

# Reading the Prairies Relationally

Louise Bernice Halfe  
and “Spacious Creation”

**H**ow do you read the literatures emerging from the prairies, literatures that are just as diverse and contested as the land itself? An exploratory answer is offered in the following discussion that examines the question of how prairie criticism might engage in a meaningful, ethical way with the Aboriginal texts growing out of the prairie region. For this purpose, I will read the work of Cree poet Louise Bernice Halfe as a performance of *mamâhtâwisiwin*—“the process of tapping into the Great Mystery” (McLeod, “Cree Poetic Discourse” 109)—before discussing how such a nationalist reading of Cree literature may be put in relation to prairie writing, while maintaining the distinctness of each tradition. In its attempt to make sense of the relationship between different literary traditions growing out of the same region, my essay relies on two critically distinct approaches—one grounded in Cree traditions of language and thought, as explicated by Neal McLeod (Cree), and the other based in Euro-Western literary theory. Ultimately, this essay argues for such a relational approach—an approach that, modelled on Creek scholar Tol Foster’s notion of relational regionalism, has literary critics negotiate and move between different literary and critical traditions, assuming the role of translators.

## **How to Read the Prairies?**

As Alison Calder and Robert Wardhaugh have aptly pointed out, prairie literary studies have long taken “the moment of settler contact with the prairie environment . . . as the originary moment of prairie culture” (10). As a result, the field has largely ignored the work of Aboriginal writers and

scholars growing out of the region. In order not to “risk obsolescence,” Calder and Wardhaugh argue, prairies criticism therefore needs to “diversify the field” by including Aboriginal voices in its exploration of prairie regional culture and “to explore why our field has become so narrow” (10). It is important to remember that Calder and Wardhaugh’s observation points to a concern shared primarily by non-Indigenous scholars. (Indigenous literary scholars will likely and, one may add, understandably have little interest in the state of prairie literary studies.) Risking obsolescence is one thing, but there is more at stake, as I am sure Calder and Wardhaugh will agree: acknowledging the existence and legitimacy of alternative sets of stories being told on the prairies is ultimately a matter of respect. Indeed, this circumstance also points to the critical challenge implied by Calder and Wardhaugh’s call, for a blind inclusion of Aboriginal voices into prairie literature and criticism will only risk silencing the very voices prairie critics seek to engage. The ending of Rudy Wiebe’s “Where is the Voice Coming From?” may be used to illustrate this issue. Wiebe ends his reconstruction of the story of Almighty Voice with the following description of Almighty’s death chant:<sup>1</sup>

And there is a voice. It is an incredible voice that rises from among the young poplars ripped of their spring bark, from among the dead somewhere lying there, out of the arm-deep pit shorter than a man; . . . a voice so high and clear, so unbelievably high and strong in its unending wordless cry.

. . .

I say “wordless cry” because that is the way it sounds to me. I could be more accurate if I had a reliable interpreter who would make a reliable interpretation. For I do not, of course, understand the Cree myself. (143)

In this passage, the phrase “of course” would have passed without question at the time the story was published. Of course, someone who was not Cree did not speak the language and, sadly, many of Wiebe’s Cree contemporaries did not speak it either, as a result of the residential schools’ enforcement of the speaking of English. Yet, for a writer who has engaged so intimately with Cree and other Indigenous traditions throughout much of his career, the phrasal adjunct “of course” is strangely out of tune—almost ironic. Why *should* it almost go without saying that a white person would not speak Cree? At the time Wiebe wrote the story, this ending may have marked his realization that his almost obsessive interest in the Indigenous past in “his” region might be seen as appropriative. He may be using his inability to understand the Cree language as a way of marking a national boundary. Furthermore, his implication that a “reliable” translation of a Cree man’s

death song might be possible is either blinkered or ironic. Forty years after the story's publication, however, its ending can also be read as a challenge to prairie critics to learn Cree as part of their regional critical education. They should become translators or Aboriginal literatures will remain to them but one powerful but "wordless cry." To ethically engage with Aboriginal stories emerging from the prairies means, above all else, to learn to listen to these stories; and for non-Aboriginal critics, this implies learning a new language, one that has both literary and critical dimensions.

