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Opening Address

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Article abstract

The overemphasis on supposed cultural differences between the “Indian” and the “White man” has contributed to the extreme marginalization of Native peoples. Nevertheless, and in spite of the ever-present millstone of colonization, Native writers continue to record historical and personal invasions, social upheavals, and personal losses with hope and determination. It has become clear that, if we are to escape the spectre of ghettoization, we must push, if not dismantle, the paradigms that restrict our identities to predetermined typologies. To acquiesce to colonial markers is to subordinate ourselves to the colonizer’s model of the world. To illustrate, LaRocque turns to the works of Jeannette Armstrong, Joy Harjo, Arthur Shilling, Thomas King, and Richard Wagamese.

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Opening Address

EMMA LAROCQUE

IT IS WITH IMMENSE PLEASURE that I welcome you to this Aboriginal Literary conference. It is an historic moment on this campus, in our Department — for there has never been an Aboriginal Literatures conference held here before. For that matter, it isn't every day that an Aboriginal Literatures conference is held on any campus in Canada, in North America, or internationally.

I will begin by outlining some concerns I have with the traditional treatment of Aboriginal writing and end with the beauty of words which have been created by Aboriginal writers.

When I started teaching Native Canadian Lit — all the way back in the late 1970s — I was perhaps one of two or three professors in Canada teaching such a course. Already then I was dreaming of organizing a Native Literatures conference. That it has taken so long is a result of many factors — which I may someday include in my memoirs. A few years ago I started to work towards developing an Arts and Humanities stream for our Department with a large focus on Aboriginal literatures, and this conference in part showcases the beginnings of that program in our Department.

As I have grown older I have pondered on what will stay after all the politics, the misunderstandings, the finagling and power struggles, the struggles of daily living — all the social rules and ceremonial protocols, and yes, even the footnotes? What will last, I think, is what the human spirit creates. To live life creating is a vocation. Much of that vocation belongs to the artists in our cultures. I believe it is the weavers, bakers, carvers, painters, gardeners, songmakers, storymakers, the dramatists and dream speakers, the orators — and yes, the writers — who fashion for us shapes, forms, and colours to express the rivers of yearnings in the human soul. The human spirit creates, not only in an effort to find meaning in our existence, but also to bring meaning into being. The very act of human creation brings meaning, and this we call culture. I believe it is the artists, the writers, who will pass on the torch of vibrant Aboriginal cultures to the next generations.

Of course, different peoples have created differently with different emphases and priorites and results. This we have come to call "cultural differences."

In Canada we have gotten quite carried away with cultural differences. The first part of my presentation will address the problem of difference in the treatment of Aboriginal Literatures. Then I want to end with the beauty of words in Aboriginal writing — perhaps our only hope in transcending our cultural fixations.

Native peoples, in large part in response to the dominant western narrative, have developed (and are still developing) a profile of "difference." Of particular interest to me is where and how "cultural differences" have been worked out by both Native and non-Native writers and critics. What is emerging is a profile of the Native culture as "tribal" (a term used in the United States)[1] or "collective" (Canadian), featuring themes of Tradition, Trickster, Land, Mother, and the Circle. These presumed features are typically juxtaposed with a Western culture that is "individual, progressive, urban, patriarchal and linear."[2] Such formulaic charts of differences present us with many interesting sets of problems.

"Cultural studies" — a relatively recent phenomenon in literary studies — usually means that scholars and writers try to "understand" the "native" with the often unstated ethnographic assumption that the "native" is "remarkably" different. Forms of ethnographic trait-listings appear in literary criticism. There is confusion about what might be just "human" with what is presumably "cultural." Critics reach for cultural explanations in themes that may not necessitate anthropological assistance. For example, is a poem about loneliness or lost love or death a matter of ethnology? Or is it an expression of a Native individual who feels personal loss for whatever reason?

