

The Princess, the Bear, the Computer, and the King of England

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The story begins like this: a Princess goes out picking berries and “oops”—she steps in bear poop (Tate 32). This year, I have started to teach oral story as part of a course that looks at orature and early Indigenous writers. The course is bookended by Thomas King’s *The Truth about Stories* and Eden Robinson’s *The Sasquatch at Home*. Lee Maracle says in the Preface to her first short story collection, *Sojourner’s Truth*, that listeners are expected to reflect on how a story applies to their own particular circumstances (11-13). So the story might apply to me, although I’m not a princess. It could be an allegory for someone putting stories on a course without knowing enough about their cultural context. Or for someone trying to teach oral stories first told in another language. Or for someone looking across disciplinary lines, tempted by those berries over in Anthropology. . . .

For anyone who teaches Indigenous literatures, as I do, the stories are a challenge. King’s novel *Green Grass, Running Water* is jammed full of origin stories from a range of Indigenous cultures. Robinson’s novel *Monkey Beach* is interwoven with Haisla stories. These novels are written for an audience that likely has no previous knowledge of the stories or their cultural context. King and Robinson aim to educate as well as entertain. Part of the education is showing readers the importance of the stories.

Of course, oral genres have long been part of literary study and have inspired many great literary works. James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is just one example. However, the Greek and Roman classics and the Bible and European folk tales generally survive only as written texts, while the Indigenous stories that King and Robinson write down are still alive, being told and retold. In

graduate school, I was forced through Old English, moaning and whining at having to translate *Beowulf* line by line. The great writers in English, I muttered, knew nothing about *Beowulf*, and Old English is really German. And in fact, *Beowulf* and Old English were wheeled into English literary studies in the 1920s around the same time as English literature became a separate university discipline. National literatures were supposed to be grounded in an indigenous oral culture—so the obscure British *Beowulf* became preferable to the famous Greek Homer. Similarly, many major anthologies of Canadian literature begin with some Indigenous oral poems in translation, although they too were unknown to most Canadian writers and so cannot really be said to “ground” the Canadian literary tradition. This retroactive claiming of a formerly ignored Indigenous tradition was fairly harmless in English literary studies. In Canadian literary studies, it is part of a colonial history that takes over Indigenous culture without doing it justice as something more than the beginning of “our” literary history. We should not study oral stories here without keeping the history of colonial appropriation clearly in mind. Nor should we forget that oral stories do not precede written stories, but are contemporary with them. Nor are they a primitive stage to be “outgrown,” by the analogy that story is to literature what children are to adults.

Still, English literature does give us an entry into reading oral stories. Everyone who studies English literature reads Homer and Sophocles and ballads and fairy tales as a matter of course. British writers may not have heard of *Beowulf*, but they knew Greek and Roman myth, Arthurian legends, and an array of other variously transcribed, translated, and rewritten oral material. Most writers were immersed in folk culture; they lived when their literacy was the exception rather than the rule. King Lear’s “love test” of his three daughters is taken from fairy tale. Wordsworth and other Romantic writers pillaged oral forms and themes. And of course, the Bible, another written compilation of oral material, underlies everything in the history of English literature, at least between *Beowulf* and the secularizing 1960. The English literature curriculum acknowledges its oral foundations, linguistic and literary, even if it does not linger on them. Those of us who teach Indigenous literatures, then, should consider oral stories to be our responsibility. But to integrate them properly is a great stretch, given the many nations whose oral cultures are still living in North America and the cultural distance between most of us and the people who know most about the stories and their context.

To add to the difficulty, Lenore Keeshig-Tobias reminds us in “Stop Stealing Native Stories” that not all stories can be used by anyone for any purpose (A.7). Eden Robinson stresses that many stories are the property of nations, clans, or individuals. However, this warning doesn’t apply to all stories. So for this course, I have picked stories told and written in English, some produced by Henry Wellington Tate for Franz Boas between 1903 and 1913 and some told by Harry Robinson to Wendy Wickwire in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Certainly, Robinson wanted his stories to reach a wide audience, “white or Indian” (*Living* 89).

Tate’s story about the princess and the bear is, in fact, a very widespread and popular story. Catherine McClellan’s *The Girl Who Married the Bear* (1970) provides eleven versions of the story she collected from Tagish, Inland Tlingit, and Southern Tutchone men and women living in the Yukon. Tate’s story resembles them, but not in all respects, leading to questions about whether the differences relate to his personal experiences and to his Tsimshian culture, whose territories are south of the Yukon. The Yukon stories also differ from one to the other, and McClellan considers how these differences might relate to the individual storytellers.

Tate’s story, like the others, reveals how complex human-bear relationships are for a culture that hunts and eats bears. What generates the action is not the slip that spills the Princess’ berries, but that she insults the bear by crying out “alas, it very nasty” (Tate 32-33). The consequences of her bad manners are dire for both the Princess and the bear. The Princess has made herself vulnerable. Although he appears to her as a handsome man, still, the bear takes her away from her family. Rather than forming family bonds in a “proper” marriage, she has set her brothers, famous bear hunters, against her own husband. As McClellan says, the conflicting loyalties in the story generate huge psychological tensions (1).

