editorial

LEARNING TO LISTEN

Out of the silence, sound.

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Who utters it? Who listens? Who heard space as silence to begin with? Who turns sound into speech, and speech into meaning? Do people hear because of how they've learned to hear — or does each person listen alone?

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Daniel David Moses, a member of Toronto's Committee to Re-Establish the Trickster, writes in the December 1, 1989, issue of *What* about the different demands of two languages. Growing up, he understood that language constructed reality in one way; as an adult, he came to know that the language surrounding him was asking him to live in another way. Could he reconcile the two sets of expectations? Should he have to? Could he live with both? Would the division between the two make living with both unbearable? This is, he writes, "a world where Native people, Native traditions assume the existence of a spirit world as a given, a gift, and where non-Native people scoff or keep secrets." Such a division both displays and constructs a hierarchy of power. Scoffing is a refusal to listen, sometimes in case the alternative should prove to be more compelling than the convention accepted as normality. Sometimes people are willing to listen only to those voices that confirm the conventions they already know. The unfamiliar makes them fear. Or makes them condescend. Neither fear nor condescension encourages listening. And no one who does not listen learns to hear.

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The time is not so distant when the "Native" was a conventional figure in Canadian literature — but not a voice (or a figure allowed separate voices). If Native characters spoke, they spoke in archaisms or without articles, in the sham eloquence of florid romance or the muted syllables of deprivation. If Native characters moved, they moved according to European schedules of arrangement, as

faithful friends or savage foes, or as marginal figures the mighty could afford to ignore. Over the course of time, even historical individuals turned from persons into signs. As far as textbooks were concerned, fictions were as acceptable as fact. Shananditti became a figure of curiosity, though few admitted to start with that this position was artificially constructed. It was genocide that made her *the last of the Beothuks*, and therefore tragic. (But, says the literary echo, also "romantic": *the last of the Mohicans* was a phrase ready to hand, ready to use to explain the "reality" away.) Pontiac and Tecumseh turned into the noble heroes of National Causes; Big Bear was cast as a suspect foe; Maquinna was generally ignored. Out of such prototypes was a Loyalist version of Canadian history confirmed. But the preponderant influence of this version of history depended on the construction of margins: the tendency it established was to deny Native communities respect for their own history, to make their own position in history contingent upon European perspectives, to displace one language of perception with a self-justifying substitute. Power declares; it doesn't readily listen. In conventional circles, in the early years of the twentieth century, Pauline Johnson was accepted as a performer, and accepted as a poet only to the degree that the performance — complete with Mohawk "costume" — was patronizingly being praised. In retrospect, it is hard not to think that these same communities subsequently (and readily) accepted Grey Owl as an "Indian" because he was theatrical *like Johnson* — that he was praised because he fit the model that convention had made familiar. The model confirmed expectations. It nevertheless left the reality unquestioned, and therefore unmet.

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Joan Crate's 1989 poem sequence, *Pale As Real Ladies*, asks in part why Johnson chose to accept the role of the performing Mohawk Princess. "To be heard at all" is one answer. The next question asks what listening to Johnson's experience has to do with the lives of contemporary Native writers. Next answer: it helps to reconstruct a missing history. The paradigms and parallels of anthropology do not describe a single unifying tradition among the many Native cultures of northern North America; differentiating more than uniting, they look for cultural variation. But have the differences thus distinguished had any palpable effect on the paradigms of Canadian historiography? Missionary anthologies were inclined to rewrite Native myths as European fairy tales, minimizing their social function, and to seek Christian parallels, for moralistic intent, and to translate the symbolic logic of the original tales into the linear forms of "realistic" representation, thus misnaming one kind of truth as another. Elementary school textbooks sometimes still construct the "other" in terms of "quaint custom" rather than depict social practices as straightforward alternatives to those of the familiar culture. Literary histories still tend to overlook as *literature* the extensive work of Native writers: the nineteenth-century inventions of Kah-ge-ga-gah-bowh (George Copway), whom Donald B.

Smith drew attention to in a *Journal of Canadian Studies* article in 1988; the oratory of Chief Dan George; the power of tale-telling, as in Edward Ahenakew's *Voices of the Plains Cree*, Norval Morriseau's *Legends of My People* (Ojibway), George Clutesi's *Son of Raven, Son of Deer* (Sechelt), Chief Ken Harris's *Visitors Who Never Left* (Gitksan); the personal rhetoric of Markoosie, Duke Redbird, Anthony Apakark Thrasher, Vera Manuel, Howard Cardinal, or the Métis autobiographer and teacher Maria Campbell; the poetry, prose, and drama of Joanne Cardinal Schubert, Bernard Assiniwi, Shirley Bruised Head, Willie Dunn, Emma Lee Warrior, Jordan Wheeler, and the many writers whose works are gathered or discussed in this collection.