Non-European voices turn the prairies, as they have long been theorized, into a space where Warren Cariou (Métis) notes, "alternative set[s] of parameters and paradigms" are brought into play ("Occasions" 29). Writers such as Suzette Mayr, Hiromi Goto, Sally Ito, Ven Begamudré, and Madeline Coopsammy offer new perspectives on the writing produced on the prairies, as do Aboriginal poets and novelists such as Louise Bernice Halfe, Tomson Highway (Cree), Gregory Scofield (Métis), Neal McLeod, or Marilyn Dumont (Métis). It may be tempting to group the works of these diverse authors under the heading "prairie literature"; yet Cariou rightly questions whether the term can "remain useful, . . . given the multicultural differences and the decolonizing imperatives of much contemporary literature that emanates from this region" ("Occasions" 29). The one alternative term that has been suggested, Jon Fiorentino and Robert Kroetsch's "post-prairie," seems inadequate to engage the specific concerns of Nêhiyawak (Cree), Métis, Tsuu T'ina (Sarcee), Nahoda (Stoney), Saulteaux (Plains Anishinaabe), Siksika, Kainai (Blood), or Pikuni (Piegan)<sup>2</sup> storywriters and storytellers. Whatever the term used, Indigenous nationalist critics—such as Robert Warrior (Osage), Craig Womack (Muskogee Creek), or Jace Weaver (Cherokee) in the United States and Janice Acoose (Cree-Métis), Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee), or Neal McLeod in Canada—have made a very strong argument against the corralling of Indigenous literatures into Euro-Western canons, whether national or regional. Indigenous nations of the Plains are distinct peoples with distinct literary and intellectual traditions that need to be read from within those very traditions in order to adequately address the particular concerns and forms of these literatures, particularly as they relate to the politics and histories of specific tribal or national communities. To subsume these literary traditions into the body of prairie literature therefore amounts to colonialism.

To further complicate the question of "inclusion," "prairies" as used and understood in prairie studies is a word foreign to the peoples indigenous to

this part of the country. “Prairies” describes a region whose very political, cultural, and social specificities always also imply a colonial project. More specifically, the word conjures up the politics of regionalism in a modern settler nation-state and, by implication, the histories of colonialism and settlement: the hunting to extinction of the buffalo, the different waves of immigration, the homesteading, the numbered treaties, the two Métis resistances, the building of the railway, etc. The peoples indigenous to what is now referred to as “the prairies,” on the other hand, share a *storied* connection to this land. Aboriginal stories emerging from the prairies are not so much about the land as they grow out of it, defining and anchoring the people who tell these stories. Story thus becomes a performance of peoplehood, which is commonly theorized as “a holistic matrix” of four interdependent social concepts—language, sacred history, land/territory, and the ceremonial cycle (Holm, Pearson, and Chavis 15)—that keep the people in balance with themselves and the world around them. Further, the storied connection to the land shared by the Plains Indigenous nations proves to transcend colonial political borders and thus further complicates the “project of inclusion” advocated by Calder and Wardhaugh. Blackfoot/Blackfeet literary traditions are home to what is now Alberta *and* Montana, but “including” the work of Blackfeet writers in Montana would certainly upset settler conceptions of the prairies as a Canadian region that ends at the 49th parallel. The question of “inclusion” ultimately points to much larger issues, then, such as the notion of what constitutes the prairies in the first place and, more importantly, how to theorize the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal literatures.

Indigenous literary nationalists have made a very convincing argument that Indigenous literary traditions are best theorized as sovereign traditions, but sovereignty need not by definition imply separatism at the political level. In fact, I believe that prairie criticism will have to address the fact that the stories it has studied in the past are not the only stories growing out of this region. The different sets of stories I am concerned with in this essay—one Aboriginal, the other non-Aboriginal—are usually imagined as contraries, as two entities that contradict each other. What if one were to imagine this relationship using a different perspective? One in which these sets of stories are constructed not as contraries but as *relatives*, using a different topos, that of *difference*? In other words, I suggest focusing, as J. Edward Chamberlin proposes, on “com[ing] together in agreement not about what to believe but about what it is to believe” (240). Chamberlin’s argument for accepting the

validity of both sets of stories, Aboriginal *and* non-Aboriginal, is modelled on Aboriginal intellectual traditions (“all my relations”) and has profound ethical consequences for the work of non-Aboriginal literary critics. It requires them to move between distinct literary and intellectual traditions and, thus, to honour that the relationship between Indigenous literary traditions of the prairies and prairie writing is of an *external* nature: they are not two parts of a whole. Rather, they are distinct entities that exist within a larger context, the legacy of history. Thus, “prairie culture” will always be prairie culture because the very notion of “prairies” as a unique historical, cultural, and social category is non-Aboriginal; and yet, there are contexts in which prairie critics will need to *engage with* Aboriginal texts—for example, when teaching prairie literature and history or in such new and vibrant fields as ecocriticism. Not only are these contexts of encounter unavoidable, but they will also become increasingly important for the future of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations on the prairies and beyond.

