregory Scofield and Louise Halfe” for a discussion of the way code-switching simultaneously sets up a dialectic that distinguishes cultures and a dialogue between them.