

CONTEMPORARY NATIVE WOMEN'S VOICES IN LITERATURE

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ELIZABETH COOK-LYNN (Crow-Creek-Sioux) writes that during her formative years she read everything from the Sears catalogue to *Faust*, from *True Confessions* to *Paradise Lost*, but she was never able to read anything about her own Native People. She recalls:

Wanting to write comes out of that deprivation, though, for we eventually have to ask, what happens to a reasonably intelligent child who sees himself or herself excluded from a world which is created and recreated with the obvious intent to declare him or her *persona non grata*? Silence is the first reaction. Then there comes the development of a mistrust of that world. And, eventually, anger.

That anger is what started me writing. Writing for me, then, is an act of defiance born out of the need to survive. I am me. I exist. . . . I write.¹

Carter Revard (Osage), a Rhodes scholar, expresses the same frustration. He tells how he toured Greece with his family in an attempt to call "the Muses to Oklahoma." He was not entirely satisfied:

I expect the Muses to behave like the strong Indian women they are over here, and to sing Arcadian songs, in the Osage Hills, that Okies can follow. I'd like to bury Caesar, not keep on praising him.²

He goes on to say that not only Ovid, Virgil or Horace "set songs among the stars," so did his grandfather.

These are not isolated experiences; Native Canadians find the same void, the same frustrations when they study Canadian literature. Why does this happen? Partly, because few Native Canadians have been published, but also because our theories of criticism take a very narrow view of literature. We have an idea of what "good style" is, this idea having fixed and unchanging attributes. We use written European tradition and apply it to literature from all cultures. This effectively precludes members of other culture groups from holding influential literary positions and also ensures a continuation of existing criteria.

This written tradition often overlooks Natives because Natives are not generally considered a living, contributing factor in all facets of Canadian society. They have been used by numerous Canadian writers as subject matter, as metaphor, as social commentary, but this writing serves only to illuminate the character of non-Native Canadian Society while leaving the character of Natives largely untouched.³ Virtually never do we ponder, dissect, critique, analyze, and finally incorporate as our own the words of Native writers.

“Native literature” means Native people telling their own stories, in their own ways, unfettered by criteria from another time and place.

Native literature reveals the depth and status of the culture, expresses Native wisdom and points of view familiar to other Natives, reveals the beauty of the Native world, beauty rarely recognized by non-Native writers. Native literature records oral narratives, values, beliefs, traditions, humour, and figures of speech. It emphasizes communal living and portrays a mingling and sharing; elders wait to teach Indian ways to the young who may be floundering in an alien culture or questioning traditional ways. Non-Native readers may not always recognize the strength and beauty of the literature but will recognize common themes. For Native readers, the literature is a source of strength and personal development. The void experienced by Cook-Lynn or the frustration of Revard can be avoided if a different critical theory is applied to Native literature, or at least new perspectives of existing critical theory are entertained.

Native literature often confronts readers with a history that is stark and unredeemable — because the historic treatment of Natives was callous. This may be a point of view unfamiliar to many non-Native readers. A particular difference from Western literature exists in the feeling for the land; Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo) said, “We are the land”⁴ — which may be a foreign concept to an essentially agrarian society. Native fiction is rich in stories within stories, echoes of old chants, prayers and incantations. In it, a combination of languages creates new forms of language.

A literary style, however, cannot be defined by ethnography alone. Where everything is accounted for by the writer’s “Nativeness,” imaginative freedom will be denied. There has to be an artistic identity beyond the culture. But who defines this artistic identity? Critics must also recognize how each writer adopts Western literary forms and language to his or her particular vision as a Native writer in contemporary society.

A question that must be asked about any Canadian who writes, and especially a member of a minority group with different viewpoint and heritage language, is not whether the language appears “good” according to some conventional model of textbook goodness, but whether it works to good effect, whether it communicates, whether it moves readers, whether it makes them see Canadian society through another person’s eyes.⁵ And if it does not speak to us, may it not be speaking to

someone else in our society in a meaningful way? Is the lack of response to the work a lack of sensitivity in non-Native readers? Are conventional critical judgments depriving readers of access to a potentially moving literature? What we say and do as critics and teachers will influence who will be publishing in the future. Are we perpetuating voids?

