

Indigeneity in Dialogue: Indigenous Literary Expression Across Linguistic Divies

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Introduction

Indigeneity in Dialogue: Indigenous Literary Expression Across Linguistic Divides

L'autochtonie en dialogue: l'expression littéraire autochtone au-delà des barrières linguistiques

MICHÈLE LACOMBE, HEATHER MACFARLANE,
AND JENNIFER ANDREWS

THIS SPECIAL SECTION EMERGED from conversations between Michèle Lacombe and Heather Macfarlane at a conference entitled *Littératures autochtones émergentes: Canada, Afrique du Nord, Océanie francophone*, organized by Université Laval and held at Wendake 9-11 Sept 2008; the proceedings, edited by Maurizio Gatti and Louis-Jacques Dorais, are published with Montreal's Mémoire d'encrier press. Editors, writers, and scholars from three continents, all interested in French-language Indigenous literatures of the world (including Canada and Quebec), came together at this historic conference. Native writers and scholars in attendance shared many cultural values, despite national differences. Indigenous world views, experiences of European colonialisms, patterns of resistance, and interest in how oral literatures relate to writing dominated group discussions. The conference was inspiring and extremely enlightening, and led to dialogue between First Peoples across the globe.

Our attendance and participation at this conference reminded us that while this momentous exchange was occurring between French-speaking Indigenous groups globally, there was little going on to promote exchange between English- and French-speaking Indigenous peoples within Canada and Quebec. If it was possible to organize internationally focused initiatives such as the one at Wendake, then surely it must be possible to foster similar exchanges between French- and English-speaking Indigenous writers not separated by oceans. As a first step, Michèle Lacombe proposed and organized a panel as part of the 2009 meeting of

the Association for Canadian and Quebec Literatures, (ACQL/ALQC) held at Carleton University in Ottawa. Jennifer Andrews, who attended the panel at Carleton, encouraged us to solicit articles for a special section of the journal; the result is this co-edited special section of *SCL/ÉLC*. All five of the presenters at Carleton have contributed to this section, a testament to their commitment to support and encourage dialogue between Indigenous writers across the French-English linguistic divide.

The call for papers for the Carleton conference focused on the role of languages in Indigenous writing in Canada, with particular attention paid to how the dominance of English and French impacts upon Indigenous languages and cultures. With an estimated fifty-three Indigenous languages spoken in Canada, Indigenous peoples are used to dealing with linguistic diversity; they are also used to dealing with colonial language policies. Canada has a long history of attempting to eradicate Indigenous languages. While francophones in Quebec (and to varying degrees in New Brunswick, Manitoba, and Ontario) have had some measure of success in fighting for recognition of language rights, federal and provincial governments have been reluctant to address the need for Indigenous language initiatives. Consequently Native writers in Canada continue to use both English and/or French as their primary means of communication in the world at large, although some of these individuals also speak their Native language with members of their own families and communities. In a context in which English represents the dominant discourse and French is simultaneously celebrated by some and resented by others, Indigenous writers who use French rather than English find themselves in an especially complex situation, experiencing double marginalization. We need only consider how Louis Riel, as a French-speaking poet and Métis leader, represented different political realities for English, French, and Native people in the nineteenth century and beyond.

There is a rich corpus of both historical and contemporary writing by Indigenous authors in both of Canada's "official" languages, as well as in a number of Indigenous languages. Some Native writers have used and continue to employ their original Native language, which has as one of its advantages the bridging of the linguistic divide between French and English speakers in some First Nations. For those Native authors who have lost their mother tongue, however, dialogue between French-speaking and English-speaking Indigenous writers often remains difficult.

Given that the use of both English and French brings with it a complex colonial history, sometimes exchange between Indigenous peoples who use these languages is limited. It is demanding enough to master two languages and to fight for the preservation of one's own Indigenous language without having to learn a third language. Nevertheless, some First Nations individuals speak three or more languages, including French and English as well as several Native languages.

This special section of *SCL/ÉLC* explores how linguistic barriers, especially those resulting from residential school experiences and other colonialist attempts to eradicate First Nations languages, affect exchanges between Indigenous artists, whether they work in English, French, or Indigenous languages. It also looks at how French- and English-language Indigenous literature makes use of Native languages to address and circumvent this situation. We would like to see enhanced resources for overcoming some of the barriers that stand between Indigenous authors who write in French and in English — resources that would not be dictated by mainstream political agendas and governments, although they would need to be financially supported on a number of levels. Currently, resources devoted to translation and interpretation are typically granted only for government meetings or other exchanges of a political or legal nature. That we find it easier to write in English, for instance, limits the accessibility of this introduction to French speakers. Indeed, the double task of self-translation, difficult and problematic enough for those of us who grew up with Canada's two official languages, should not be imposed on Indigenous writers. How is access to programs and funding limited or enhanced, based on one's primary language of expression? Logistics aside, as scholars, we are also interested in comparing the literary expression of French- and English-speaking Native writers. How can literature facilitate (or inhibit) exchange between First Peoples? What are the benefits of dialogue between Native writers who work in different languages, and what might be the basis of common ground between them? And what is the role of critics, both Native and non-Native, in this process of exchange?