This begs the question of what constitutes literature as opposed to, say, anthropology, or "cultural studies." And of course it begs the question of how Native writing should be reviewed or analyzed. On my part, I am annoyed that ethnology and ideology have so pervaded literary criticism that the human personality is forgotten in non-white, especially Native, writing.

White Canadian reviewers, perhaps afraid to offend our presumed cultural sensibilities, have been reluctant to touch our works. *We* are reluctant to criticize each other. Those who do take interest tend to take our works to the familiar, perhaps 'safer' havens of ethnology and colonization studies.[3] First Nation and Métis writing has been frequently analyzed under political or ethnological terms. Often overlooked are the individual authors themselves, with their unique styles, imaginations, and tropes and metaphors. This is why in our Call for Papers we asked that papers focus on Aboriginal (Canadian) authors or work, with particular emphasis on the use of language: on the uniqueness, nuance, complexity, and creativity of the writer/writing.

The point is, the overemphasis on the supposed cultural differences between the "Indian" and the "White man" — as if those are real — has contributed to our extreme marginalization and has created new stereotypes. As have political interpretations which have overemphasized victimization and tended to submerge literary concerns and individual uniqueness. Similar in consequence to the ethnolographic treatment of all things Native, ideological formulations produce a lumping effect. Take the lumping of Native women writers as indistinct, battered, mother-earth bodies. Once again, Natives are generalized as a mass, and "massness" is "a sore subject," one may say, to Native peoples.

Native writers, after all, are attempting to undo five hundred years of caricatures by replacing the stereotypes with "real" human personalities. Limiting treatment of Native literature as a "voice" of culture or even of re- sistance obviously makes it difficult, if not impossible, to *see* Aboriginal persons beyond the stereotypes. These are not the only options available to us as writers and critics.

Naturally, it is impossible to deal with anything human without reference to culture or historical experience. Inescapably, Native writers, like all other writers, have to contextualize their cultural and political lives. Clearly, the issue is not whether we should refer to our cultures, our histories, or our contemporary lives; the issue is how this should be done, and equally, how it should be received and addressed.

In the grand scheme of things, Native literature receives little serious or learned critical attention.

How might we break through the seeming impasses of reading Native writing stereotypically? It becomes very clear that our "way out" must involve "pushing," if not dismantling, the paradigms that restrict our identities to predetermined typologies.

In this search for "a way out" we must keep sight of our central task, which is the humanization of Native peoples. This is more of a challenge than we may at first imagine because Native history and cultures have for so long been encased in stereotypes. How do we deal with *real* Native cultures, and political actions which are an integral aspect of humanity, without resorting to ethnological or political generalizations?

In what ways can we treat Native literature such that we can recognize cultural and political factors yet not turn to stereotypes which surround Native cultures and history?

First of all, I must emphasize that my reading — and yes, my evaluation — of Aboriginal writing is not detemined solely by Western standards of criticism or by universalist notions of what constitutes humanity. The discourse must be thought of in a different way. We cannot keep giving all the power to Westerners or to Western standards by submitting to the popular and canonical thought that all things literary or all concerns about the individual or about character development emanate from the Western culture. Nor can (or should) we "return to the past," that is, to pre-Columbian nativism, anymore than we should surrender to post-Columbian stereotypes. To acquiesce to either of these colonial markers is to subordinate ourselves to "the colonizer's model of the world," that is, the "doctrine" that Europe's rise to world dominance is due to some "internal" and "autonomous" quality of race and culture, that the world derives its "progress" from the diffusion of European civilization. In other words, we cannot accept that human progress begins and ends with European culture.

It is not just Westerners or the Western canons that can measure aesthetic value of art, literature, narrative, or character development! Based on my Plains Cree Métis cultural background, I can appreciate character development, among other literary ploys and tropes.