The model I am advocating here is, then, a relational model that allows prairie scholars to study Aboriginal texts wherever they see connections to prairie texts, without silencing the very voices they seek to engage with. As such, this model borrows from an emerging strand in Indigenous literary criticism focused on relations—a central category in Indigenous intellectual, spiritual, and political traditions (reflected, for example, in “all my relations”). One such relational approach, “relational regionalism,” has been proposed by Tol Foster in order to argue for region as a critical tool in examining the relations between communities and the issues that result from these relationships. For Foster, region is a significant frame for critical inquiry, but he also notes that he understands “a regional framework as one that is not actually coherent without more specific tribal studies that serve to buttress and challenge it”: in order to understand the world around us, we need to know ourselves first, and that knowledge may indeed include all the intellectual tools needed to understand that outside world (269). When Foster points to relations as a central tool “through which we can understand ourselves and each other” (277), he does so by emphasizing that relationships always imply both “interactions and conflicts between communities” (273). The notion of relational regionalism is, then, neither simplistic nor conciliatory. As Foster emphasizes, the aim of making relations a main lens through which to read literature and history “is emphatically *not* the leveling of distinction or hierarchy, the contention that we are all the same, but that even within the constraints of hierarchy and different levels of maturity

and expertise we are nonetheless intricately bound to each other” (278). Indeed, what makes relational regionalism a radical approach is its intention to read Indigenous-settler relations from a decidedly *Indigenous* point of view by “privileg[ing] the local and the tribal” (268). It thus offers positions that discussions of this relationship tend to undermine because they are dominated by settler traditions of writing and thought, which have long marginalized, suppressed, disregarded, and appropriated Indigenous voices and intellectual traditions.

Similarly, the relational reading of the prairies I discuss here involves not just any kind of comparative literary approach, but one that also builds on specific traditions of Aboriginal thought and thus allows Aboriginal voices to exist in their own stories and traditions. Like Tol Foster, I believe that a relational framework can be successful in putting alongside each other the different sets of stories emerging from a particular region, but only if this framework is based on studies that pay close attention to the specificities of these sets of stories. More specifically, I want to argue that the only way for prairie critics to dialogue with the Aboriginal voices is to translate and navigate between specific Aboriginal and Euro-Western literary and intellectual traditions, giving each the same careful attention as the other. Doing so, they would follow the example of Aboriginal thinkers who, more often than not, know both intellectual traditions, their own and the colonizers’.

As suggested above, such a relational reading of the prairies will require critics to learn a new language of criticism. In order to discuss this relational model of criticism, I will thus offer a reading of Louise Bernice Halfe’s poetry as grounded in Cree traditions of thought, before examining how this nationalist reading differs from Euro-Western approaches to Aboriginal texts. Finally, I will discuss why these differences should matter to non-Aboriginal critics. For this purpose, I will explore specific contexts of encounter in which prairie critics may find themselves engaging with Aboriginal texts. Though a challenge to prairie literary studies—they require critics to navigate between different literary and critical traditions—these contexts of encounters ultimately have much to contribute to prairie criticism in the twenty-first century.

### **The Poetic Dreaming of Louise Bernice Halfe**

English is neither *lingua franca* nor *lingua nullius* but a highly varied language whose national and regional nuances carry a large bundle of meaning. Rather than becoming willing subjects of (neo)colonial linguistic practices,

Indigenous peoples have claimed English for their own purposes of exercising rhetorical sovereignty, defined by Scott Lyons (Anishinaabe/Mdewakanton Dakota) as “the inherent right and ability of *peoples* to determine their own communicative needs and desires in [their] pursuit [of sovereignty], to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse” (449-50). Rhetorical sovereignty is not restricted to speaking or writing but concerns the whole process of communication, including the very ways in which language is viewed and valued. In her poetry, Louise Bernice Halfe switches between English, Cree, and a Cree-inflected English, not so much to produce polyphony as to create a decidedly Cree voice in the English language. Thus, Halfe’s “Cree-ing loud into [her] night” (*Blue Marrow* 16) gives birth to poems deeply involved with the continuation of Cree stories on Cree terms—stories whose origins lie in Cree literary and rhetorical traditions or *mamâhtâwisiwin*.

