INTERPRETING CANADA:
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INTERPRÉTER LE CANADA :
NOUVELLES PERSPECTIVES DU CÔTÉ DE L'EUROPE

CANADIAN STUDIES IN EUROPE
ÉTUDES CANADIENNES EN EUROPE

VOLUME **10**

Published by / publié par
**the European Network for Canadian Studies /
le Réseau européen d'études canadiennes
(ENCS / RÉEC)**

in collaboration with

Masaryk University, Brno

1st edition, 2012

Edited by
Luigi Bruti-Liberati

Selected proceedings of the
NINETEENTH EUROPEAN SEMINAR FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS IN CANADIAN STUDIES
Milan, Italy / 22-24 September 2010

This publication has been made possible with the aid of financial support from Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada.

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Printed and bound by
Reprocentrum, a. s., Blansko

Cover / Couverture : Downtown / Centre-ville, Toronto

ISBN 978-80-210-5877-4
ISSN 1214-0562

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AlterNatives[1] in Contemporary First Nations and Métis Narratives: preliminary considerations

volume 10

Abstract

Taking the strategies of representation enacted by the Canadian sociopolitical order as a starting point, this article provides some preliminary methodological considerations necessary before dealing with the narratives by contemporary First Nations and Métis women writers. Jeannette Armstrong, Beth Brant, Maria Campbell, Lee Maracle and others contest the cultural normativity and re-present alterNative identities in contrast with the 'official' representations of 'Indians'.

Résumé

Prenant comme point de départ les stratégies de représentation promulguée par l'ordre socio-politique canadien, cet article offre des considérations méthodologiques préliminaires avant d'examiner des narratives par des femmes écrivains autochtones and metisses. Jeannette Armstrong, Beth Brant, Maria Campbell, Lee Maracle, entre autres, contestent la normaticité culturelle et re-présentent des identités alterNatives qui contrastent avec les représentations 'officielles' des 'Indiens'.

1 I owe the term to Ojibway writer Drew Hayden Taylor whose play *AlterNatives* speaks of a group of activists, the so called "alterNative warriors" (Taylor, 57), who try to challenge common othodoxies and formulaic depictions of "the Indian", accepted both by the Native and the non-Native communities.

Native Literary and Cultural Renaissance

The first chapter of *A History of Canadian Literature* by W.H. New, published in 1989, is dedicated to Indigenous mythmakers. New overtly acknowledges the Native cultural stance, thus recognizing the role of Indigenous cultural production in the making of the nation. As a matter of fact, Native Canadian writers had been gaining public attention since the 1960s. McKenzie has called the period Native Literary and Cultural Renaissance (McKenzie, 84), triggered by political movements which responded not only to the politics of assimilation adopted by the Canadian government, but also to the lack of adequate representations of the Indigenous peoples within the Canadian society. Such a complex process of self-assertion could be synthesized into two main phases. The first one, starting in the mid-1960s, coincided with the change in political climate that organizations such as the National Alliance for Red Power (NARP) and the American Indian Movement (AIM) were achieving in both Canada and the United States as well as with the translations of ancient myths by Ojibway artist and writer Norval Morriseau, *Legends of My People: the Great Ojibway* (1965). The second phase began in the 1980s and was characterized by the rise of a strong corpus of Indigenous narratives that compelled critics to begin to recognize and deal with Native literatures. As a consequence, from 1989 onwards, numerous anthologies registered a proliferation of native voices: in 1989 Heather Hodgson edited *Seventh Generation*, and in 1990 New remarked his interest in First Peoples with the publication of *Native Writers and Canadian Literature*, while Jeanne Perrault and Sylvia Vance collected writings by Aboriginal women writers in *Writing the Circle*; two years later, Daniel David Moses and Terry Goldie published *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English* thus signalling that the interest of publishing houses in Native cultures embodied the request of the Canadian reading public and critics for such productions. Moreover, as Barbara Godard explains "Native Canadian culture had never before received such public attention as it did in Toronto in the spring of 1989" (Godard, 109) when, at the Theatre Pass Muraille, *Dry Lips Oughta Go to Kapuskasing*, the latest play by Manitoba Cree author Tomson Highway, gained an extraordinary critical acclaim. Taking the strategies of representation enacted by the Canadian sociopolitical order as a starting point, my intent, here, is to provide some preliminary methodological considerations necessary before dealing with the narratives by contemporary First Nations and Métis women writers. Jeannette Armstrong, Beth Brant, Lee Maracle, Maria Campbell, and others contest the cultural normativity and re-present alterNative identities in contrast with 'official' representations of 'Indians'.

