

THE STORIED WORLD OF HARRY ROBINSON: *Emerging Dialogues*

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You should understand
the way it was
back then,
because it is the same
even now.

Leslie Marmon Silko

There, how's that? That's how I can tell
my life for the white people's way. Is that
what you want? It's more, my life. It's not
only the one thing. It's many. You have to listen.
You have to know me to know what I'm talking
about.

Mabel McKay

DIFFERENCE: STORIED EPISTEMOLOGIES

IN READING WORKS WRITTEN by Aboriginal authors, critics often point to characteristics of written texts that reveal their "origins" in oral tradition. The idea of orality and writing as existing on an evolutionary time line, however, has been complicated by the development of deconstruction and poststructural literary theory. Jacques Derrida, for instance, observes that, because of the underlying grammar of language, anything spoken must always already have been "written." Speaking must be viewed as a form of writing, according to Derrida, because it follows convention (a grammar) that pre-exists actualized speech. Differences between oral and written traditions, therefore, reveal themselves in complex and intersecting ways, and

the two can no longer be seen as mutually exclusive. Yet similarities, or links, between oral and written genres still seem most evident in texts where orally performed stories and narratives have been recorded and then translated into written form.

In North America, *Write It on Your Heart* and *Nature Power*, written by the Okanagan's Harry Robinson, are among the most comprehensive examples of oral stories performed by a First Nations storyteller and then transcribed and published in book form.¹ Wendy Wickwire recorded Robinson's stories over a period of ten years; I subsequently assisted her in transcribing and editing the written versions. My own research into First Nations literary traditions over the past ten years emphasizes the continuity of oral storytelling traditions like Robinson's in contemporary written forms like the novel. While I approach the study of Robinson's narratives and First Nations literature from the perspective of literary criticism, it is in fact impossible to separate them from the world of lived experience. The points of connection – and disconnection – between Robinson's orally performed stories and their written counterparts suggest ways of constructing meaningful cross-cultural dialogues within a variety of contexts.

Robin Ridington (1996, 475) argues that Robinson's storytelling is particularly "remarkable because he told the stories in English, using the Okanagan narrative style with which he was familiar. His work is also remarkable simply for his mastery of the genre." Robinson worked collaboratively with Wickwire, and he emphasized the importance of his stories as cross-cultural teaching vehicles. In the process of translating the orally performed stories into written texts, Wickwire (Robinson 1992, 17) observes: "As Harry pointed out, each of us had a particular role to play in bringing his stories to a larger audience. His job was to tell stories, and mine was to get them onto the printed page." The result of these roles is the final print versions of Robinson's stories. In *Write It on Your Heart* and *Nature Power* Robinson's narrative voice suggests the kind of translation – and collaboration – between languages that Jeannette Armstrong, a contemporary First Nations writer fluent in both Okanagan and English, describes as bridging realities between two worlds of experience. Armstrong (1998, 191) states that, in the Okanagan language, "reality is very much like a story: it is easily changeable and trans-

¹ Other noteworthy collections in Canada include Cruikshank (1990); and several bilingual collections by Richard and Nora Dauenhauer (1987, 1990, 1994).

formative with each speaker. Reality in that way becomes very potent with animation and life.”

Armstrong (1998, 193) goes on to suggest that the English spoken on First Nations reserves, or “Rez English,” more closely resembles Okanagan in both its syntactic and structural qualities, and that it reveals semantic differences “reflecting the view of reality embedded in the culture.” Some of the characteristics of Okanagan, Armstrong points out, arise from the “vocal roots” of the language (187). Rez English, like the Okanagan language, is more often spoken than written. But, as Margery Fee (1997, 30) observes, the ideological effects of translating from oral language into written language “make it nearly impossible to represent distinctive spoken dialects in a way that does not make its speakers look ill-educated and inferior.” Wickwire, however, has not compromised the oral flavour of Robinson’s storytelling. The blend of oral and written, and of Okanagan and European genre conventions, suggests a non-standard English translated into print, the kind of language that Ron Marken (1994, 4) has described as “oral tradition printed on white pages, words to get your ears around.” This blending of new content, new experience, into older stories suggests that stories and storytelling can be a way of theorizing the world, how it works, and how humans should behave in it. These kinds of stories resist being categorized either as literature or as not literature; rather, they are both literature and something more.