Neal McLeod links *mamâhtâwisiwin* to what he calls “Cree poetics.” For McLeod, the process of poetry constitutes “a first order act of theory and critical thinking” (“Cree Poetic Discourse” 117). Storytellers are *kâ-mamâhtâwisiwak*, those that tap into the Great Mystery; as “poetic dreamers,” they function as the keepers of the “ancient poetic pathways” that constitute Cree ancestral knowledge (113). This knowledge is based not in discourses of science but in a “metaphorical discourse, composed of symbolic and poetic descriptions of the world and [Cree] experiences, [that] saturates and permeates Cree narrative memory” (109). Cree poetics, McLeod further writes, “link human beings to the rest of the world through the process of *mamâhtâwisiwin*, the process of tapping into the Great Mystery, which, in turn, is mediated by historicity and *wâhkôhtowin* (kinship)” (109). In Cree contexts, storytelling is therefore intricately linked to the creation and keeping of knowledge, including the people’s collective memory. The poetic pathways that constitute Cree knowledge, according to McLeod, are always “embodied understandings”: they indicate the storyteller’s “location in understanding the world and reality” (113). At the heart of this embodied understanding of the world therefore lies “‘*wâhkôhtowin*’ (kinship/relationships),” which McLeod translates as “poetics of empathy”: “Through relations we are able to create the web of understanding of our embodied locations and stretch it outwards to a wider context of collective historicity and through a poetics grounded in dialogue and an open-ended flow of narrative understanding” (114). In other words, *kâ-mamâhtâwisiwak ê-ânisko-âcimocik*: those that tap into the Great

Mystery, “they connect through telling stories” (110); evoking ancestral knowledge, contemporary poetic dreamers fulfil their “moral responsibility to remember” (111). McLeod describes this process as “intra-narrative dialogue (âniskwâpitamâcimowin ‘the act of inter-textual connecting’)” (117). âniskwâpitamâcimowin<sup>3</sup>—connecting through story—is central to mamâhtâwisiwin because it marks that process through which Cree poetic and intellectual traditions grow and develop organically: “retravel[ling] and indeed expand[ing]” ancestral knowledge, contemporary Cree storytellers perform kinship and create a future for their people through narrative imagination, which becomes the driving force of Cree memory (117, 121).

In her most recent collection, *The Crooked Good*, Louise Bernice Halfe ê-âniskwâpitamâcimot (“she connects through intertextual dialogue”) in order to recover the female voices that have become hidden and oppressed in the process of colonization. More specifically, *The Crooked Good* engages directly with Cree mythical past through an elaborate retelling and interpretation of the story of cihcipiscikwân (Rolling Head), an âtayôhkêwin (sacred narrative) that forms part of the wîsâhkêhcâhk cycle, the Cree story of Creation. It tells the story of a woman whose husband beheads her upon learning that she has been having an affair with a snake. The husband ascends to heaven, becoming the morning star, as does his wife’s torso, which turns into the evening star, forever chasing after the husband in the sky. The woman’s head, on the other hand, rolls over the land in search of her two fleeing sons (one of them turns out to be wîsâhkêhcâhk, the Cree culture hero and elder brother). Equipped with four powerful gifts from their father, the boys eventually manage to escape into safety, while Rolling Head drowns, her head sinking to the ground of a deep lake and becoming a sturgeon (Halfe, “Keynote Address” 66-68).

*The Crooked Good*’s retelling of cihcipiscikwân-âtayôhkêwin (“the sacred narrative of Rolling Head”) is framed as a storytelling performance: the collection’s first-person narrator ê-kwêskît (“Turn-Around Woman”) remembers her mother telling her children the story of Rolling Head one winter night (19-29). *The Crooked Good* is therefore clearly marked as embodied understanding, and doubly so. For the narrator’s remembering of her mother’s storytelling performance frames her own interpretation of cihcipiscikwân-âtayôhkêwin in the light of her own life story, “this story” that she tells the readers (3). *The Crooked Good*, then, is âcimisowin, a “story about oneself” or autobiographical story (Wolfart 246). Since Cree notions of identity are always communal, however, the life story ê-kwêskît shares in



the poem is also the story of her family, particularly that of her mother and sisters—a story of sexual and racial abuse that is representative of the stories of many Cree and other Aboriginal women across North America.