Strategies of representation

In each cultural circuit, practices of representation are a key process and part of the way power operates: by intervening in discourses about certain subjects, power tries to fix 'true' representations, i.e. to construct meanings through language. As a consequence, the politics of representation constitute tactics to maintain control and validate the mythologies of superiority. According to Stuart Hall, "representational systems consist of the actual ***sounds*** we make with our vocal chords, the ***images*** we make on light-sensitive paper with cameras, the ***marks*** we make with paint on canvas, the digital ***impulses*** we transmit electronically" (Hall 1997, 26): the accent posed on the 'making' suggests that meaning does not depend on the materiality of the sign, but on the social function that it acquires in cultural contexts. In this sense, Indigenous peoples have been the objects of knowledge produced in and through representational systems. Official discourses, aiming at producing 'realities' of the Other "politically, sociologically, ideologically, scientifically" (Hall 1996, 40), adopted several strategies such as naming and stereotyping (a policy that shifts between idealizing and demonizing).

Naming is the discursive manipulation of spatial and individual identities through language, that is the representation of political objects in discourse. According to Bill Ashcroft "names invoke ownership" (2009, 82) and are the most powerful means of cultural incorporation. Stereotypes, as embodiments of essence, are the product of political choices which tend to impose politically oriented representations of subjects: by distorting elements of reality, they try "to ensure a comfortable construction of ideology" (Alatas, 2). The production of stereotypes tends to reiterate Manichean dichotomies which oppose idealized/mythicized and demonized representations of the Other. As a consequence, idealization (or mythicization) and demonization are the processes through which representations are constructed and legalized in discourses of power: they are the very technologies that produce systems of representation. Each strategy of representation underpins appropriation and domestication.

In Canada the strategies of representation enacted by the dominant power have been functional to the absorption of the 'Indians' in society, that is to the erasure and reconstruction of Indigenous identities in discourses of power. As a consequence, these strategies produced 'official' representational systems that categorised Indigenous peoples on the basis of Euro-Canadian perceptions. In "The Case of the Word Métis", Oriana Palusci discusses the ways in which the Indians have been named in the Canadian context: the term "Indian", she argues, "identifies both the language and a person in a collective way, as a comprehensive umbrella term which, cramming together heterogeneous ethnic groups, inhabiting an unidentified geographic space called

America, simplifies the many-faced universes of *Indian* identities, languages and traditions" (2010:61). In *A Dictionary of Canadianisms*, published in 1967, *Indian* is the only descriptor used to identify Indigenous peoples. Gerald Vizenor points out that "the word *indian* transposes the real, a colonial coalescences of thousands of distinct native cultures and communities in one misnomer"(2007:12) while Steffi Retzlaf defines it "a White invention" (61). Nevertheless, by the end of the 1970s, that is between the first and second phase of the Native Cultural Renaissance, the term was gradually replaced by *Aboriginal*, officially adopted in the Constitution Act in 1982: this was "a change which rhetorically asserts the freedom of indigenous cultures from the historical mistakes of European definition" (New 2003, 5). A further shift towards self-assertion was the introduction of the term *First Nations* used for the first time by Chief Sol Sanderson in 1981: the adjective "first" underlines that Indigenous peoples had been living in North America much before the arrival of the Europeans. For what concerns the word Métis, as Palusci explains, it does not refer to a racially pure individual, but to "a person split into different races, one part belonging to Europe, the other part inferior, corrupted and imbedded in the term *mongrel*" (65) a French name indicating the bastard son of Indian concubines, in other words, an half-breed. Therefore, Métis had a deeply depreciative meaning. It was only by the end of the 1960s that the term was re-appropriated by Métis authors who tried to restore a Métis 'pride': Maria Cambell's *Halfbreed*, published in 1973, is the story of a Métis woman who, after having experienced racism and discrimination, learns to appreciate her 'Halfbreed' heritage.