BLENDING STORIED REALITIES

Robinson incorporates European elements and content into his stories in ways that reflect the spirit and worldview of an Okanagan storyteller: his performances remain grounded in lived experience. When, for instance, Neil Armstrong shows up in a Coyote story, it is because the story of Armstrong’s first steps on the moon are as much a part of Robinson’s life as are the traditional stories of Coyote’s escapades. Robinson’s narratives show readers how there are different kinds of knowledge. In *Write It on Your Heart* and *Nature Power* contemporary reality is grounded in a First Nations understanding of a world in which the (old) stories continue to frame (new) experience. Part of that experience, for Robinson, lies in understanding that print culture has the power to transform oral performances in ways that continue their ability to theorize and educate an audience about the world. And, by framing the story of Armstrong’s first steps on the moon

within the context of a traditional Coyote story, Robinson both makes his listener/reader re-evaluate his/her understanding of historical events and requires his audience to think about how, historically, the Okanagan have made sense of these events through narrative. In the story that Wickwire (Robinson 1989, 92) calls “Coyote Plays a Dirty Trick,” Robinson says:

Coyote’s son was the first man on the moon!
And Mr. Armstrong was the second man on the moon.
So the Indians know that,
but the white people do not know what the Indian know.

And:

And Mr. Coyote, the Young Coyote,
was up to the moon at that time,
before Armstrong.

See?

Armstrong get up to the moon in ‘69.
But Coyote’s son,
a long time before Christ.

God, like Neil Armstrong, reveals Himself in Robinson’s stories because Christianity is also part of contemporary Okanagan experience.² In fact, numerous historical aspects of Okanagan and European contact suggest themselves through the cross-cultural references contained in Robinson’s stories. Yet, paradoxically, rather than signalling the evidence of European “contamination” of traditional Okanagan narratives, the contemporary elements in Robinson’s stories suggest exactly the opposite. The continuity of Okanagan storytelling traditions is reflected in the stories’ connections to material and social reality. These are marked by a variety of narrative structures that, in particular, signal Okanagan ways of thinking about the world. In one story Robinson describes an 1881 meeting between a group of Okanagan First Nations and a “government man.” At this meeting the Okanagan are asked to describe their “beginnings.” The dialogue illustrates the misunderstandings that arise between Robinson’s perspective and a European perspective that comes from outside First Nations experience. It also reveals an

² While Robinson considered himself to be Roman Catholic, it is unclear to what extent his conceptualization of God is an exclusively Christian one.

understanding of creation that is more properly understood as transformation rather than as origins, or “beginnings.”³ Robinson says:

“Yeah, our forefather, how we became to be
Indian, that’s from Adam, Adam and Eve.”

“No, no, that’s mine.”

“Yeah,” the one ‘em says,
“Noah, Noah, the one that built that great big ...
when the world flood.”

“No,” he says.

“That’s overseas.
That’s my forefather. Not the Indians.
I’m asking you for your forefather.”

(Robinson 1992, 15)

Wickwire (Robinson, 1992 15) observes that, in this dialogue as well as in many of his other stories, Robinson attempts “to set straight the historical record so that everyone, Native and non-Native alike, would know why Whites and Indians are different.” In the preamble to this story of the meeting between the Okanagan and the government agent, Robinson says: “The Indians at that time, they doesn’t know anything about it. And they try to say, but they say something different” (ibid.). The government agent makes it clear that Aboriginal peoples cannot share in the European creation story, while Robinson’s narratives suggest that Okanagan creation stories now include elements of Christianity. The agent’s view of creation is based on oppositions; Robinson’s is based on multiple differences between cultures that encompass points of both connection and disconnection.

This story, like all of Robinson’s stories, reveals an inclusive and syncretic way of thinking about the world. The storyteller incorporates newer European ideas into older Okanagan traditions. The old traditions remain dynamic and fluid, absorbing the new, blending past and present, and deconstructing ideas of “us” versus “them” in favour of a complex set of relations between us *and* them. The European view, revealed through the lens of the “government man”

³ Dennis Tedlock (1995) and Hugh Brody (2000), among others, have written of Aboriginal views of creation: “Oral cultures set out the origins of aboriginal societies: in place after place, the first peoples arose where they now live. There had been no immigration, but an emergence; not an arrival from elsewhere, but a transformation from an ancient, prehuman time” (Brody 2000, 113).

in Robinson's narrative, is, in contrast, culturally exclusive and is based on binary oppositions. The government agent is determined to categorize European and Aboriginal experiences of creation as mutually exclusive, thereby denying the reality of post-contact history as well as the vitality of ongoing Okanagan storytelling traditions.