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A few anthologies have, of course, made some texts available, unavoidably "translating" some of them into the format of a different culture simply by converting them from oral to written form. Edmund Carpenter edited *Anerca* in 1959; Kent Gooderham *I Am an Indian* in 1969; David Day and Marilyn Bowering *Many Voices* in 1977; Robin Gedalof (McGrath) *Paper Stays Put* in 1980; John Robert Colombo *Poems of the Inuit* in 1981; Penny Petrone *First People, First Voices* in 1983 and *Northern Voices* in 1988. Preliminary inquiries into Native literary forms include essays in the new Yukon journal from Whitehorse, *The Northern Review*; a "native literature issue" of *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* from Brandon, Manitoba (5:2, 1985); and Brian Swann's two recent anthologies from the University of California Press: *Smoothing the Ground: Essays on Native American Oral Literature*, a series of essays (both theoretical and analytic) on linguistic features and the verbal coding of social norms, and (with Arnold Krupat) *Recovering the Word*, a collection of largely interpretive essays, including William Bright's "The Natural History of Old Man Coyote," Duane Niatum's "On Stereotypes," and Rudolf Kaiser's analysis of ways in which variant versions of Chief Seattle's nineteenth-century oratory have been made to serve political ends, including those of current ecological aspiration. Swann's bibliographies, moreover, provide access to the substantial body of commentary which now exists on Native American studies.

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Even the margins have margins. Herbert Schwarz's *Tales from the Smokehouse* (1972) collects erotic male stories from Native sources — which the missionaries either bowdlerized, never heard, or never retold. Beth Brant's *A Gathering of Spirit* (1984, revised 1988) collects lesbian as well as heterosexual writings by North American Indian women, including work by the Piegan writer Emilie Gallant and the Ojibway Lenore Keeshig-Tobias. But anthologies do not in and of themselves change historical attitudes. Keeshig-Tobias, editor of *Trickster* in Toronto, rejects

in principle the way non-Natives try sometimes to construct Native voices; *by speaking for the other*, she argues, *they co-opt the other*, and their subtexts remain those of the mainstream culture. Only when the margins participate more actively in the mainstream, by implication — effectively altering it — will the mainstream itself come closer to understanding native experience, native beliefs, native perspec-
itself come closer to understanding Native experience, Native beliefs, Native perspectives on human relationships, the spirit world, the nature of nature.

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Nor does participation, all on its own, guarantee effective social change. Attitudes born of stereotypes usually reiterate stereotypes, in a cycle that tends tirelessly to reconfirm itself. Mainstream institutions seldom initiate questions about established attitudes so much as they co-opt the questions that the margins have begun relentlessly to ask. But even this development can be functional. Deliberate commitments to change, that is, sometimes construct opportunities for difference.

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Native speakers, writers, singers, and tale-tellers have long contributed creatively to tribal culture. Indirectly they have contributed to national culture, too, but to the degree that the nation did not, would not, listen, their activities were regarded (when acknowledged at all) as primitive, pagan, curious, quaint, and collectible rather than as intrinsically artistic. Recently, Native organizations have themselves become active agents for creative change. The En'owkin Centre in Penticton, B.C., led by Jeannette Armstrong (of Okanagan heritage), is one of several newly established creative arts schools designed to meet the needs of Native artists. The Baffin Writers' Project, now directed by Alootook Ipellie, is encouraging Inuit writers to publish and helping to arrange both publication and distribution of their works. Native publishers have come into existence: Theytus Books in Penticton, Fifth House in Saskatoon. Native journals are now available: *Ontario Indian, Trickster, Inuktitut* — as well as anthologies constructed from Native perspectives: Beth Brant (Degonwadonti), a Bay of Quinte Mohawk, records in *A Gathering of Spirit* how one of the contributors to her collection writes "You will never know how much this book means to me. *It is real. It is the truth.*" Native critics have embraced the role of cultural teacher. Thomas King (of Cherokee descent) writes a personal introduction to Canadian Native fiction as a preface to the short story anthology he assembled as a special issue of *Canadian Fiction Magazine* (no. 60, 1987). Maria Campbell's *Achimoona* (1988) provides an opportunity for new Métis writers to offer their work to readers. And Native bookstores are now in operation also. Chiefs Mask, 73 Water Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6B 1A1, is one; Akwesasne Notes, P.O. Box 1251, Cornwall, Ontario K6H 1B3, is another. What this summary

describes is the construction of an alternative cycle of communication to the one on which the "dominant" society has long depended.

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But the nature of any "dominance" is that it, like the margins it defines, is a social construct, a fabrication of language and institutional design. Margins have a way of speaking back from the edges of power, of resisting those who occupy a centre by having laid claim to the terms that declare that they do occupy a centre. If they are not recognized for the creativity of the differences they bring to bear on cultural perception, margins also have a way of making the centre irrelevant, and of speaking on their own.

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This collection of essays and poems is a speaking-place. Because boundaries are processes of interaction as much as they are lines of demarcation, it is also a series of opportunities to begin listening.

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W.N.