When the strategy of naming is applied to space, places are reinvented in discourse in order to be domesticated and familiarized (Ashcroft 2009:76): the Europeans who arrived in North America and re-named the landscapes were clearly mapping and appropriating the territories. At the same time they were erasing the Indigenous discourses over the land and imposing their own spatial narrations. When the French explorer Jaques Cartier settled in what later became Quebec city, he used the word "Canada", probably adopted from the Huron-Iroquois *kanata* meaning "village", to refer to New France (DeRocco and Chabot, 124); nonetheless, Indigenous peoples had traditionally designating the territories on which they lived with the term "Turtle Island". As Retzlaff explains (263), "Turtle Island" appears repeatedly in the discourses of Native peoples but "does not correspond precisely to any of the concepts embodied in terms such as 'Canada' or 'North America', as these terms support a Western perspective including the supremacy of the political, economic, religious or historic beliefs and values of Western societies" (Retzlaff, 267). On the contrary, it refers to an environment which is deeply connected with the notions of "homecoming" and "Mother Earth". The term was recovered by Morriseau in his translations of the Ojibway legends and in his

painting of the Great Turtle: according to Retzlaff, it has recently become a key concept in contemporary Pan-Indianism (267). The term has seen a further restoration with the spread of the Internet: nowadays turtleisland.org is a Native owned and operated Web site, "the best online source for Aboriginal, First Nations, Native People's news and information"[2].

Naming has not been the only strategy adopted to mystify Indigenous subjectivities in Canada: in fact, technologies of idealization have worked to promote, among the other demystifications, the myth of the "authentic Indian". When in 1885 the CPR, i.e. the Canadian Pacific Railway, was officially opened to the public, a tour of the Rocky Mountains was offered in order to make money; it included the sight of Aboriginal inhabitants in their natural setting, 'true and authentic' Indians in feathers and buckskin. Idealization responded to a European anthropologic interest in exotica: when world fairs were organized, 'primitive' peoples were brought to the metropoles and exposed as attractions. Nevertheless, in those same years, the government was enacting a form of cultural genocide through the Indian Act, thus banning traditional ceremonies such as Thirst Dance, Sun Dance and Potlatch, being too 'primitive' and inadequate for the new image of contemporary Canada. Moreover, as Betty Bastien and Celia Haig-Brown discuss in their studies on First Peoples and their traumatic experience in residential schools, the very idea of the "lazy native", promoted by the Puritans from the beginning of the seventeenth century onwards, had been instrumentalised by the colonial ideology to justify compulsory education and mobilization to agricultural labour in Indigenous communities.

Resisting representations

The systematic discipline by which power works within and produces systems of representation through orders of discourse is continually resisted. Resistance circulates over time and space, spread throughout the network of power as a capillary movement that struggles with tactics, local circuits and technologies of control, thus creating, through counter-tactics, counter-circuits and counter-technologies, apparatuses of disruption. First Nations and Métis literatures epitomize a struggle in language, the articulation of counter-discourses that challenge the very assumptions through which power constructs Indigenous subjectivities discursively: emancipation discourses emerge from within their political activity and challenge the mystified representations produced by what Foucault calls the "regime of truth" (1980, 131). Destabilizing utterances of

2 *online* at http://www.turtleisland.org/front/_front.htm (12 March 2011)

contestation trigger discourses of self-representation. In the struggle for displacing cultural hierarchies and undermining its position of dominance, Indigenous literatures play a central role, in that they contrast the rhetorical violence with which power has subsumed Native peoples in its cultural circuit by opposing rhetorics of resistance.

Ashcroft discusses the process by which colonized subjects try to resist the forces designed to shape them as 'others' in terms of "interpolation", that is "the access such 'interpellated' subjects have to a counter-discursive agency" (2001, 48): interpolation is a strategy of resistance that involves insertion, interruption and interjection meant to disrupt the constructed coherence of discourses of power. In this sense, Indigenous narratives of self-formation interpolate the discourses produced by the "regime of truth" and destabilize both institutional practices and systems of representation. They also challenge the insidious process of absorption through which power tries to 'digest' Indigenous peoples in its social apparatus or to erase their special status. According to Sunera Thobani, official multiculturalism, just to mention one, though complex, example, despite having been defined as antithetical to the assimilation policies promoted by the Canadian government through the residential schools, has resulted in a deeper assimilation of First Peoples under white supervision (Thobani, 172).