Throughout her book *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon*, Julie Cruikshank (1990) emphasizes that, in any discussion of indigenous storytelling, one must focus on the continuity of traditional First Nations stories as social process rather than on their production as cultural artifacts. Critics, however, frequently point to the limitations of written text and the inability of print to express the dynamic fluidity and continuity of oral tradition. Print, it is implied, suggests artifact. Speech is dynamic and suggests process. But appearances can be deceiving, as anyone who has ever listened silently to a long monologue can attest. And change, ironically, is essential to preserving any kind of tradition. Oral form seems only part of a storied equation in which form and situation combine to create something different. One must "read" Robinson's texts holistically; this is how the stories in *Write It on Your Heart* and *Nature Power* encompass both oral and written modes of linguistic expression.

But oral tradition, as Jo-Ann Archibald (1997) points out, is still more than a characteristic of storytelling. Orality, she suggests, reflects a deep cultural belief system and is, in fact, a mode of thought: "Learning how a story fits within a people's belief system requires that one live with or interact with the people for a long time. The communal principle of storytelling implies that a listener is or becomes a member of that community." She goes on to note that using written English to convey Aboriginal stories can be problematic because the framework of these stories (principles, values, and format) can be very different from their structure and meaning as expressed in the original language (34-6). Cruikshank (1990, 16) also writes of her initial reluctance to record English versions of stories that were traditionally learned and performed in Aboriginal languages because so much is "lost" in translation: "This inevitable loss in style and form was noted by Boas generations ago, and his observations seem as appropriate now as they were then." Much, however, has also changed since the time of Boas, and, as Cruikshank acknowledges, Aboriginal storytellers today continue to view their role as one of educating younger generations, who often speak English as their first

language (*ibid.*). Robinson also saw his role as one of educating the younger generations of both Aboriginal peoples and White peoples. His stories emphasize the differences between Aboriginal and White ways of knowledge so that, as he says to Wickwire, people learn that there is not “only the one way.”

TRANSLATING OKANAGAN STORIES

Differences between languages and cultures are highlighted when, at times, Robinson struggles to translate Okanagan concepts into English. But his very struggle to translate into English abstract concepts that are dependent upon Okanagan cultural contexts for their meanings tells the reader something meaningful about Okanagan reality. When Robinson searches for a way to express the Okanagan concept of *ha-HA*⁴ in English, for instance, it becomes apparent that the difficulty in translating lies in the differences between underlying cultural contexts, between Okanagan and mainstream Canadian ontologies. For Robinson, natural and supernatural worlds, the sacred and the secular, are not separable, and when he tries to explain a term that crosses these kinds of boundaries, Wickwire finds his storied explanations difficult to understand. In one conversation he asks Wickwire, “Now, I wonder if you can understand?” When she responds by saying, “Yeah,” Robinson continues:

There’s none of this in my word, in my language,
 that I couldn’t tell it in English.
 And that kind of things,
 they don’t seem to have a word in English for that.
 If it’s not – then how can I?
 I can only guess, that’s all.
 So, we could say that in English, “ha-HA,”
 Or, power.
 It’s about the highest power there is.
 But still we don’t know the name.
 Even in the Indian.
 Might be coyote, might be skunk, might be grizzly,
 might be bird – anything.

(Robinson n.d.)

⁴ See Blanca Chester (1996) for a discussion of the conversation that Robinson and Wickwire have around the translation of this term.

As Cruikshank (1998, 162) points out: “Narratives arguably connect analytical constructs with the material conditions of people’s daily lives ... I ... hear and understand these stories as being told thoughtfully and purposefully, as being grounded in everyday life, and as having political consequences.” To understand these stories from the perspective of a worldview where meaning is constructed out of binary oppositions rather out of a multiplicity of differences, however, risks getting the story wrong. As the Aboriginal writer and critic Greg Sarris (1993, 121) asks, can we really read *Hamlet* (William Shakespeare) and *Ceremony* (Leslie Marmon Silko) the same way? As Sarris observes, the practice of reading and writing about Aboriginal literature requires more than studying “about” Aboriginal cultures and then applying that knowledge, like a template, to an analysis of storytelling traditions.

