

OTHER VOICES: NATIVE LITERATURE AND ISSUES OF SPEECH

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Voice and perspective. Can authors use and exchange these when writing about topics outside their culture or world experience? Increasingly, this and related questions are the topic of debate in literary circles, cultural institutions, and the arts community. In North America the topic has been particularly heated when discussing Native literature.

After working on the book project for the Glenbow Museum, *Booking passage: the alternate lives of artifacts*, I considered this issue and its wider implications, for writers, and understanding between peoples. *Booking passage*, a collection of stories and poems inspired by the museum's artifacts, features the works of ten of Alberta's best writers. All the museum's collections and exhibits were part of this exercise, and the writers were from a variety of cultural backgrounds. They were chosen because of their talent, the respect and recommendations from their communities, and their willingness to try a new experiment in writing. Early in the project, a number of issues were raised by colleagues: Who would write these stories and poems? Would all the writers have equal access to the objects and exhibits?

It was suggested by a number of people that only Native people should or would want to write about Native exhibits and objects. It was also suggested that non-Native writers be denied access to objects not from their cultures. These were hard questions, they were questions echoing the current issues of appropriation of voice. And they questioned the right to voice or

imagined voices that all writers create/assume in fiction. These issues are intriguing and they affected the project planning. Considering them led me to the results of this paper.

A survey of current literature (newspapers, magazines, journals, books, critical essays, collected interviews with writers) and conversations with Native and non Native writers and artists produced a range of opinion. There is great diversity, and most of that divergence is outside the arts community. Responses to the issues were frequently polarized, and centred on ownership, respect, and knowledge:

[re: writing the Circle anthology]

Sue Deranger and Marie Baker, both members of the Regina Aboriginal Writer's Group which is calling for a boycott of the anthology on the grounds that the two non-native editors are not culturally able to assess the material (1).

Only Native people can truly and authentically relate and interpret Native Indian experience (2).

You can't tell writers what to write, but if you're going to write about native characters, you should take the trouble to get to know them (3).

[Marie Annharte Baker]...has no trouble, she says, with Kinsella or any other non-native writer writing about Indians, providing they don't distort native experience in a racist way (4).

Nobody's trying to tell anyone what they can write about. The issue is really about how cultural appropriation is used to obscure racism in the literary and publishing world (5).

Taylor is divided on the subject. On one hand, he opposes censorship and says material would be limited if only Indians wrote Indian stories.

[re: non natives writing about natives]

But you should learn to walk with my people, live with them, before you write about them. The story will be more authentic (6).

[Darrel Wildcat] These stories, these customs are things we own, things that belong to us (7).

Cultural appropriation is dangerous: it's not right for people to take away our culture ... it's the same thing as stealing our land, taking what you can and profiting (8).

The responses are varied, emotional, and complex. Given their range, are we all talking about the same issue? Are we talking about non Natives writing Native "stories"? Are we talking about only Native people writing about Native topics? Are we saying that Native writers should and would only want to write about Native topics? Does this mean Native writers are only writing about Native subjects/issues? Or, as Thomas King has said:

So, what they're saying is, «you are a Native writer who writes». And that is a perfectly good description for me. But if they ask me, «are you a Native writer?» and what they mean is, «are you a writer who happens to be Native who only writes about Native things?» that's a poor description because I write about non Native material too (9).

Native writers come from a unique cultural tradition, but they are still writers, and their stories cover many topics both within and outside traditional paradigms. Native writers also write from many perspectives. They write outside Native topics; female Native writers write about male characters; male Native writers write about female characters. In both cases, Native writers place themselves in a "voice space" beyond their gender.

Native literature and Native writers are tied to the oral traditions and to traditional paradigms for the story. But the writers themselves have not grown up inside a cultural void. They have been influenced and inspired by characters, models, and forms from widespread sources. For example, Tomson Highway has cited:

In terms of novels, I suppose among my favourites are the novels of W. Faulkner and F. Dostoevskij. Those are the two novelists in particular that I have tremendous admiration for. And a lot of the Southern writers in the United States: people like Katherine Ann Porter, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, and those people, because they wrote about working-class

people - well, grassroots people, very ordinary people - and turned their stories with the art of storytelling and great technique into major visionary works (10).