Framed as an interpretation of Cree sacred history from a Cree feminist perspective—that is, as *âniskwâpitamâcimowin*—*The Crooked Good* is a perfect example of *mamâhtâwisiwin*, the process of poetic dreaming that involves the retelling and interpreting of ancient stories in the light of new experiences: in this case, colonialism and its gendered violence against Cree *iskwêwak* and other Aboriginal women. Halfe highlights the very process of *mamâhtâwisiwin* through the use of meta-fiction. *ê-kwêskît* makes references to her performances of memory in the text—“The embers are starlight / in memory’s cave” (29); “I am old. Old. / I’ve devoured my eggs / every mating moon. Lost my memory” (79); she even names the ancient story keepers (*âtayôhkanak*) when she points to them as “the origin of stories and the source of poetic insight” (McLeod, “Cree Poetic Discourse” 112-13).

In Rib Woman  
stories are born.  
The Old Man called it psychology. Me,  
I just dream it.

*These gifted mysterious people of long ago,  
kayâs kî-mamâhtâwisiwak iyiniwak,  
my mother, Gone-For-Good, would say.*

*They never died. They are scattered here, there,  
everywhere, somewhere. They know the language,  
the sleep, the dream, the laws, these singers, these healers,  
âtayôhkanak, these ancient story keepers*

I, Turn-Around Woman, am not one of them. (Halfe, *The Crooked Good* 3)

Particularly noteworthy in this passage is *ê-kwêskît*’s use of the verb *mamâhtâwisi*, “to tap into the Great Mystery,” which is repeated twice in the collection (22, 26) and, according to McLeod, also describes *wîsâhkêhcâhk*, the Cree elder brother and “first ceremonialist” who is said to have been the first to *mamâhtâwisi* (“Cree Poetic Discourse” 112). Most importantly, however, Halfe pursues the process of *mamâhtâwisiwin* through the deliberate rooting in *cihcipiscikwân-âtayôhkêwin* of the women’s stories shared in *The Crooked Good*. *cihcipiscikwân* and her presence in contemporary life as “Rib Woman” (“In Rib Woman / stories are born”) are the origin of *âniskwâpitamâcimowin*, the intertextual connecting that Halfe practises in *The Crooked Good*. The result is nothing short of creating a tangible future for *nêhiyawak*, the Cree people.

### Learning a New Language of Criticism

Relying on the work of Neal McLeod, my discussion of Halfe's poetry has deliberately avoided using critical models and terms that grow out of Euro-Western intellectual traditions. "Names define and articulate a place within society and the world," McLeod writes. "Indigenous names are absolutely essential for the description of Indigenous realities" ("Cree Poetic Discourse" 111). The late Cree elder Sarah Whitecalf said it best when she argued that "kinêhiyâwîwininaw, nêhiyawêwin": "our Creeness [is] our Cree language" (28-29). What is interesting about Whitecalf's observation is her use of the second word, nêhiyawêwin, which is generally translated as "Cree language." A closer analysis, however, reveals that nêhiyawêwin is really a nominalization of the verb nêhiyawê, which is best rendered as "nêhiyaw-ing" or "Cree-doing": "The language, as a core activity that differentiates nêhiyaw people from all others . . . is the most natural thing to think of when thinking of 'doing nêhiyaw'" (Muehlbauer n. pag.). But of course, Cree-doing also extends to other activities and realities, such as mamâhtâwîwin and âniskwâpitamâcimowin. To "translate" Euro-Western critical terminology into Cree terms is, then, not a mere linguistic exercise, replacing one word with another; rather, it amounts to learning new critical tools which are fully grounded in Cree traditions of thought and without which non-Indigenous critics will never be able to understand and teach Cree literature.