Storytelling traditions have existed throughout world history not just throughout First Nations and Native American histories. But the assumption that the oral story is a universal category with its origins in the Greek epics of Homer is, as Dennis Tedlock (1995, 1-31) observes, problematic. Among other things, such universal readings overlook the social aspects and contexts of the storytelling performance, especially with regard to emergence, or creation, stories. Tedlock points out that “any and all present discourse is already replete with echoes, allusions, paraphrases and outright quotations of prior discourse” (7).⁵ As one reads Robinson’s stories, one sees how their dialogic and literary qualities reveal themselves at levels deeper and more complex than that of multiple voices within a particular text. Okanagan symbols and metaphor, embedded in the language of the stories as well as in the performative aspects of Robinson’s storytelling, suggest how Okanagan oral traditions perpetuate themselves through both the English language and through print.

Robinson’s concern with preserving and recreating the storied traditions of the Okanagan through print should be read as part of the “living worldview” that Wickwire (Robinson 1989, 17) attributes to oral storytelling rather than simply to reflecting a concern with preserving “dying” traditions. Robinson’s storytelling performances, as well as the storytelling of other Aboriginal elders and the works of many highly literate Aboriginal writers, show us how old traditions

⁵ Here Tedlock seems to be drawing on the literary criticism of M.M. Bakhtin, who concerned himself with, among other things, the diversity of language and the interaction of different kinds of dialogue in both social and literary contexts.

remain alive and vital even when they reveal themselves through new modes of expression. In being translated from oral into written forms, the stories continue to meaningfully incorporate current events into an older past. Robinson (1992, 15) actively sought to increase his listening audience through print; at one point he writes Wickwire a letter, saying: "Is not to be hidden ... It is to be showed in all Province in Canada and United States. That is when it comes to be a book." Oral stories migrate widely, and it seems appropriate that, in this time of print culture, part of that migration includes the movement from oral to written.

The kind of fluidity and continuity inherent in Robinson's narratives, as they shift from oral into written form, is particularly evident in the three creation stories that begin *Write It on Your Heart*. The initial story, "The First People," moves seamlessly into an earth diver story where an Okanagan Aboriginal, one member of a pair of twins, dives into the water and picks up a speck of dirt that then grows into the earth. As this story continues it becomes a detailed account of the first twins, Aboriginal and White. On tape, one hears how each story moves into the next: the two stories are intimately connected. Separating them, for Wickwire, was a difficult and arbitrary task:

There is just no single "origin" story in those early collections. Maybe the tradition has always been "fluid" and reworked according to changing situations and individual "interpretation." Maybe the early ethnographers were constantly battling with an issue that was part of the tradition. For "us" it is a single linear "story"; with the Okanagan of a century ago, it may have been something very different. Harry's views certainly support the latter. (Wickwire to author, personal e-mail communication, 26 May 1998)

It is clear when reading some of the stories in *Write It on Your Heart* that each story contains another and that each evokes another. This is even more evident when listening to the taped versions of Robinson's performances: it is often impossible to determine exactly where one story begins and ends, and where another one starts. One cannot read the story of the First People without imagining its connection to the earth diver story, and its connection to the story of the twins, and its connection to the story of how Coyote gets his name – never mind the multiple points of connections between all of these. The interconnectedness of the stories and their resistance to

linear reading reflect a cultural context within which the story is both oral history and the transformation of culture itself. One might say that the world itself exists inside the story. In both their oral and their written versions, therefore, it is the stories themselves that act as interpretive devices that enable us to understand the world.

STORIES AS TRUTH

The act of storytelling always suggests or implies an interaction with an audience. Telling a story suggests that someone is listening to that story. Traditionally, the listener comes from the same cultural background as the teller, and the two share a certain matrix of cultural knowledge. Consequently, there is no way of knowing exactly how Robinson edited and shaped these stories for his audience. What is certain, however, is that he assumed that he was telling his stories to an audience other than Wickwire and that this audience would interact with his stories in multiple ways. Hence, his insistence that Wickwire get the written story down in a way that is “right” for a reading audience emphasizes the collaborative nature of constructing *Write It on Your Heart*. Of the stories’ transformation into print culture, collaboration is key: As Robinson (1992, 17) tells Wickwire, “The stories is worked by both of us, you and I.”

