

Reading Aboriginal Lives

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This special issue on First Nations writing follows *Canadian Literature's* double issue on Thomas King a year ago. We include an essay by Robin Ridington on King's latest novel, *Truth & Bright Water*, and an investigation, by Albert Braz, of Louis Riel's literary manifestations in English and French, but also bring forward three names that have not yet been much discussed in academic journals: Alice French, Yvonne Johnson and James Tyman. And as usual, although the authors certainly didn't collaborate, there are many interesting connections among the articles. Many of the works discussed are autobiographical or deal with the ways Native lives are "read" by the mainstream culture. Louis Riel's self-description as *un néant*, a ghost, reflects how he was and still is deployed as symbol more than remembered as a man. Like Oka, any incident to do with Aboriginal peoples that sparks conflict between what were once called "the two founding races," the French and the English, is read not for what it might say about the aspirations, desires, or political demands of the Aboriginal people involved, but for what it says about relations between the two solitudes. Attention is paid, but for the wrong reasons, and in the end, the Aboriginal protagonists go to jail, or worse, and the mainstream media forgets the whole subject. Did we ever find out what happened to that golf course?

The need to transform ghosts and stereotypes into human beings is one impulse that leads to life-writing. But for French, Johnson and Tyman a further need was to make sense of what happened to them as children, when they suffered not only misfortune (Johnson's cleft palate, Tyman's abusive father, the death of French's mother), but the "care" of a state that did not value

them as human children. Many First Nations people have had to bridge the gap between themselves and their own culture caused by state intervention, as Christine Watson's conversation with French reveals. Writing about this process, either as autobiography or autobiographical fiction (like Richard Wagamese's *Keeper'n Me*) is another way to write oneself into an identity that the state has "saved" one from, marking it as inferior. Warren Cariou's account of James Tyman's "recovered" life makes clear that the displaced and the othered experience identity as constructed and shifting. Beth Cuthand puts it like this in her "Post-Oka Kinda Woman," "Talk to her of post-modern deconstructivism / She'll say 'What took you so long?'" Making sense of abuse and trauma caused directly or indirectly by a long and repressive colonial history is a theme not just in these three autobiographical pieces, but also in *Truth & Bright Water*, where Lum commits suicide because he cannot make sense of his life. As Ridington points out, his cousin Tecumseh, the narrator, has a better chance at making sense of his own life and of the life of his community, as he is mentored by "the famous Indian artist," Monroe Swimmer.

Part of this involves remembering the pain, a process that, as Susanna Egan notes, can feed into the widespread desire for what she calls "victim literature." Again a writing process that may well be part of a liberatory struggle is read through the dominant culture's scripts. A person in the process of recovering his or her own life is read as a victim, someone to be gaped at, briefly pitied, then ignored.

The problematic collaboration between the white man and Aboriginal woman, Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson, is one that Wiebe himself might well have discussed explicitly, given that he is aware of the issues (or at least he was when debating W.P. Kinsella over his refusal to think about the feelings of the people of the Hobbema Reserve whose reserve he was fictionalizing). Wiebe's historical fiction, "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" about the death of Almighty Voice (accused of stealing a cow, then evading arrest, finally machine-gunned in a shallow trench from which he was defending himself) has always been a touchstone for me on the issue of appropriation. Here Wiebe focuses on the museum where the few remains of the incident are kept, describes photographs in obsessive detail, goes over the known historical record, and recreates the man's last moments, when finally, Almighty Voice sings his warrior's death song. The narrator describes the song as a "wordless cry," but then he says "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” (81).

These last lines have always meant, for me, that Wiebe acknowledges both the peculiar Romantic intensity of his obsession with the Aboriginal past (which is, apart from his own Mennonite heritage, almost all he has written about) and his ultimate inability to understand or make sense of another culture that is now lost to us, mainly because our ancestors did their best to destroy it. However, Yvonne Johnson is alive, against the odds, and she and Wiebe presumably could have had an interesting conversation about the motivations behind his writing career. Just why is Big Bear, Johnson’s ancestor, at the centre of Wiebe’s fictional world? This is, of course, not an easy question to answer—is it just that over-developed Mennonite sense of guilt? Was it an attempt to ally his own religiously rebellious and persecuted ancestry with that of the Cree? Was it an attempt to shift out from under the burden of blame by representing the whole sorry colonial history of the Plains rebellions in as much detail as possible? Another chance has gone by to start the conversation, a conversation that John A. Macdonald could have had with Louis Riel at least, if not with Big Bear. Without a conversation with living First Nations people about what they think and feel about their writing, their culture and their lives, the likelihood that we will have produced bad interpretation rises, as we make ourselves the experts, and them into the mute subjects of monologic expertise.

Egan’s article raises a whole range of questions that will have to be raised as long as the huge power imbalance between Aboriginal cultures and the mainstream remains. We may get tired of these issues (aren’t we over appropriation yet? do we have to give them credit for this, when we did all the work? do we have to ask permission?), but if we do we have forgotten all the lessons that post-colonial theory has tried to teach about the ways in which colonial ideologies replicate themselves in the service of power. Interpretation can be a kind of respectful listening or it can be a kind of appropriation, and we always have to raise the issue that what we hope has been the first may in fact have been yet another example of power disguising itself as benevolence.

With this editorial, Margery Fee takes her leave as Associate Editor of Canadian Literature to devote herself to her work in the Dean of Art’s Office. Her work on the journal has been outstanding, and distinguished by its intellectual energy and courage especially in the area of First Nations writing. Her job as book reviews editor has been taken over by two worthy successors, Kevin McNeilly and Glenn Deer. Both have already introduced themselves to readers of Canadian Literature as editors of special issues.