For example, understanding Louise Bernice Halfe's work means to become fully aware of its literary and intellectual contexts. Of course, *The Crooked Good* showcases lyric and documentary uses of language. From a Cree perspective, however, it is a continuation of Cree traditions that only happen to fit the characteristics of the long poem. Because "genre is quintessentially intertextual" (Briggs and Bauman 147), reading Halfe's poetry within the generic framework of the long poem creates a discussion that is mediated through other texts of this genre, such as Robert Kroetsch's *Seed Catalogue*, Eli Mandel's *Out of Place*, Aritha van Herk's *Calgary, This Growing Graveyard*, or David Arnason's *Marsh Burning*. While establishing such relationships is valid (regardless of the fact that Halfe is familiar with these traditions), strictly Euro-Western-based approaches to Halfe's work fall short of engaging the Cree intellectual traditions informing her work, thereby cutting it off from prior Cree discourse. To read *The Crooked Good* respectfully therefore is to read it as grounded in Cree intellectual thought. By re-telling and interpreting Cree traditions and linking them to new experiences, such as colonialism, Halfe contributes to the Cree "body poetic"

which, for McLeod, is not just a more or less loose ensemble of works but a textual body that “connects [Cree] living bodies to the living earth around [them]” (“Cree Poetic Discourse” 109). *mamâhtâwisiwin* produces Cree narrative memory that, McLeod writes, “is more than simply storytelling” (*Cree Narrative Memory* 7): it creates kinship, not just among Crees, but also between the people and the land. To ignore the groundedness of contemporary Cree texts in Cree traditions thus risks undermining Cree peoplehood.

Similarly, what McLeod calls *âniskwâpitamâcimowin* may be described as “metonymic intertextuality,” one central type of intertextuality distinguished by Renate Lachmann that is created through participation: old and new “texts, in a sense, enter into one another” (305). Deeply concerned with the struggle toward decolonization, Halfe engages Cree traditions through participatory processes, creating memory by explicitly linking new experiences to ancestral knowledges. Again, it may be asked what is gained from theorizing Halfe’s tendency to use primarily metonymic intertextuality in her work as *âniskwâpitamâcimowin*. For one, our reading of her work becomes grounded in *nêhiyawêwin*; two, we avoid the fixity of much Euro-Western literary terminology by emphasizing a process rather than a result, namely, the process of creating a connection between past, present, and future generations—what might well be called *wâhkôhtowin*. A reading of Halfe’s work as based in *âniskwâpitamâcimowin* points to the role of language and stories in the creation of memory and its importance for the continuance of *nêhiyawak*. In short, the notion of *âniskwâpitamâcimowin* helps focus attention to the lived experiences of contemporary Cree people, thus bridging the gap between literature and real-life issues and concerns.

Finally, there is the notion of *mamâhtâwisiwin*. McLeod provides a definition of the term, describing it as “Cree poetics” without, however, really explicating his notion of “poetics” (“Cree Poetic Discourse” 109). His point, I assume, is to provide readers, especially non-Aboriginal scholars, with a frame of reference. Curiously enough, McLeod’s account of *mamâhtâwisiwin* makes *interpretation* the underlying frame for the process of making art (*poiesis*, “to make”): poetic dreamers *ê-mamâhtâwiscik*; they produce “poetic descriptions of the world” based on “embodied understandings” (“Cree Poetic Discourse” 113). All these observations point to an effort to explain, to learn the meaning of something. The same motivation is found in Halfe’s description of *The Crooked Good* as her “efforts to unravel the . . . philosophy” of *cihcipiscikwân-âtayôhkêwin*, “its psychology and spirituality” (“Keynote Address” 73). There

are no descriptions in McLeod's discussion of mamâhtâwisiwin of the specific elements of language that are inevitably part of the process of making art in Cree contexts, such as figures of speech, narrative structures, or the generic conventions of âcimowin and âtayôhkêwin—all those rhetorical features that ultimately denote Cree rhetorical sovereignty. Obviously, mamâhtâwisiwin describes not just the art of making and reading poetic discourse (as poetics is usually theorized in Euro-Western contexts); rather, mamâhtâwisiwin also denotes a particular way of being in the world, the lived space of Cree experiences.

Learning a new language of criticism is the first step for prairie critics who seek to engage with Aboriginal voices emerging from the prairies in a respectful and ethical way. The relational model of criticism I am envisioning here is not just built on difference, however; as a comparative approach, it cannot work unless critics move and navigate between Euro-Western and Indigenous traditions of thought when reading the prairies—which brings me to the question of where a relational model of criticism might be applied in prairie contexts.