Native Canadians are writing, but few are publishing. We lack a definition of what Native literature is, and do not agree on criteria for judging it.⁶ It is imperative that we look more closely at Native literature and judge it not within a European cultural paradigm but from the points of view of the culture from which it springs. Examining an author's purpose, as works by three Native women indicate, provides one way to cross this cultural boundary. Maria Campbell, in *Halfbreed* (1973), Beatrice Culleton, in *In Search of April Raintree* (1983), and Lee Maracle, in *I Am Woman* (1988), have all written for different reasons; in each case, the purpose strongly influences style and content.

CAMPBELL'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY is dedicated to "my Cheechum's children"; the introduction says, "I write this for all of you, to tell you what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in our country."⁷ It soon becomes evident that Campbell is not writing for other Métis; she is preoccupied with telling *non-Natives* what it is like to be a Halfbreed.

A close friend of mine said, "Maria, make it a happy book. It couldn't have been so bad. We know we are guilty so don't be too harsh." I am not bitter. I have passed that stage. I only want to say: this is what it was like; this is what it is still like.⁸

This book is the story of Maria's life as a Métis child in northern Saskatchewan and of her life as a young woman in the city. Some of the literary qualities are immediately obvious to the readers — the very brief retelling of the history, the humour, the irony, the understatement. The oral tradition, apparent in the writer's style, assumes that the listener (or when transferred to writing, the reader) comes from the same background as the storyteller. Because of the common heritage there is no need for lengthy descriptions or wordy explanations. There is no need for elaborate display of emotions; in fact, emotion is rarely expressed because events speak for themselves. But though remarkable for its understatement, *Halfbreed* is a book choking with emotion. The author's sense of place and her dependence on that sense show up again and again in the first part of the book. Recurrent allusions to love, peace, beauty, and happiness indicate that Métis are not hopelessly caught between two cultures. But Maria's life is devoid of this warmth and sense of belonging as she leaves home. She is manipulated by people who are strangers to her and

to her way of life, and the style of the second half of the book demonstrates this distinction.

Though Maria Campbell claims she has overcome her bitterness, her anger seethes just below the surface, an anger undoubtedly justified. She makes no attempt to understand non-Native society, just as non-Native society has made no attempt to understand hers. She tells dispassionately of British war brides who were lured to Saskatchewan by Métis men:

One was a very proper Englishwoman. She had married a handsome Halfbreed soldier in England believing he was French. He came from northern Saskatchewan's wildest family and he owned nothing, not even the shack where a woman and two children were waiting for him.⁹

This woman promptly beat up the English bride and the community collected enough money to send her to Regina where "they were sure the government would help her." As she moved into the outside world Maria's contempt for non-Natives increased. She talks of the social action groups of the 1960s: "The whites at the meetings were the kind of people who failed to find recognition among their own people, and so had to come to mine, where they were treated with the respect they felt they deserved."¹⁰ And she goes on to say, "I'd hated those nameless, faceless white masses all my life."¹¹ Such blunt comments about non-Natives and the harshness of Métis life dominate the book.

But Campbell also uses humour effectively, often remembering and lovingly describing community rituals. Much of her humour takes the form of anecdote. When the Métis parents were all called to the school for inoculations, she recalls, "Alex Vandal, the village joker, was at his best that day. He told Daddy that he was going to act retarded because the whites thought we were anyway."¹² The joke is not Alex Vandal's antics but the fact that the teacher took him seriously, thereby hugely entertaining the assembled Métis. But the humour in the book does much more than just entertain. Campbell uses it as a defiant gesture which accounts, in no small measure, for the popularity of the book among Métis readers. Kate Vangen (Assiniboine) points out that

indigenous peoples have undoubtedly been using humour for centuries to "make faces" at their colonizers without the latter being able to retaliate; however, Native humour has escaped most historical and literary accounts because the recorder did not perceive the gesture as humorous or because he did not appreciate the humour.¹³

Maria regrets being Catholic because the Anglicans have that exciting "fornicator and adulterer," Henry VIII. Maria's Indian grandparents excuse her outspoken ways because that was the "white" in her. She tells of playing Caesar and Cleopatra on the slough while non-Native passers-by shook their heads and laughed. The irony of the situation takes a double turn when we find that the cousins never

allowed Maria to be Cleopatra because she was too “black” and her hair was like a “nigger’s.”¹⁴ Though the book was written for non-Natives Maria keeps them at a distance. She writes of things she knows, which she believes her readers do not know. The humour and irony are very effective in pointing out to the readers that, indeed, Maria is right. There are things that we did not know. Until she wrote the book, “halfbreed” was nothing but a common derogatory term; now it means a person living between two cultures. The ultimate irony is that her book has never been taken seriously as literature.