In the Cree language and awareness we can make clear distinctions among different essences and qualities of things.[4] In Cree we are provided with all sorts of information, which helps us develop our senses and intellects, which provides us with moral and aesthetic values, and which prepares us to appreciate literary studies — even in a different language. And I of course grew up with Wesakehcha, the character of characters, the always interesting cultural teaser/psychoprophetic Wehsehkehcha (who today is largely reduced to the Western understanding of "Trickster"). But Wehsehkehcha was much much more than a trickster, as both Canadian and American Native writers and critics keep explaining (Johnston, Highway, Keeshig-Tobias, Owens, Vizenor).

We are faced with a considerable task: on the one hand, we do wish to advance an Aboriginal literary basis of criticism, but on the other hand, we face the spectre of ghettoization, much like that faced by Native visual artists.[5] In other words, everything we create gets re-translated to fit preconceived notions of who we are. Sometimes we fit them in ourselves. This, of course, is what keeps us marginalized and Othered.

There are issues that critics have not investigated. For example, what about the cultural differences between Native intellectuals and artists? To what extent does my Nehiyawew Métis background (linguistically, Plains Cree and Michif; anthropologically, plains and wood lands; culturally, non-industrial and industrial) influence my reading of other Native works? Say, Slash or Garnet in *Keeper 'n Me*? There is also the possibility that my response is entirely personal. For example, might I be drawn to Ruby Slipperjack's Owl (in *Honour the Sun*) as a character because I too grew up by the railroad tracks in a small northern hamlet, and I too loved my pets? Perhaps I respond to Owl in much the same way that I respond to Maria Campbell's ghost stories in *Halfbreed,* and again in her *Stories of the Road Allowance People.* But how do you explain my love for *Monkey Beach*? The lingusitic and cultural backdrop to this complex story is as foreign to me as Japan is. But isn't it just a treasure chest of brilliance? Full of colonial ghosts and ancient Haisla (or Isla) secrets?

The point I am raising suggests that literary critics must begin to pay closer attention not only to cultural differences between and among Native peoples, but maybe also to the plain love of words. Play of words. Our peoples cultivated words. Aboriginal writers come from cultures which were makers of words. Many words. Amazing words. Cultivated words. Ultimately, Native literature must be more about art and nuance than about ethnographic trauma or colonial discourse. It is unfortunate that so many literary critics have focused on ethnography or politics and have overlooked the art of reinvention.

Indeed, I still think that Canadian intellectuals have largely overlooked all that Native writers have written and have accomplished, especially since the 1970s. Let me just briefly recount. Native writers have produced social and historical commentaries, histories, autobiographies, fiction in the form of short stories, legends, poetry, plays, and novels.

Native writers record historical and personal invasions, social upheavals, personal losses, a myriad of emotions, unique cultural backgrounds and experiences, and much sense of hope and determination despite the ever-present millstone of colonization.[6] And despite such burdens, writers have produced much emotion, insight, beauty, hilarity, song and dance, be it a poem about loneliness or about grandmothers, or about plain old human terrors, like pakak "the thousand-year companion who pierces the heart with his socket eyes" (Halfe), or like the unsett-ling dreams and visions our ancestors' memories bring: "It's with terror sometimes / I hear them calling me," wrote Sarain Stump. Then there are the identity crises that come from the contradictions of our times — all fodder for Drew Hayden Taylor.

Literary devices are both inventive and prosaic. The venues and styles combine Indigenous and contemporary traditions and are based largely on Aboriginal ethos and poetics and resistance thinking, including contemporary postcolonial resistance.

Native writers and scholars representing a cross section of genres, genders, geographies, eras, and cultures have written letters to the pope, chatted up Archie Belaney, or put Duncan Campbell Scott back in his safari canoe — or like, Scofield, called spades spades — and all of us are dismantling stereotypes, upsetting conventions, and inventing new genres. We have especially challenged the mis/representation of Native peoples and cultures in historical, anthropological, literary, and popular productions. In this process of revisiting, we have sought to establish our own humanity by re-inscribing history and the cultural records, turning to facts of biography in scholarship, and highlighting human qualities and emotions as individuals through fiction, poetry, and drama. And there are now hundreds of us.