### **Contexts of Encounter: Reading the Prairies Relationally**

There are various contexts in which prairie critics may find themselves engaging with Aboriginal voices. One such important context of encounter between prairie and Aboriginal literary traditions, though one that is often neglected, is the university classroom. Although I argue against subsuming Aboriginal texts under the heading of “prairie literature,” I believe that, respectfully done, courses on prairie writing may benefit from the inclusion of Aboriginal texts because they provide alternative voices that challenge common conceptions of the region. One could imagine numerous different scenarios here, such as reading Rudy Wiebe's *The Temptations of Big Bear* right next to Cree elder Jim Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw's discussion of oskiciy (pipestem) and its use during the signing of Treaty Six at Fort Carleton in 1876. Or studying Roger Epp's “We Are All Treaty People” alongside *City Treaty* by the late Cree poet Marvin Francis. In fact, reading all four of these texts in dialogue with each other raises important questions regarding conceptions of history and society. How do non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people interpret pivotal events on the prairies? Filtered through a perspective that is essentially Christian (Wiebe, *Temptations*; also see Howells 162) or as grounded in Cree spirituality (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw)? How do they read the treaties and their relevance for people living on the prairies today? As

a social contract à la Hobbes and Locke, granting rights to both parties (Epp), or as a promise to share with strangers what can ultimately never be possessed, a promise that fell on deaf ears (“How about a / mcTreaty™ / Would you like some lies with that?” [Francis 6])? Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw’s speeches contribute to Cree linguistics and ethnography, but read from a Cree perspective, they are kakêskikhkêmwina (“counselling texts”; Wolfart 246). When Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw turns to Cree notions of spirituality—the pipestem’s presence during a meeting or gathering turns any promises made into sacred vows (Muehlbauer n. pag.)—and Cree oral history (the signing of Treaty Six) in order to criticize contemporary issues (the breaking of the treaties), he is practising nothing other than mamâhtâwisiwin. Similarly, Francis’ poetry has been described, applying postmodern models, as work of “an insurgent, a shit-disturbing trickster” (Fiorentino and Kroetsch 13). From a Cree point of view, however, Francis relies on âniskwâpitamâcimowin when he re-interprets Cree mythical past in order to offer a contemporary, urban rendering of the Cree elder brother that argues against the continuous exploitation of Indigenous peoples in what has essentially always been a global, corporate, and capitalist undertaking (Cariou, “How Come” 151, 155-56). A truly relational reading of these four texts does more than juxtapose conflicting positions, then; it also relies on two distinct critical sets through which to analyze the texts, thus emphasizing the very conflicts raised by them as well as what causes these conflicts in the first place: different ways of knowing and looking at the world.

Louise Bernice Halfé’s poetry, too, works well in the classroom when, for example, juxtaposed with such prominent prairie poems as Robert Kroetsch’s “Stone Hammer Poem” or John Newlove’s “The Pride.” The argument put forward in these poems—that the poet invents the prairies by turning it into a poem, thus claiming ownership of the land (Fee 19-21; Dyck 80-81)—marks an expression of settler nationalism in prairie literary history that has been criticized by both Indigenous scholars and postcolonial critics. In a course on the history of prairie poetry, including a discussion of Halfé’s poetry as the product of a process that her people have always engaged in can serve very meaningful purposes, not just of critiquing the underlying presumptions in “Stone Hammer Poem” and “The Pride,” but also of exposing students to other forms of knowledge-making and -keeping besides Euro-Western traditions. Reading *The Crooked Good* from within Cree intellectual traditions points to the existence of those very elements that Kroetsch and Newlove construct as absent in Aboriginal traditions—

spiritual and poetic relations to the land. As Kroetsch describes it, Aboriginal people see the stone, and by implication the land, as purely functional: “it is a million / years older than / the hand that / chipped stone or / raised slough / water (or blood)” (2). Further, reading Halfe’s poetry from within Cree intellectual traditions also highlights those very connotations that make *mamâhtâwisiwin* and *âniskwâpitamâcimowin* such potent descriptors of Cree literature.