When Michèle Lacombe proposed the panel for the ACQL/ALQC meetings at Carleton, she envisaged a group of papers that would take a comparative or interdisciplinary approach, draw on either a single text or multiple author studies, and consider neglected aspects of Indigenous literary history from both an Indigenous and a Western standpoint.

She had hoped for responses by both Native and non-Native scholars as well as papers in both French and English. Throughout the process of generating both the panel and the collection of articles that follows, several challenges have emerged that need to be addressed in order to allow such comparative work to flourish. For instance, the mandate of Canadian scholarly organizations that typically embrace and champion the perspectives of Native authors and critics on a regular basis (such as The Canadian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (CACLALS)) means that they are not frequently focused on comparative French-English approaches to the politics of language/s in Native writing in this country. Similarly, Indigenous organizations such as The Canadian Indigenous Native Studies Association (CINSA), while interested in oral literature, intellectual traditions, and artistic practices, do not have a long history (at least compared to similar organizations in the United States) of paying attention to creative writing. ACQL/ALQC, for its part, does not have as its official *raison d'être* the task of considering the relationship of Indigenous languages to Canada's official languages in the history and reception of its literature; consequently Indigenous scholars have not used this organization as a forum for dialogues between and about Indigenous writers in Canada.

While the co-editors of this special section hoped to include work by both Indigenous scholars and writers, in the end we found ourselves struggling to strike a balance between French- and English-language contributions. If one group is to represent the majority of contributions in such endeavours, we would prefer that it be Native contributors, and in calling for more work in this area, we are hoping to engage the imagination of Indigenous scholars with an interest in at least some of the questions and concerns we have outlined. We do not want this project to be dominated by non-Native scholars or writers. Intersections between dance, theatre, visual art, poetry, and song are of especial interest in discussions of Indigenous creation focused on multiple languages and modes of expression, especially for those Aboriginal artists who work in more than one medium. In addition to university-based literary studies, support for the study and reclamation of Indigenous languages, which was called for in the 1996 Report of the Royal Commission on Indigenous Peoples, is taking place in some communities and universities — but more needs to be done in these areas. In particular, skilled

(and reasonably paid) translators of Indigenous texts are needed. Such translations are helpful, despite the fact that some will be inevitably limited as because of the differences between the two languages. By no means intended to replace literature written in First Nations languages, these translations (including French-English translations) would supplement existing bilingual editions of poetry, for instance, in which First Nations languages appear side-by-side with French or with English.

Recognizing the important role of Indigenous languages in relation to French and English writing suggests one avenue for rejuvenating language-based comparative work, which seems to have waned in the past few decades (at least in Euro-Canadian and postcolonial literary circles). While such endeavours should not take place at the expense of research projects defined and undertaken by Native and Indigenous scholars with an interest in literature, interdisciplinary university programs such as comparative literature programs might wish to collaborate with discipline-based departments on research into the role played by languages in Indigenous literatures. Anthropology departments could benefit from analyses of contemporary creative writing as well as visual art by First Nations creators. Notably, the numbers of non-Native Canadian and Québécois students who enroll in Indigenous language courses is growing (without, one hopes, negatively affecting the balance of Native and non-Native students in such courses), which could bring attention to how and why language and literature studies intersect with questions of cultural identity. Canadian Studies and Native/Indigenous Studies departments may wish to revisit their engagement (or lack of engagement) with the French language as an avenue to accessing new creative work rather than merely associating it with the burdens of colonialist assimilation policies or the legacy of longstanding wars between different groups of European colonizers. An exploration of the ways in which Manitoba and New Brunswick writers employ English, French, and Indigenous languages in their work, for instance, as well as border-crossing studies on the presence of Native languages in texts authored by Indigenous writers who live in close proximity to, or on either side, of the international boundary between Canada and the United States — such as Okanagan, Blackfoot, Mohawk, or Maliseet nations, to mention only a few — might also prove fruitful starting points.

Contemporary issues and future directions for research can only be briefly mentioned here. We consider the work of new scholars in this

special section as a wonderful starting point for future study in this area. Keavy Martin's article offers a thoughtful introductory overview of problems and dilemmas posed by a comparative, language-based approach to the study of Aboriginal literature. Martin offers a close reading of the novel *Sanaaq*, written by an Inuk woman named Mitiarjuk, then living in Kangiqsujaq, in the region of Northern Quebec now referred to as the territory of Nunavik. Martin has studied Inuit and French and writes in English; her article considers the challenges of reading a text that, despite being composed in an Aboriginal language, is only available in published form in a French translation by a European anthropologist. Isabelle St-Amand, like Martin, is interested in the relationship of orality to literacy; her essay explores strategies of re-appropriation in Native narratives by Indigenous authors living in Quebec. She pays particular attention to the categories of autobiography, poetry, and drama in French, while also acknowledging the important literary contributions of English-speaking Native writers. St. Amand offers an overview of recent French-language anthologies of creative writing and monographs of literary criticism, but her primary focus is on the tools she considers most useful for analyzing texts by Indigenous authors writing in French. Like Martin's article, St. Amand's study epitomizes the groundbreaking scholarship being produced by a new generation of academics whose work is characterized by a deep respect for First Nations people and their cultures.

