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Introduction

From Conference to Special Issue: Selected Articles on “The Love of Words”

RENATE EIGENBROD AND JENNIFER ANDREWS

HELD IN THE FALL OF 2004 in Winnipeg, with the generous support of the University of Manitoba, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and The Canada Council for the Arts, “For the Love of Words: Aboriginal Writers of Canada” was a landmark conference. Inspired by Emma LaRocque’s vision, “For the Love of Words” brought together Native and non-Native scholars and Aboriginal writers/community activists for an intensive three-day gathering that combined creative readings, plenary speeches, and academic sessions examining the significance of language in the context of Native Canadian writing. It was organized by Emma LaRocque in collaboration with Renate Eigenbrod, her colleague in the Department of Native Studies (with much appreciated help from Warren Cariou, Department of English, and Native Studies graduate student Karen Froman). The sharp focus and congenial atmosphere of the conference led to a great deal of stimulating discussion and lively debate within sessions and readings — and just as intensively over morning coffee, lunch, or dinner — about the benefits and limitations of traditional approaches to Native literature and other possible frameworks for expanding and reassessing the goals of Native Studies, particularly through a closer examination of Aboriginal literary aesthetics. Jennifer Andrews, who attended the conference, was inspired by the enthusiastic and thoughtful presentations by participants and offered, together with co-editor John Clement Ball, to publish a special issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature/Études en littérature canadienne* drawn from the contributions of those who presented papers at “For the Love of Words.” Rather than reprinting conference papers, potential contributors were asked to submit full-length articles that would expand upon and engage the conference themes in more depth. The resulting publication

is a rich collection of thoughtful theoretical and textual engagements with a wide range of Aboriginal writers and contexts.

The papers and presentations delivered at the conference reflect the increasing visibility of Aboriginal authors and the growing field of “Native Lit” in Canada, dating back to Harold Cardinal’s *The Unjust Society* (1969), Waubageshig’s collection of essays, fiction, and poetry *The only Good Indian* (1970), Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed* (1973) and George Kenny’s *Indians Don’t Cry* (1982) — to name only a few milestone publications. Writers like Jeannette Armstrong, Maria Campbell, Beatrice Culleton-Motionier, Louise Bernice Halfe, Thomas King, and Eden Robinson are now garnering national and international attention, and their writing is taught in academic institutions throughout Canada and beyond. However, the search for celebrity is often fleeting, and while a few individuals of Aboriginal descent may be singled out for recognition in the form of awards and keynote events, often the richness and diversity of Native literature at large is ignored. Rather than analyzing the works of a few well-known Aboriginal writers as part of a Canadian or postcolonial conference, the organizers decided it was time to provide a forum exclusively for Native literatures in Canada. The need was especially pressing given that the only previous conference of this kind took place at McMaster University in 1992, over a decade earlier. The intent behind “For the Love of Words” was not so much to emphasize culturally or racially constructed differences in literature (such as the famous *Writing Thru Race* conference held in Vancouver in 1994), as it was to organize an event to highlight the complexities of Aboriginal literary expression, which has been simplified and subsumed too long under non-aesthetic categories.

One very visible way to illustrate diversity in Aboriginal literature in Canada is to showcase the multitude of culturally embedded voices within this field. With nineteen scholarly papers, three keynote addresses, and another nineteen readings by Canadian Aboriginal authors, the conference program gave voice to the wide range of writing styles used by First Nation and Métis authors from all over the country. Moreover, the panels addressed a diverse array of topics under the rubric “for the love of words,” including the poetics of autobiography, the linguistic play of poetry, representations of Indigenous aesthetics in fiction, and resistance aesthetics. And through the conference discussions, different — and often complementary — interpretations of the notion of “aesthetics” emerged, offering new ways to approach Aboriginal literatures in Canada. The

contents of this special issue of *SCL/ÉLC* sustain that dialogue by giving focus to aesthetics (while still acknowledging the importance of politics) when reading Aboriginal texts.

The academic and creative submissions reflect the various dimensions of an Indigenous aesthetics. Cree/Métis poet Duncan Mercredi's "it's all good this," which opens the issue, enacts a Native aesthetic rooted in memories of the past; it refuses to gloss over pain and injustices, yet is able to find a way to balance the experience of loss with the present need to "speak ... / teach ... / learn ... and dance without fear." As Mercredi's speaker points out, the traditional stories were not told openly for a long time, either because they were considered unworthy (being the expression of savage and primitive minds) or because they were in danger of appropriation and distortion. The richness of Mercredi's language, the incantatory quality of the poem's repetition, and the speaker's personal engagement with the power of story-making demonstrate the strength and pleasure to be found in the reading of Aboriginal literature, establishing a basis for the theoretical discussions that follow. In her opening address at the conference, Emma LaRocque emphasizes that aesthetics overrides cultural, or more precisely, anthropologically constructed difference. Although the allusions to sweetgrass and sage in her own poem, "Sweeping" place her culturally, she argues in her presentation that Native literature cannot only be critiqued as "a 'voice' of culture or even resistance." Rather, it is by attending to "our (Native) humanity" as expressed through writing, LaRocque contends, that readers and scholars can avoid the tendency to see Indigenous texts as primarily political works. The imagination and the "creative re/construction of words" become more than merely tools of cultural identification and resistance; they are in themselves worthy of study. kateri akiwenzie-damm's poem "shorelines" enacts this beauty of words through the speaker's vision of key moments within the life of a man fundamentally shaped by his relationship to water as he moves from infancy to old age, finally finding "his way home." Drawing on Anishnaabe originary narratives, akiwenzie-damm combines the cultural dimensions of her mixed-blood heritage with a narrative of human and poetic transformation through interaction with the natural world.