And, from Greg Young-Ing:

I would have to say also that I was influenced by some of the musicians who wrote lyrics that I think are poetry ... like Bob Dylan, Ian Curtis from Joy Division, Mike Scott from the Waterboys, and Bob Marley. Bob Marley was a big influence on me (11).

It seems that some critics are saying Native culture is homogenous, and because it is Native culture, any Native writer can write across gender lines because they are part of that culture. That seems at odds with criticisms and observations made within the Native community. These indicate that Native writers are faced with the same dilemmas other writers have about voice and perspective. How well or how poorly are they able to speak through their characters? How well are they portrayed? Some, like Tomson Highway, have been criticized for adopting another gender's voice. As writer Beth Cuthand has commented:

I know that a lot of Native women, Indian women, are sensitive about the way he [Tomson Highway] portrays women. But I think he was very brave to do what he did with *The Rez Sisters* (12).

The same can be said of choosing a main character, as mentioned in Hartmut Lutz's reference to Native writer Jeannette Armstrong:

I know that Jeannette Armstrong has been asked the same, why Thomas Kelasket is a man, especially asked by women (13).

So, if gender is like another culture, and all writers take the liberty of writing from those other cultures, then Native writers are also writing outside their culture. This does not negate the seriousness and emotion linked to who is writing about Native topics. It only demonstrates that Native authors are grappling with the same questions that confront all writers.

But what of the other issues? Perhaps the perspectives are not so diametrically opposed. It seems respect and knowledge are at the centre and all other reactions radiate from them. This conclusion was supported in a number of discussions held during Calgary's Freedom To Read Week events. Many writers spoke about appropriation, political correctness, and voice. Some writers of colour, as they have defined themselves, acknowledged these criteria.

Certainly allegations of cultural theft, and assertions that non Natives are culturally unable to write about Native subjects are prevalent. But these are balanced by others of prevalence: if you write, don't distort; know the people before you write about them; nobody's trying to tell anyone what they can write about. Frequently, the comment "write from a knowledge base" arises.

There is substantial fear about something else being stolen from First Peoples. That is mixed with the concern that what is said will distort and perpetuate stereotypes. What seems to be at issue is truth and voice. The opportunity for Native writers to have the chance to speak, and the underlying belief that unless it is spoken by them it will not be the truth. There is ample experience of those who do not write from knowledge base, or with respect. There is strong reason for First Peoples to close the doors on Native topics, to safeguard the access. Many have called for that response. But the dialogue continues, and, as Hartmut Lutz has said:

Mainstream authors have been asked to use self restraint, to step aside and give Native authors their chance, to be quiet for a while, to learn from and listen to First Nations people before writing about them, and to at least seek their permission before telling their stories (14).

Writings by Native authors, face a further complication because of the nature of the written word. If a Native writer writes about a Native subject it will be read by other than a Native readership. Once it's written, once any writer writes anything it begins a new life. It lives again in the interpretation and response from its readers. Once it's "out there" people see different things in your writings, they assign different meanings to your words. You can't control how it is received and

perceived. Writer Daniel David Moses addressed that issue in a 1990 interview:

But I believe that once I've completed a piece of work, and put it out into the public, that it is separate from me, and that what people can give or take from it is part of the process of the way art articulates and embodies the values of our society. I do not believe that I have control over that. I have control over my writing, over that technique (15).

Writers grapple with this, Native writers grapple with it more because they recognize their cultural responsibility. They carry a long tradition of storytelling. And who tells the story is very crucial. The word "story" is particularly significant, and, as Hartmut Lutz has noted:

The spoken word, the verbatim rendering of traditional stories, deserves the utmost attention and veneration. Many of today's Native authors in Canada define themselves and their work as part of the ongoing tradition of storytelling. Non Native authors who maintain that anybody should be able to tell anybody's story and write about anybody else's culture may be unaware of the particular significance the word has in the oral tradition (16).