With regard to this process, Wickwire observes: “In an oral tradition such as Harry’s ... nothing is fundamentally new ... and creation is not some moment in the past, but remains present as the wellspring of every act and every experience in the world” (Robinson 1989, 23). During each storytelling performance Wickwire is invited into a dialogue with Robinson’s world; she is required to recreate and to understand her own experience of the story and Robinson’s interpretation of it. Although the books, for the most part, contain only one version of each story, Robinson often performed the same story more than once for Wickwire. Moreover, he instructs her: “Take a listen to these, a few times and think about it, to these stories, and what I tell you now. Compare them. See if you can see something more about it. Kind of plain, but it’s pretty hard to tell you for you to know right now. Takes time. And then you will see” (Robinson 1992, 19). During his performances, Robinson frequently addresses Wickwire (and now us, as readers) rhetorically: “See?” But to see what Robinson means one has to think about his stories at the level of cultural meaning. The meaning that Robinson wants his audience to understand is

dependent upon non-verbal as well as verbal contexts, and it is understood that concepts such as “truth” and/or “reality” are culturally constructed.

As Wickwire notes, Robinson never fictionalizes stories; rather, he emphasizes that all of his stories are “true.” Wickwire reflects on this and says, “The truth and accuracy of Harry’s words ... have made me think anew about what is ‘real,’ what we ‘know,’ what is ‘true.’ In the West we have built a civilization around the ‘true’ story of a man who died and was resurrected after three days” (Robinson 1992, 20). Robinson’s notion that all of his stories are true reflects an Okanagan understanding of reality itself as storied. According to Wickwire, “Stories describe either situations experienced personally or they describe situations passed on by others who similarly experienced them, however long ago. In the case of the latter, Harry simply explains, ‘this is the way I heard the stories so I tell it that way’” (Robinson 1989, 16). The truth of stories, it seems, has to do with the nature of their meaning.

Alessandro Portelli (1997, 42-3) notes in his research on storytelling traditions that stories transform material facts into cultural meanings: “What counts is less the event told than the telling of the event.” Meaning lies in dialogue, in the shared experience between storyteller and listener. While either storyteller and/or listener may initiate dialogue, communication between storyteller and listener is essential if that dialogue is to be ongoing.⁶ Storied communication is inherently dialogic; unlike monologue, it invites the active participation of both storyteller and audience. Truth lies in a story’s ability to create an ongoing dialogue with an audience, whether that story is in oral or written form. This is where one can “see something more about it.” Whether a story is categorized formally as fact or as fiction, however, is outside Robinson’s scope of reference.

Robinson’s written narratives reflect the same vitality, the same “psychological urgency”⁷ and “truth,” as do their oral tellings because the printed stories resonate with earlier oral, performative versions. Consequently, the written versions reveal the ongoing ability of oral

⁶ The idea that literature is meant to communicate to the reader ideas about the world is not self-evident: some literary theory sees literature as a closed system, where (literary) texts refer to each other and have no connection to the lived world of experience. Language itself, in such a view, is not necessarily concerned with communication. Bakhtin (1986) discusses the idea of the “utterance” as distinct from the idea of language as a whole. An utterance, he argues, always presupposes a response and, therefore, leads to dialogue.

⁷ This is a phrase that Walter Ong (1982) uses to describe the oral storytelling that is characteristic of cultures that are not print-based.

stories to take on new forms as well as new thematic content. They suggest, moreover, that form is part of content and context. The ability of the stories to continue teaching younger generations of listeners – both Aboriginal and White – also highlights a continued recursivity and productivity. Robinson’s stories show how a storied worldview remains part of an ongoing and vital Okanagan culture. The stories themselves will, therefore, continue to show up in new ways and in new times and places.

STORIED DIALOGUES

Robinson makes a clear distinction between his own stories, which have an underlying Okanagan context and history, and stories that have European sources. The different views of reality that remain embedded in such narratives are highlighted in Robinson’s performances, which reveal differences in the details of such stories. In addition, the source of any narrative, where the story comes from, and how it arrived in Robinson’s repertoire are all meaningful aspects of each of his tellings. As he begins the story that Wickwire entitles, “Puss in Boots,” Robinson says:

Yeah, I’ll tell you “Cat With the Boots On.”