In her keynote address — focusing explicitly on "The Aesthetic Qualities of Aboriginal Writing" — Jeannette Armstrong approaches the topic of Indigenous aesthetics from a somewhat different angle.¹ She argues that aesthetics are grounded in cultural difference, or more precisely, in the

language of a specific culture (in her case, that of the Okanagan nation). For her, an Indigenous aesthetics is shaped by a double “translation”: from an Indigenous language into English (she calls it auto-translation) and from the oral into the written. Emphasizing the point that “we *do* speak from cultural authority,” even when writing in English, she discusses how Aboriginal writers break new ground in literature by “drawing on original story.” She rephrases the colonial and neocolonial centre/margin discourse, stating emphatically, “we move the aesthetic of Aboriginal literatures from the common text of the settler into a new place in our communities. It gives me great joy to be in the margins, knowing that.” The need to learn and publish in originary languages becomes a crucial part of Armstrong’s argument, a point which is powerfully echoed in the poem that follows her address. Marilyn Dumont’s “Les Animaux” is an account of the disappearance of the buffalo on the Prairie plains as recalled by a Métis speaker who blends together French and English while lamenting the demise of the animals that once made the speaker “captain of the hunt.” Dumont elegantly moves between the two languages, creating a eulogy not only for the buffalo herds displaced by the settlers — “the new herds” — but also for the potential loss of a linguistic and aesthetic heritage that uniquely combines French and English along with Cree. The fundamental power of language, and the land and community from which it arises and flourishes, resonates in the next essay, “The Grandmother Language: Writing Community Process in Jeannette Armstrong’s *whispering in shadows*.” The author, Jane Haladay, discusses in depth the way in which the novel is situated within an Okanagan community and how their language is connected to the Okanagan land. She shows how a “symbiosis of land, language, and community” gives rise to a novel that interweaves multiple genres, subverts the hierarchical placement of characters, and proposes an Okanagan ecological world view of balance.

Native representations of the relationship between history and identity move beyond politics through a careful crafting of Indigenous aesthetics in this special issue, beginning with George Kenny’s “How He Served,” a poem about his father. Kenny explores the significance of his father’s life in distinctly nurturing and sensual terms, giving him a depth and humanity that resists dominant (read Eurocentric) depictions of Aboriginal peoples as one-dimensional. This reshaping of imposed presumptions about what constitutes Indigenous history — both public and personal — is fundamental to Deanna Reder’s article “Understanding Cree Protocol in the

Shifting Passages of ‘Old Keyam.’” She explores the need for revisiting history and acknowledging the beliefs and practices of individual tribal communities in her discussion of the semi-autobiographical text *Voices of the Plains Cree*, which Cree author Edward Ahenakew submitted for publication in 1922, but which was not published until after Ahenakew’s death in 1973. Reder analyzes the contradictory discourses of a Cree activist who was also an Anglican cleric and who lived at the time of the height of the government’s assimilation policies. Caught between contradictory narratives, Ahenakew negotiates different voices and rhetorical strategies in order to express a Cree identity under siege. Together with other Aboriginal scholars, Reder concludes that Ahenakew may express the voice of the assimilated but that his writing is shaped by a Cree philosophy of relationships. His character Keyam “tries to reconcile possibly irreconcilable perspectives of the Cree and of the colonizers, *because this is a Cree value*” (emphasis added).

Nearly one hundred years later the acclaimed Cree poet Louise Halfe speaks from a very different political position. Yet, like Reder, she emphasizes the importance of context when analyzing the aesthetics of Aboriginal literature. Her keynote address, the last of three published here, involves retelling the story of a woman who is punished by her husband for her erotic encounters with snakes; he beheads the snakes, and then beheads his wife, tossing her body into the sky but leaving her head to roll around the earth. This is not just any story, but part of a long creation story from her Cree background, which Halfe tries to understand in its depth by delving deeper into the Cree language and dismissing the possible influence of Catholicism on the narrative’s outcome. Halfe gives her own title to the story of the Rolling Head, *Cihcipistikwan-Atayohkewin: “The Rolling Head’s ‘Grave’ Yard.”* Using the device of a pun, Halfe validates the reality of a story that demonizes women by literalizing their fate — death — while at the same time suggesting the graveness carried by the philosophy and symbolism of this story. Halfe also pointedly resists imposing singular readings on her narrative, emphasizing that the aesthetic power of a story such of that of the Rolling Head needs to be experienced by each individual listener or reader.