But Native authors also recognize that stories can be told by others, but that when that telling assumes wider cultural assumptions, then it is an issue for concern. As author Maria Campbell has observed,

I would never attempt to write about German people's beliefs. Maybe I would write about an experience I had with a German writer, like Margaret did with the experience she had with the people. But I couldn't tell you your people's story (17).

Responsibility and voice were the subject of a comment from Leonore Keshig-Tobias:

Stories and words are powerful, and we as storytellers, as writers, must take responsibility for the words we put out there to

the public. For the words we put into the air! We can't just throw them away carelessly! (18).

Survey of the literature and opinions of many authors and critics gives some insight into this powerful issue. And its implications extend to all writers. Respect, knowledge, and truth are still central and must be understood against a backdrop of history and politics. Frequently, writers in the native and non native communities are the most perceptive on this and related issues.

Notes

1. From "Newest anthology draws saskatchewan writers' fire" by Lynn Van Luven, *Edmonton Journal*, May 12, 1990.
2. Comment by Native writer Jeannette Armstrong in "School helps student-writers find their voice" by Lynne Van Luven, *Edmonton Journal*, March 31, 1990.
3. Comment by Native writer Thomas King as reported in "Indian tales, this time from the pen of a Native" by H.J. Kirchoff, *Globe and Mail*, January 30, 1990.
- 4 & 5. Comments by Native writer Marie Annharte Baker in "Poet strives for authentic sketches of Native people" by Liam Lacey, *Globe and Mail*, May 3, 1990.
6. Comment from Native writer Drew Taylor as reported in "A heritage of pride" by Wendy Dudley, *Calgary Herald*, March 13, 1990.
- 7 & 8. Comments from Darrel Wildcat and Floyd Favell in "Borrowing the stories of others: some say writers have no right to use other cultures as basis for their fiction" by Lynn Van Luven, *Edmonton Journal*, January 27, 1990.
9. Interview with Thomas King conducted by Hartmut Lutz (1991: 108).
10. Interview with Tomson Highway conducted by Hartmut Lutz (1991: 90)
11. Interview with Greg Young-Ing conducted by Hartmut Lutz (1991: 118)
12. Interview with Beth Cuthand conducted by Hartmut Lutz (1991: 35)
13. Comment by Hartmut Lutz (1991: 39)
14. Comment by Hartmut Lutz (1991: 5)
15. Interview with Daniel David Moses conducted by Hartmut Lutz (1991: 160)
16. Comment by Hartmut Lutz (1991: 6)
17. Interview with Maria Campbell conducted by Hartmut Lutz (1991: 58)
18. Interview with Leonore Keshig-Tobias conducted by Harmut Lutz (1991: 84).

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Summary

The article deals with the multi-faceted issue of native literature and the many questions it currently stirs about the correctness of non-native writings on native subjects, of native writings on non-native topics and so on.

The range of opinions is very ample and includes different - sometimes opposite positions. Throughout the voices of a few Natives, the A. points to the issue that seems to arise as the main topicality from the debate, that is the necessity of a thorough research and knowledge as a basis for writing «beyond one's gender» in order to avoid the risk of perpetuating false stereotypes.

Sommario

L' articolo tratta del complesso - attuale - problema della letteratura nativa e delle diverse domande intorno alla possibilità per autori nativi di scrivere correttamente su temi non nativi, per autori non nativi di farlo sulle culture native e così via. Lo spettro delle risposte è vasto e include opinioni differenti, talvolta contrastanti.

Attraverso i pareri di alcuni Nativi l'A. riconduce i termini del problema alla questione dominante che sembra emergere dal dibattito, quella cioè della necessità, per chiunque scriva «al di fuori del proprio campo», di basarsi su approfondite ricerche e conoscenze onde evitare il rischio di avvalorare fuorvianti stereotipi letterari.