BEATRICE CULLETON’S *In Search of April Raintree* is also autobiographical but it is thinly disguised as fiction. It lacks the warmth, zest, and cultural insights of *Halfbreed* but a Native writer raised in impersonal foster homes from early childhood has no memories and teachings on which to draw. Culleton’s barren formative years are reflected in every phrase of *In Search of April Raintree*. The book is dedicated to Culleton’s two sisters, both of whom committed suicide. Through the voice of April Raintree, Beatrice Culleton begins her search.

Memories. Some memories are elusive, fleeting, like a butterfly that touches down and is caught. Others are haunting. You’d rather forget them but they won’t be forgotten. . . . Last month, April 18th, I celebrated my twenty-fourth birthday. That’s still young but I feel so old.¹⁵

Unlike Campbell, Beatrice Culleton wrote for herself. Her book served as a catharsis so that she could finally come to terms with her personal history. Through her book she comes to understand her mother’s alcoholism (though she still finds it hard to forgive a mother who prefers drink to her children). Non-Native people played a role in Culleton’s life (and hence in April Raintree’s) by making life more difficult, but Culleton’s real sorrow is caused by her own people.

In the wake of alcoholism came child neglect, foster homes, incompetent and uncaring social workers. In the book, April is placed with a particularly heartless foster mother. Readers see her as a hyperbolic figure, but sober reflection on reality should shock readers; this is no mere indulgence or literary gesture. Other scenes, too, insist on the brutality of real experience, as in the incident when April Raintree is raped and, as she fights back, her assailant laughs, “Yeah, you little savages like it rough, eh?”¹⁶ Readers might initially wonder at the author’s purpose for including the rape scene; it seems somewhat contrived. It soon becomes evident that it, too, parallels reality.¹⁷ Fully seven pages are devoted to straightforward description. The scene totally lacks coy allusions, titillation, or sexual excitement. Readers cringe with revulsion as the rapist yanks April’s hair and commands, “I said suck”¹⁸ — and the torment, humiliation, and pain increase. Culleton shows courage in describing the rape and reporting it; and in the novel, at least, she has the satisfac-

tion of seeing the rapists convicted. The plot continues logically since the aftermath of the rape plays a prominent role in April's subsequent actions. Readers owe Culleton a considerable debt for dispassionately and competently handling a topic that is too often romanticized by writers and which becomes a debilitating crisis for many women in reality.

Though the book is popular in Canadian as well as European markets, it is rarely referred to as "Canadian literature"; at best it is called "Native literature." Why? The style is, admittedly, very simple. Beatrice Culleton writes as she, and many people like her, speak. Perhaps, too, the style is painful for those who are immersed in the skilful prose of Margaret Laurence or Gabrielle Roy. But is it just to confuse a simple style with a simplistic book? On the contrary, if this book is judged by whether it works to good effect, communicates, moves us, or makes us see, then it must stand as one of the most scathing indictments of Canadian society that has ever been written.

LEE MARACLE'S BOOK, *I Am Woman*, is a book of prose and poetry written expressly for Native people. It is, essentially, the story of one woman's search for the truth. Maracle, too, claims no animosity toward non-Natives, but she says the book is not for them. She goes on to say,

It is inevitable, Europeans, that you should find yourself reading my work. If you do not find yourself spoken too [*sic*], it is not because I intend rudeness — you just don't concern me now.¹⁹

Rather, she says her book "addresses the Native people in desperate circumstances, who need to recover the broken threads of their lives."²⁰ To write her book, she gathered stories, scribbled on paper napkins and brown bags, stories which she says come from "the people of my passion." She resisted publishing for a long time because she could not commit the "voices of the unheard" to paper or to "squeeze one's loved ones so small."²¹ All the voices carry the same theme: "Racism is for us, not an ideology in the abstract, but a very real and practical part of our lives. The pain, the effect, the shame are all real."²²

In common with other Native writers she recognizes the importance of elders. Her poem "Creation" acknowledges the vital family ties:

I know nothing
of great mysteries
know less of creation
I do know
that the farther backward
in time that I travel
the more grandmothers

and the farther forward
 the more grandchildren
 I am obligated to both.²³

The words "I am woman" were liberating for Maracle, words first spoken by Sojourner Truth. Before 1961, the "woman" question did not exist for Native women — they were wards of the government, children, asexual in a world that measured white women in terms of their sexuality. Campbell and Culleton have opened windows to the "shame" of being Native and the particularly degrading position of Native women. Campbell declares, "I was skin and bones with running sores all over my body. I was bruised and battered from the beatings I got from Trapper and whoever else felt like beating me."²⁴ Culleton's assailant chortled, "Hey, you guys, we're going to have to teach this little Indian some manners. I'm trying to make her feel good and she pulls away. The ungrateful bitch."²⁵ Maracle sums it all up. Indian women, she believes, were objects of "sexual release for white males whose appetites were too gross for their own women."²⁶ However, she does not place all the blame on non-Native men. She asks,

How many times do you hear from our own brothers; Indian women don't whine and cry around, nag or complain. At least not "real" or "true" Indian women. Embodied in that kind of language is the negation of our femininity — the denial of our womanhood.²⁷

The effect this denial had on her was that she was convinced that love and compassion were "inventions" of white folks; Indians never loved, wept, laughed, or fought.²⁸ In her book she comes to understand that

The denial of Native womanhood is the reduction of the whole people to a sub-human level. Animals beget animals. The dictates of patriarchy demand that beneath Native man comes the female Native. The dictates of racism are thus that Native men are beneath white women and Native females are not fit to be referred to as women.²⁹

The book is a journey of exploration, and like any journey is uneven. Style and content vary. But it grips the reader with its energy and determination. Maracle writes forcefully, angrily, passionately, sadly, and poignantly.

Separately, and together, these three Native writers speak with infinite wisdom and sadness of what it is to be a Native woman in Canada. They do not speak of the distant past but of our age, from 1940 to the present. Anger and loss pervade all three books, but there is also hope. Campbell speaks of her brothers and sisters all over the land; Culleton speaks of better family life; and when Maracle proclaims herself "woman," she equates "being" with being *sensuous, beautiful, strong, brilliant, passionate, loving*. All three writers experience difficulty in communicating with non-Native Canadians. They have written their books for different reasons. But inevitably a writer, who publishes, writes to communicate with others. The

difficulty that Native voices experience in being heard and being taken seriously is best expressed by Maracle in the following poem:

It is hard not to protest —
 not to address CanAmerican Europe
 when you are not just surrounded,
 but buried beneath the urban giant;
 reduced to a muffled voice
 by the twang and clang of machines.
 It is hard not to cry out to those
 next you 'come together . . . push up
 on the giant . . . bite his heels'
 It is easier to cry out to the unseen,
 deaf ears above for help.³⁰

NOTES

- ¹ Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers*, eds. Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1987), 57.
- ² *Ibid.*, 83.
- ³ This concept has been thoroughly explored in Leslie Monkman, *A Native Heritage: Images of the Indian in English Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1981).
- ⁴ Paula Gunn Allen, "The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective in American Indian Literature" in *Studies in American Indian Literature* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1983), 3.
- ⁵ Swann and Krupat explore this concept in greater detail in the introduction to *I Tell You Now*.
- ⁶ For a more detailed discussion on this dilemma see the introduction to Thomas King, ed., *Canadian Fiction Magazine* No. 60 (1987).
- ⁷ Maria Campbell, *Halfbreed* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1973), 8.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 132.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 45.
- ¹³ Kate Vangen, *The Native in Literature: Canadian and Comparative Perspectives*, eds. Thomas King, Cheryl Calver, and Helen Hoy (Oakville: ECW Press, 1987), 188.
- ¹⁴ Campbell, 18.
- ¹⁵ Beatrice Culleton, *In Search of April Raintree* (Winnipeg: Pemmican, 1983), 9.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.
- ¹⁷ Beatrice Culleton in a video produced by the Manitoba Action Committee on the Status of Women, n.d.

¹⁸ *Raintree*, 144.

¹⁹ Lee Maracle, *I Am Woman* (North Vancouver: Write-On Press, 1988), 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

²⁴ Campbell, 124.

²⁵ Culleton, 141.

²⁶ Maracle, 18.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

NOSTALGIA

Emma LaRocque

Where does it go
the log-cabins,
woodstoves and rabbit soups
we know
in our eight year old hearts?

I tried to hold it
with my Minolta
As Sapp stills it
with paint and brush.

I ran out of film,
and Sapp out of brushes.