In Tate’s version, the Princess wants to save her husband from her brothers. She chooses a den for them high up on a ridge as far as possible from the hunting grounds. But the elder brothers kill so many bears that by the time the youngest goes out hunting, there are scarcely any bears left. The youngest brother has almost given up when his dogs catch her familiar scent and run ahead: then she rolls down a snowball with the imprint of her fingers in it. She clearly wants to go home. At first her brother is reluctant to kill the bear: after all, this is his brother-in-law. But the Princess has just had two babies and knows she has to choose: she wants them to be humans. She tells her brother that he has to kill the bear, and he does. But the bear, who

had a premonition of his death, has taught her how to mourn him and treat his body properly, knowledge she passes on to her brother. This respectful treatment presumably will promote future success in the hunt.

She and her two children go home and her father loves his grandchildren. One day, however, playing roughly, they knock their grandmother down and she calls them “little slaves” (Tate 39). Their mother and her children are ashamed, and the children ask to go back to their father’s people. Their sad grandfather misses them. Although Tate begins by describing the village as happy, the story is full of sorrow. However, the hunt goes on and this marriage means that kinship ties have been forged with the bears, whom Tate also calls “myth people” (36).

Tate, whose English is not perfect, uses words that drag a huge array of cultural assumptions with them for Western readers. The Princess is certainly high-ranking, but not in the European fairy-tale tradition of castles, coaches, and tiaras. This Princess is packing a heavy load of berries to be dried for the winter. And in Tate’s version, she is accompanied by her slaves. Again the word brings in a huge array of images from history elsewhere. The setting is far from the American South. But the slaves clearly have to help the Princess when she drops her berries, and when it gets dark and they start to worry about wild animals, they have to go on ahead when she tells them to. Situating the social life of Tsimshian people in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century becomes part of teaching the story.

Teaching this story as literature raises other issues. McClellan wanted to collect enough variants of the “same” story to be able to talk about its core as well as the features that individual tellers added. This particular story has many such features, some of which come from Tate’s idiosyncratic language. Tate learned to write English while helping William Ridley, the Bishop of Caledonia, to translate the gospels. Thus, when the slaves start to worry about how late it is, they say “let’s . . . go right on before night lest the wild beasts come and devour us and we will perish” (33). Surely these words echo the King James Version of the Bible. This phrase varies in style quite a bit from Tate’s description of Red and Spots, the youngest brother’s “two large beautiful handy dogs” (32). Tate’s English, which veers between the biblical and the colloquial, the grammatical and the poetic, and indeed, the literary and the ethnographic, usefully reminds us of the gulf between his social world and ours.

As literature scholars, we usually foreground a story as an individual work of art, while anthropologists front story as part of a large continuum or web

of stories that in turn reveal large belief systems or reflect kinship systems. Indigenous scholars often adapt the stories to contemporary arguments, enacting a continuum that other writers cannot claim. Now we are fortunate to have Indigenous insights, and are perhaps better able to read stories in multiple ways. Computers make large comparative textual studies possible. Claude Lévi-Strauss' famous article, "The Structural Study of Myth," not only makes a case for taking oral stories seriously, but also calls for the use of computers to enhance their study (443). Ironically, fifty years later, Franco Moretti's *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (2005) makes the case that that quintessential European literary form, the novel, should be read distantly, that is, by computers for quantitative data, as well as by humans.

This move reflects the understanding that many dominant attitudes to fiction have tended to isolate "great" works by "great" male writers at the expense of the nexus from which these works are selected. Much of the last few decades of literary study have been spent showing how works by women and "minority" writers have generally been ignored. Since Indigenous people were deemed not to have writing, and those who were educated were deemed to be assimilated, writers like Tate were ignored, as were his peers. And, as Tate's editor, Ralph Maud, points out, only the stories that suited Western definitions of "myth" were seen as appropriate for collection.

Harry Robinson's stories show, however, that these types of "timeless" story cannot easily be separated out of his repertoire. One of the first stories he tells Wendy Wickwire is an origin story, using classic "earth diver" story form, where the earth that will form the world has to be brought up from beneath the water that covers everything. However, his divers are not animals, but people: the Chinese, the Hindu, the Russians, the Indian and the white. And the Indian and the white are twins, another classic trope in Indigenous stories, and one that Thomas King explores, along with the earth diver story, in *The Truth about Stories*. As Robinson's story proceeds, various expectations are left unfulfilled: the Indian gets the earth that makes the world, not the last and smallest diver, as usual. And the Indian is also Coyote, who later is selected by God to speak to the King of England about settlers' seizing of Okanagan land in the interior of British Columbia. This use of story to make contemporary political points and to document history blows apart most assumptions made by early anthropologists about oral story, as Wickwire points out (Introduction, *Living by Stories*). A computer might be able to pick up the recurrent features—the five earth divers, the twins—but what would it do with the King of England?

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