As politicized activities, First Nations and Métis narratives challenge the hegemony of the dominant literary institutions as well. The 'silence' Native literatures emerged out of was, in fact, the product of strict politics of exclusion enacted through hegemonic discourses of power that not only strived to deprive Indigenous peoples of their languages and their traditions but also established restrictive cultural norms. In this sense, Aboriginal literatures are not 'emergent' literary voices "arising as a result of Aboriginal peoples 'literacy' in an official language", as Okanagan author Jeannette Armstrong points out (2005, 180): given a wider definition of literature which is not strictly linked to the writing system, they must be read as Aboriginal spoken art forms rooted in ancestral traditions and shaped by conventions and ancient knowledge. As a consequence, "Aboriginal literatures are a distinctive genre within Canadian Literature" (Armstong 2005, 180), sites of reconfiguration where to affirm self-re-presentation and interrogate the cultural normativity. In this reactionist framework where literature and political struggle intersect, Canadian Native women's narratives have adopted miscellany and oratory in order to disturb the claustrophobic metaphors and the mystified representations used by the dominant literature to objectify Indigenous women as 'princesses' or 'squaws'.

The necessity of negotiating a critical approach to First Nations and Métis literature is a crucial knot to unravel. As an intellectual project, Native (or Indigenous) studies has offered methods of research and enquiry in order to understand Indigenous cultures from the inside: although both Native studies and literatures continue to be referred to as 'new' or 'emergent' fields, there is a long-standing Native intellectual as well as cultural tradition in Indigenous communities. As Robert Warrior points out, Indigenous literatures have been thought to require the beneficial of European literary tradition whereas Native studies derives from an extensive Indigenous intellectual tradition which gives substance to Native epistemologies. Indeed, by the end of the 1960s, Native Studies programs were introduced in Canadian universities: the first initiative was launched at Trent University in 1969 and in the early 1970s the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians created a series of institutions within Indigenous communities that had no tradition of university level education. The Canadian Journal of Native Studies, launched in 1981, became the voice of the Canadian Indian/Native Studies Association. In their introduction to ***Native American Studies in Higher Education***, Duane Champagne and Joy Strauss stress the necessity for Native studies to distinguish from "race, ethnic, cultural and multicultural studies [because] [n]one of the latter approaches fully appreciates or emphasises Indigenous rights of self-government, land and negotiated relations to state governments" (12). Nevertheless, as Gail Valaskakis points out, Cultural Studies' resistance to essentialism as well as its analysis of power hierarchies is helpful in the acknowledgment of Indigenous literatures as oppositional discourses in struggle with contradictory representations (Valaskakis, 151). Despite its anti-colonial engagement and even though some Indigenous writers articulated their politics in postcolonial terms, Native Studies has been almost ignored by Post-colonial scholars. The exclusion from the post-colonial symposium is partly due to Native Studies' stress on Indigenous traditions and intellectual sovereignty. Nonetheless, such disregard for both Native American and Canadian contexts may be the result of the domination of the field by African, Asian and Caribbean "agendas and paradigms", as Eric Cheyfitz points out (4).

Self-translation as counter-discourse

The cultural production of First Nations and Métis women writers such as Jeannette Armstrong, Beth Brant, Maria Campbell and Lee Maracle may be understood in terms of self-translation: not only these writings are culturally self-translated by subjectivities at the crossroads of different languages and cultures, i.e. identities informed by linguistic and cultural plurality, but they are also translations of the Indigenous self in literature. As re-constructions of the self, they are functional to the re-assessment of cultural identities. What emerges here is that narratives by Canadian Indigenous women

writers resist the dominant cultural norms as counter-discourses, disrupt Canadian mythology as self-representations and reconstruct cultural identities as self-narratives. Katheri Akiwenzie-Damm states that for many Indigenous writers "creative language in written or spoken forms is used, not merely as a form of individual self-expression, but as a form of cultural expression that raises the communal consciousness of the people" (Akiwenzie-Damm, 171). The alterNatives emerging from such narratives are the very cultural identities restored from misleading representations, devaluation and silencing. "Alter", which is the Latin word for "other", implies that such identities are 'other than' the official representations promoted so far: therefore, they address the very myth of 'authenticity' as a Euro-Canadian unit of measure on the basis of which Indianness could be quantified.

Adopting Ashcroft's definition of transformation "which describes one way of viewing cultural identity [and] the strategic process by which cultural identity is represented" (2001, 4), First Nations and Métis women's narratives can be understood in terms of transformative cultural production. Their intent is to alter the "influences exerted by the dominating power" in order to transform them into tools "for expressing a deeply held sense of identity and cultural being" (2001, 20). Counter-narratives such as ***Slash*** by Armstrong or *Bobbi Lee* by Métis author Lee Maracle epitomize the regeneration of Indigenous identities in writing which offers a "way back to the Good Red Road" (Brant, 11) as Mohawk writer Beth Brant suggests, that is a way of life among Native peoples of balance and continuity.

Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel, brought the word "Indian" into sharp focus and best exemplifies the mechanisms of appropriation through which First Nations and Métis authors were trying to find their way to self-empowerment. A main characteristic of Maracle's narration is its genesis: in fact, the story was initially recorded as an oral autobiography in 1972 at the Liberation Support Movement Information Centre in Richmond. Life stories of chiefs and elders had usually been collected by Euro-Canadian anthropologists who, at the very beginning of the twentieth century, showed ethnographic interests in chiefs and elders' recounts. Indeed, Maracle's story should have led people to "political struggle" (Maracle 1990, 19): the activists of the LSM Centre, Don Barnett and Rick Sterling, who taped Maracle's recount, believed that her testimony could have been helpful in the understanding of racism and violence against Native people in Canada. According to Armstrong, who wrote the preface to the second edition of ***Bobbi Lee***, "the telling of our lives, the back-tracking, the map-making through the treacherous terrain of our individual experiences is perhaps a more important exercise than we Native people readily appreciate" (15).

Once translated into written form and published in 1975[3], ***Bobbi Lee*** became "an extremely important document to Canadian literature" (15), as Armstrong suggests. Indeed, Maracle's narrative tries to turn the Euro-Canadian historiographic perspective upside down and disseminate an alterNatively 'other' point of view: in fact, she portrays the chaos pervading the path towards the achievement of political consciousness from an inner point of view, which is not only Indigenous, but also a woman's insight.

While autobiography, as a Western genre, traditionally celebrates individuality (Bataille and Mullen Sands, 11), Maracle's life-story traces a communal path to regeneration and affirms the subordination of the individual to the community. As Arnold Krupat maintains, Indigenous autobiographies are dialogic in that "the self is not constituted by the achievement of a distinctive, special voice that separates it from the others, but, rather, by the achievement of a particular placement in relation to the many voices without which it could not exist" (Krupat, 133). In fact, Bobbi narrates the transformation of her individual "I" into a collective "we" and the cultural negotiations she has to enact in order to survive within the communities she lives in.

Because of her Métis identity, Bobbi is denied access to the Indian community; nonetheless, as she enters school, she understands to be an "Indian" for everybody else: "three months after I entered school I became aware that I was an Indian and that white people didn't like me because of the colour of my skin" (Maralce 1990, 33). At the same time, her father's whiteness not only complicates her belonging to the inner circle of the half-breeds but also troubles her family ties because "only two of the boys were 'white' while the rest of us were definitely 'Indian'" (131). Her life in such a strange community where "weird things were always happening" (25) is uneven and decentred as the place and the houses, "cold and dump" (1990:22) with no electricity, people "on the North Shore mud flats" (21) dwell in. The mud surrounding their precarious boatshed is both a thick barrier of isolation remarking differences and distance, and also a black hole under whose gravity people and things collapse and are reassembled differently. When she leaves home for Visalia, "a strange little 'Mexican' town" (53), the community she lives in completely denies her existence (1990, 56) and she feels like "a piece of furniture, a table or something" (1990, 58). In Vancouver she experiences to what extent difference "set[s] you apart from the rest of the community, make[s] you a foreigner" (1990, 68) thus negating the very possibility of belonging. Once in Toronto, her dislocation becomes even worse: she degenerates into an "appendage" (1990, 92), "a kind of a parasite [...] detached and unconcerned" (1990, 98). In order to solve her dislocation and de-subjectification, she needs to belong, that is to find a placement as a Métis woman within Canadian society. After a long period of de-humanization, Bobbi

3 The second edition was published in 1990 as ***Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel***.

manages to find a way back to her origins: she learns to "think Indian" (207), faces her "indigenous womanhood" (230) and unravels her story. "We are all Indians", she asserts, "one people with many cultures" (208), thus enacting the shift from a subjective (mis)conception of identity to a collective identification.

Concluding remarks

The struggle over the means of representation and the strategies of absorption reaches its fullest accomplishment within First Nations and Métis creative writings which question, interpolate and transform the dominant cultural discourses and the literary norms. Such counter-discursive narratives provide an entry into the mechanisms of self-formation and re-presentation: as translations of the Indigenous self in literature, they provide alterNative perspectives, disrupt Canadian mythology and restore Indigenous cultural identities from misleading representations, devaluation and silencing.

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EMILIE PÉNEA
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Margaret Atv
The Question

Abstract
This article explores
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Résumé
Cet article analyse
et ses sous-genres.
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nouvelle, cet essai
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met l'accent sur le