In other words, we have made enormous cultural contributions to our country, we have produced unique and wonderful works. By banging on the doors of convention, we are lifting the weight of old and tired traditions. We are the other half of Canada, the half that is shedding light on both the good and the shadowy sides of this land. We are sometimes the Uncomfortable Mirrors.

For all that we have created and accomplished, we have received most inadequate recognition from Canada.

But back to the point. As you may know, I read and treat Aboriginal literatures as Resistance Literature. That Native writing can best be understood as Resistance Literature does not mean that it is singularly political or that it lacks either complexity or grace. The Aboriginal landscape is full of aesthetic possibilities. Those of us who teach and/or write do so because our intellects are inspired by the creative re/construction of words and our spirits are nurtured by imagination.

Literary criticism needs to come back to the artistic essences of imagined words and worlds. "We are born into a world of light," writes Richard Wagamese, but "it's not the memories themselves we seek to reclaim, but rather the opportunity to surround ourselves with the quality of light that lives then." (3).

One of the reasons I like and teach literature is because it may be one of the most effective ways to throw light on our humanity, to bring back to the centre our (Native) humanity. Perhaps it is through literature that we can best illuminate Native individuality and psychology as well as complexity and everyday fluidity, and we can do this without compromising Native cultural diversity or the colonial experience. Appreciating, highlighting, and demanding excellence as well as what is unique in contemporary Native writing should certainly become central to Native literary criticism.

And I do care about the quality of writing in Aboriginal (or for that matter in non-Aboriginal) writing. I do believe in such a thing as literary excellence in the tradition of the Cree Métis who were known as Nehiyawewak, the Exact-Speaking people. As I have said, I try to do in English what my mother and grandmother could do in Cree. It is in keeping with our original cultures to produce excellence in the contemporary context. Yes, even in a different language. Yes, even within the historical context of "re-inventing the enemy's language," as Native American poet Joy Harjo has put it.

Ultimately, it is to Native writers we must turn for illumination on Native humanity.

Arthur Shilling, an Ojibway artist from Ontario, dedicated his art and poetry to portraying "the beauty of my people," as he it put in a film of the same title. Shilling died in 1986 from heart failure at the age of forty-five, but not before he could produce *The Ojibway Dream,* a book mixing poetry and art. He wrote exquisitely:

> When I paint I feel like I'm still at the beginning, excited at the next

> bend in the river. Frightened and scared. I can hear the beauty, smell it like sweetgrass burning, the sound of my people. Their cries mix in with my paint and propel my brush. What else could bring reds and blues so clear, such as I have never seen before. (20)

It is here now that we make a turn, that we look "at the next bend in the river" of Native writing. The next bend in the river of expression promises to be exciting. "Wake up. All the Shadows are gone. There is daylight even in the swamps. The bluejays are laughing .... Laughing at the humans who don't know the sun is up and it's a new day" (19).

NOTES

[1] Among the Native American intellectuals and writers who use this term are Paula Gunn Allen, Louis Dwens, Gerald Vizenor.

[2] American critic Arnold Krupat is irritated by this in his interesting work *Ethno-criticism,* but he too stays within the circles of arguments he dislikes. Why contain the discussion of Native literature to ethnology? For a cogent and thoughtful treatment of Native American literature, see Louis Owens, *Other Destinies.*

[3] As noted earlier, Campbell, Culleton. Annstrong and Maracle's works have especially been reviewed under ethnological and/or victim terms.

[4] It is still important to emphasize this point because one of the more common traits ascribed to Natives is their egalitarianism; from this it is often assumed Natives live in some sort of an amorphous collective consciousness. But our worlds and worldviews are not a flatline of spiritualities and equalities.

[5] Visual artists have long expressed such a concern; this theme is the foundation of inquiry in a number of the essays included in *Indigena.*

[6] I use this phrase and analogy in my autobiographical essay "Tides, Towns and Trains" in *Living the Changes,* ed. Joan Turner. Winnipeg: U of Manitoba P, 1990. 73-90.

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