Riding boots on.

That’s the stories, the first stories.

There was a big ranch, not around here.

That’s someplace in European.

Overseas.

That’s a long time, shortly after the “imbellable” stories.

But this is part “imbellable” stories.

It’s not Indian stories.

This is white people stories,

because I learned this from the white people.

Not the white man.

The white man tell his son,

that’s Allison – John Fall Allison.

His son was a half Indian and a half white,

because his mother was an Indian.

And his father was a white man.

So his father told him these stories.

But he told me – Bert Allison.

So he told me,

“This is not Indian stories.
White man stories.”
You understand that?

(Robinson 1989, 282)

“Imbellable,” according to Wickwire, “was the term adopted by Harry during a discussion with a non-native who explained to Harry that these stories were ‘unbelievable’” (ibid.). The idea of any of his stories being “unbelievable” lies outside the terms of Robinson’s reference since the stories, as he sees them, are not fictionalized. But Robinson also seems to be aware that White people view their stories differently. When Robinson tells Wickwire his version of a European folktale, the story emphasizes the interconnectedness of animal and human realms in typical Okanagan fashion. In “Puss in Boots,” for instance, rather than stressing the cat’s transformation into human form he stresses the importance of treating cats and dogs “right” because they share the world with humans. Robinson’s cat says:

But if you’re not good to me,
if you kick me,
if you take the broom and chase me out with the broom
or something,
you going to have another bad luck.
And it’s going to be bad for you
for the rest of your time.
But if you treat me right,
you can be all right at all time.

(Robinson 1989, 313-14)

As he concludes this story, Robinson says, “You treat your dog very good. / You can do the same with your cat. / There are stories for the dog, too” (315). The relationship between people and animals, Robinson suggests, is an intensely personal one, and the cat’s experience of the world is no less important than is the human experience of the world. The message – that harmony between human and animal worlds is crucial – is a subtle one: the well-being of the human world is directly linked to the well-being of animals.

Traditional European versions of “Puss in Boots” reinforce separate, and hierarchical, animal and human worlds, and the message of the story shifts, fitting its European contexts. Human responsibility for animals in traditional European tellings of this story is connected to the idea of human dominion over the creatures of the earth. Humans

are responsible for the cat's well-being because people are superior to cats and consequently should look after them rather than, as in Robinson's story, because humans and cats exist on the same level of consciousness. Wickwire, moreover, notes that, in some European versions of this story, the boy cuts off the cat's head (at the cat's request) and the cat is then transformed into a prince. The implication is clearly that only humans can attain higher levels of consciousness, or "prince" status. In Robinson's version, however, the cat can simultaneously expect to be treated like a prince and remain a cat. And Robinson's story reflects, as he says, "The way it's supposed to be" (314).

Robinson's concern that his audience understand that Okanagan and White ways of knowledge and power are different is grounded, as his telling of traditional European folktales like "Puss in Boots" implies, in an understanding of the complex connections (and disconnections) between cultures. And, despite his emphasis on the differences between Aboriginal and White perceptions of the world, Robinson notes that "they gets together sometimes" (Chester 1996, 34). It is through his stories that Robinson gives his audience clues with regard to how to interpret differences between Okanagan and White history, Okanagan and White views of the world. Okanagan history, he suggests, is not the same as White history, but the two do interconnect. Other stories with their sources in historical events also reveal connections between Aboriginal stereotypes and Okanagan experience. In one story Robinson says: "The white man, they can tell a lie more than the Indian." And he continues:

And now, if the white man tell a lie,
 it don't seems to be bad.
 But if the Indian tells a lie,
 that's really bad.
 That's what they do.
 See?

(Robinson 1989, 46)

Robinson observes that White people, unlike Aboriginal people, have written laws and that writing both prevents and encourages lying. Throughout his storytelling Robinson focuses on the importance of paper and the printed word, and his narratives show how White people have practised deception through the printed manipulation of truth. At one point he says:

But the white man, they got the law.