Those very spiritual and poetic relations to the land also play a pivotal role in another context of encounter between prairie and Aboriginal literatures. One important area in which prairie criticism is already working with Aboriginal texts is ecocriticism. Jenny Kerber’s analysis of the writing of Louise Bernice Halfe and Thomas King (Cherokee) in *Writing in Dust* comes to mind here, though her analysis is still largely focused on what Kristina Fagan (NunatuKavut) has called a “‘cultural’ approach” that separates Aboriginal cultures from Aboriginal politics (13-14), and hence from the lived experiences of Aboriginal peoples and the political dimensions of such issues as climate change. When, after years spent in Toronto, the narrator in Halfe’s *The Crooked Good* drives west, she speaks of returning “to *nêhiyânâhk*,” Cree country (70). Interestingly, the word “prairies” does not figure in her description of home, which she refers to either as *nêhiyânâhk* or, more notably, as *tawinikêwin* (69), a word that is translated in the poem’s glossary as “spacious beautiful, abundance of land; a cleared space; spacious creation” (130). Halfe’s description of the land as “spacious creation” has both spiritual and political undertones. Euro-Western intellectual traditions have a history of ignoring, undermining, and downplaying Aboriginal notions of kinship which include, as suggested in *The Crooked Good*, relationships to the other-than-human, particularly the land. As noted above, Aboriginal models of people- and nationhood are built as an intricate web of four interdependent social concepts: language, sacred history, the ceremonial cycle, and land/territory. If any one of these elements is diminished or destroyed, peoplehood is at stake. Thus, environmental issues on prairies are always also political issues and ultimately concern the question of Aboriginal sovereignties. In *Writing in Dust*, Kerber rightly argues that “Environmental issues . . . can serve as key points of entry into a series of difficult-yet-necessary conversations” between different groups of people inhabiting the prairies today, including Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people (19), but these conversations will be fruitful only if people are willing to listen to each other. As far as settler society is concerned, this

listening to Aboriginal perspectives and concerns implies acknowledging and respecting Aboriginal notions of peoplehood and, by implication, Aboriginal sovereignties. All of which is to say, a prairie ecocriticism that acknowledges and respects Aboriginal ways of knowing when engaging with Aboriginal texts could serve as an important role model for the kind of conversations to which Kerber is alluding. It is true that Aboriginal literary nationalism is a challenge to prairie literary studies because it complicates traditional notions of the prairie region. At the same time, this complication actually has much to offer the field, particularly such subfields as prairie ecocriticism. For one, Aboriginal literary nationalism promotes Indigenous ways of knowing and thinking which should play an important role in addressing the environmental issues facing the Canadian prairies today. Further, by challenging Euro-Western constructions of the prairies/plains region in North America, nationalist approaches to Aboriginal literatures emphasize the transnational dimensions of environmental issues, such as climate change. Finally, Aboriginal literary nationalism focuses attention on the political dimensions of ecocriticism: how do we make sure that resources are shared fairly and that the effects of climate change are distributed evenly?

Non-Indigenous critics cannot assume that the tools of their trade are the only critical models available to read and understand texts, however broadly defined. Nor can non-Indigenous critics assume that their traditions of reading—primarily grounded in discourses and practices that originate in Western Europe—are adequate for an ethical approach to texts that originate in intellectual traditions very different from their own. Hence, my argument for a relational model that will allow prairie literary studies to engage with Aboriginal literary voices, all the while respecting that these voices form canons of their own. Proposing this relational model, I do not mean to suggest that all prairie criticism be relational or engage with Aboriginal voices; at the same time, however, prairie literary studies cannot turn a blind eye to the other stories emerging from the region and needs to learn how to engage with these stories—just as much as the future of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations will depend on whether non-Aboriginal people will learn to listen to and understand Aboriginal people. Learning to understand alternative ways of theorizing is naturally a process that may arguably never really end, but it is a worthwhile project. How else is reconciliation to work if non-Aboriginal people, whether they live on the prairies or not, refuse to acknowledge that there may be more than one way of reading, whether of stories, history, the land, or the world as such?

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#### NOTES

- 1 In 1895, Almighty Voice, a Cree man from the One Arrow reserve, was arrested for killing a government cow but he escaped from jail, thus unleashing a manhunt that eventually ended with his death in gunfire in 1897 (Hanson, “Kitchi-Manito-Waya” n. pag.).
- 2 The Siksika, Kainai, and Pikuni are the three nations of the Blackfoot/Blackfeet.
- 3 Cree is still very much an oral language and does not rely on punctuation and capitalization as does English. To reflect this, I have avoided italics and capital letters for all Cree words and sentences throughout the text, unless they appear in quoted matter.

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