Orality grounded in community and knowledge and awareness of an Indigenous language are the two strands that, according to Jeannette Armstrong, shape an Indigenous aesthetic. Jack Robinson argues in “Writing Voices Speaking” that Thomas King chooses the former to give his novel

Medicine River a Blackfoot (Siksikawa) perspective. Robinson contends that while “an aesthetic of talk” constitutes “Nativeness” in this novel, it also deconstructs fixed images of Aboriginal peoples, their cultures, and their artistic and literary expressions, deconstructing the seeming dichotomy between the dominant aesthetic modes of non-Native versus Aboriginal cultures. The “aesthetic of talk” in *Medicine River* becomes a way of bringing the novel’s protagonist, who had been estranged from his culture, back to his community. Similarly, in “Michif Voices as Cultural Weaponry,” Pamela Sing discusses the role of language and literature in hi/stories of displacement, in this case of a people — the Métis. She argues that the language “specific to some of Western Canada’s Métis of French ancestry,” Michif, has the potential to reinscribe “a space that, to the Métis, feels like a *homeland*.” In her discussion of Maria Campbell, Sharon Proulx-Turner, Marilyn Dumont and Joe Welsh, Sing shows how Michif becomes a powerful way to sustain the connection between place and identity in spite of historical dispossession. “Love of words” in this context includes choosing to use a language that differs from standard English, a language embedded in imperial history and imbued with colonial values.

Even if Aboriginal authors choose to use standard English, they try to creatively decolonize it in a variety of ways that are both powerfully op-positional and resolutely creative. In her collaborative essay with Lally Grauer, “A Weasel Pops In and Out of Old Tunes,” Anishnaabe poet Annharte Baker alters individual words and their meanings, and, in doing so, recontextualizes the language of social control. By playing on words, recycling and reframing them, she creates her own vocabulary, one that displaces the language of colonization with new possibilities. Baker’s explicitly political and deeply aesthetic approach to the “love of words” is taken further by Anishnaabe poet Marvin Francis, who lost his fight with cancer in January 2005. We are grateful to his partner, Cindy Singer, for providing us with the until now unpublished poem, “making elbow room for poetry and that last bus down sergeant,” which contemplates how contemporary urban life, with its emphasis on image over word, potentially leads to the devaluation of the power of words. His poem insists on the need to make “elbow room for poetry,” rather than simply surrendering to the emptiness of a consumer society. Warren Cariou’s article on Francis’s long poem, *City Treaty*, looks at the poet’s commitment to anti-globalization. Cariou argues that the aesthetics of decolonization is turned into an

aesthetics of “de-coca-colonization” by re-contextualizing the power of corporations in the mcpemmicans and mctreaties of old and new forms of economic exploitation. The “love of words” and their inherent playfulness thus remain fundamental tools for resisting a capitalist economy in which politics appear to trump aesthetics, something that neither Francis nor Cariou is willing to let happen.

This special issue concludes, appropriately, with a scholarly article by June Scudeler about the Métis writer Gregory Scofield and the poem he read at the conference. We hope thereby to confirm that an organic relationship between academia and creative writers is essential to understanding not only the history of Aboriginal literature in Canada, but also its future directions. The article examines Scofield’s evolution as poet, writer, social worker, and gay activist raised in urban centres, who, Scudeler argues, weaves together politics and aesthetics to produce his own cross-cultural poetic vision. In particular, Scudeler explores how in his latest collection, *Singing Home the Bones*, the poet draws on both his Indigenous background and the Jewish heritage of the father he never knew — by using Cree prayer songs and Jewish mourning practices — to articulate a powerful personal and communal history of loss. Scudeler’s essay is followed by a poem which was delivered by Scofield at “For The Love of Words.” Adapting the Cree prayer song structure Scofield’s narrator insists upon recovering the original names of his female ancestors, whose relationships with male Hudson’s Bay Company employees led to the obscuring of their Cree roots. Scofield’s incantatory delivery of this poem at the conference, impossible to convey adequately on paper, and his seamless blending of English and Cree, the latter remaining mainly untranslated, reflect the efforts of contemporary Indigenous writers in Canada to create their own unique voices by drawing, with great energy, on a multiplicity of oral and written traditions in order to provide new perspectives on what being Indigenous can mean. As Warren Cariou suggests in his study of Marvin Francis, and Scudeler affirms in her discussion of Scofield’s work, a new vision and a new poetic language have emerged from the new generation of urban writers, whose work goes beyond conventional notions of ‘Nativeness’ — something to look out for at future conferences and special issues yet to come on Aboriginal writers in Canada.

NOTE

¹ Thanks to Dr. Mariella Lorusso for recording and transcribing Armstrong’s oral address, as published here.