Michèle Lacombe comes from an earlier generation of scholars who have witnessed the longstanding neglect of Indigenous literatures in comparison to "minority" languages and literatures in Canada and Quebec. As the daughter of a francophone teacher of Shakespeare, and as a self-identified métis (mixed blood) academic — born in New Brunswick, raised in Quebec, and now living in Ontario — Lacombe examines the play *Hamlet-le-Malécite*, written by the Huron-Wendat director and playwright Yves Sioui-Durand. Sioui-Durand is one of the founders of Ondinnok Theatre Company and the author of an important body of work, as reflected by the fact that three of the articles in this special section consider his texts. Lacombe addresses questions of language and identity in *Hamlet-le-Malécite*, the story of a young Malécite man who wishes to take on the lead role in a French-language production of *Hamlet*. The play uses postmodern satirical techniques and a hybrid form of theatre to address perceptions of miscegenation

and cultural loss in the eyes of Canadians, Québécois, and other First Nations, reclaiming Indigenous identities and perspectives in the process. Sioui-Durand engages with different kinds of spoken and written English and French as well as with a number of Indigenous languages, foregrounding how — for better and for worse — language use both reflects and creates different concepts of identity. Collaboration with urban-based Indigenous actors from a number of Quebec First Nations influenced the form of his play, which does not represent an adaptation of Shakespeare so much as an original work addressing the colonialist legacy of what F.R. Leavis called “the great tradition” of Western literature written in English. Sioui-Durand uses Shakespeare as a platform to suggest a new Indigenous form of theatre, one embodied in this and other original plays produced by Ondinnok. Representing a transitional generation of scholarship in this area, Heather Macfarlane extends Lacombe’s analysis of Indigenous-language usage by offering a comparative reading of three Native-authored plays — by Floyd Favel, Tomson Highway, and Yves Sioui-Durand. One of the first to compare French- and English-language Indigenous writing at a time when scholarship about Indigenous literature was starting to assert itself, Macfarlane addresses Canadian language policies and language legislation, paying particular attention to the long-standing debate about the status of English and French in Canada and Quebec. She explicates the use of Indigenous languages as a tool of resistance in the work of Native dramatists who deal with this colonial legacy. For both Lacombe and Macfarlane, place, kinship, and solidarity matter in the reclamation of culture and identity, given that work by Native playwrights reveal both differences and commonalities when it comes to their use of Indigenous languages.

Sarah Henzi employs a wide range of European and North American theorists to analyze the work of both French- and English-speaking Native writers. Her focus is on language gaps (*trouées*), including silence and non-speech, which she reads as spaces of resistance and renegotiation in the face of cultural appropriation. She notes that code-switching and translation function as performative language-games, opening up a place for the renegotiation and construction of meaning. Circumventing traditional approaches to comparative literature, her readings of French- and English-speaking Indigenous poets, dramatists, novelists, and essayists creates its own transformative space, in which creative writers and

critics alike contribute to a never-ending dialogue whose trajectory is linked to re-appropriation and performance as aspects of “writing home.”

Finally, Armand Garnet Ruffo, who attended the panel organized by Lacombe at Carleton University, offers the perspective of an Ojibway scholar, poet, and teacher of Canadian and Indigenous literature. Familiar with both “official” languages, Ruffo provides a critical Indigenous context for these scholarly contributions, as well as important personal insights into the ongoing issue of language debates from the standpoint of a Native academic and a creative writer who has wrestled with language and identity politics in his own work.

This special section represents the tip of an iceberg on a subject that has already inspired significant critical activity, in the form of essays by and about Indigenous authors who write in French, and in the form of comparative studies of Native literatures in Canada and Quebec by a wide array of scholars, both Native and non-Native. It is not our intention to single out particular writers or critics so much as to foreground a few of the many different vantage points for talking about Native literature. That said, poets such as Josephine Bacon, Jean Sioui, Louis-Karl Picard-Sioui, and Rita Mestakosho, whom Armand Ruffo talks about in his afterword to this special section, deserve to be better known, both in “Indian country” and in French- and English-speaking Canada. We are hopeful that these articles will lead to more critical work in this area and will create new opportunities for dialogue between Indigenous writers across multiple linguistic divides. For this reason, we would like to see an increase in comparative studies, more work by Indigenous scholars who write in French, and better circulation of their research beyond the borders of their languages. In short, despite our focus on criticism, it is our goal that these brief contributions spark conversations between Native writers across linguistic divides, if not a radical rethinking of what constitutes Native Canadian literature.