Then they mention on the law,
 and he says not to tell lie.
 Lie is bad.
 In the court you take the Bible,
 You kiss this Bible to say the true,
 not to tell a lie.
 They know that much because they got the law.
 But not him.
 But the same white man but the others,
 the bunch, that they got a different idea than the other one,
 and they can tell a lie.
 It's begin to do that from that time until today.
 (Robinson 1989, 46)

In this story, “Twins: White and Indian,” God has provided four sets of written instructions for living in the world. Unfortunately for Aboriginal peoples, the White twin steals the paper that was intended to be shared by Aboriginals and Whites. The White twin thus effectively removes the power of the written word from the realm of Aboriginal knowledge. While the written word is powerful, however, so is the spoken word, and, as Robinson suggests, Aboriginal peoples are left with other powers. Words, whatever their form, are always powerful entities. Robinson also observes that the absence of writing made the Okanagan powerful in other ways, ways that White people cannot comprehend. For example, of shoo-MISH, another kind of power, he says:

God give this shoo-MISH to the Indian.
 Not to the SHA-ma.⁸
 And what they give to the SHA-ma,
 to be a power, like, they don't give that to the Indian.
 (Robinson n.d.)

And he notes:

See, the Indians they could see the things
 With their power ...
 The Indians' power in their body.
 You could see the difference right there.
 (Robinson n.d.)

⁸ Wickwire states that *SHA-ma* is the Okanagan word for White people, and Robinson uses the word frequently, not always translating it into the English equivalent of “Whites.”

These narratives, like many of Robinson's narratives, are structured so that they reveal the connections between Aboriginal and White peoples as lying partly in the differences between them. These are connections, moreover, that mirror what has already happened in the process of creation. European elements in the stories, like the existence of an omnipotent god who creates the world and gives his creation the equivalent of the written covenant of the Old Testament, imply relationships that mirror the interconnections between all human, animal, and inanimate worlds. The differences between the Aboriginal and White twins, Robinson's stories suggest, are a matter of lived experience and of the choices that each makes at the beginning of creation – and over and over again throughout history.

White peoples, Robinson makes abundantly clear, have been explicitly instructed to work with Aboriginal peoples rather than against them. God tells the White twin:

You have to tell this one about the paper.
 You're the one that's got to tell him all what's on there.
 You have to tell him.
 You have to let him know.

(Robinson 1989, 50)

But, of course, he doesn't. The rest is history. As Robinson states elsewhere:

Nowadays, the *SHA-ma* was trying to make the things all in one.
 On his side, on his way.
 But it should not.
 But the Indians is got to have his own way at all.
 That's what God says.
 So, finally we can go that way.

(Robinson n.d.)

Throughout the translation of his stories from oral to written form, Robinson was concerned with getting the story "right." He recognized the importance and power of the words associated with perpetuating traditional Okanagan stories in books like *Write It on Your Heart* and *Nature Power*. The awareness of the body of his stories as a complete entity – and as part of getting the story right – may have formed part of his disappointment when he realized that not all of his performances (some 200-plus narratives) were to be contained in the first book, *Write It on Your Heart*.

Portelli observes that oral history is transformed into written history through different creative processes. Interviewees tell their stories differently when they are being recorded for the explicit purpose of being textualized in print. Consequently, he argues, oral histories recorded by historians are more cohesive and less fragmented than they would have been had they been recited casually over a lengthy period of time. In reality, stories are frequently told as fragments that build up over time rather than as one lengthy narrative (Portelli 1997, 3-23). Ironically, the editing process and the constraints on publishing exhaustive accounts of all of Robinson's stories have made it impossible to create the kind of coherent record that is typical of written history or (literary) print culture. Instead, the written collections compiled by Wickwire resemble the kind of oral fragments that not only build up over time but that also require an insider's knowledge of other earlier and connected stories. Thus, a whole history is hidden inside the oral record.

The dialogic nature of Robinson's stories causes conversation to shift. Readers move between layers of stories, narrative voices, and human and animal worlds in a way that is in keeping with interactive, performative oral storytelling traditions. The stories are both literature and history. In addition, the collaborative process of putting together *Write It on Your Heart* and *Nature Power* shares in the dialogic nature of the storytelling situation. Unlike artifacts collected and "preserved" by anthropologists or historians or literary critics, these are not monologues imprinted on a flat white page. Robinson's Okanagan stories remain dialogues between people and peoples, and the written texts continue speaking to those who take the time to listen.

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