

# **THE ORAL IN THE WRITTEN: A LITERATURE BETWEEN TWO CULTURES**

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## **Abstract / Resume**

The author reviews differences between orality and literacy, noting that the latter is an extension of the former. She suggests that much contemporary Aboriginal literature includes characteristics of oral narratives. Such devices as the use of the first person and the emphasis upon oneness indicate writing in the "oral" form.

L'auteur réexamine les différences entre l'oralité et le degré d'alphabétisation, et remarque que celui-ci est une extension de celle-là. Elle suggère qu'une bonne partie de la littérature autochtone contemporaine comprend des traits distinctifs des récits oraux. Des techniques telles que l'emploi de la première personne et l'accent mis sur l'unité indiquent que l'écrit relève de l'oralité.

What I can remember, I will say  
 What I do not remember, I will not say.  
 I cannot read and write  
 I can only remember.  
 Before the whiteman came, we were bush people.  
 When they came, where we live they said  
 "this my land."  
 And we have no more.  
 We can't read and write.  
 We only can remember it.  
 Since not too long ago  
 That my people started to go to school (Ridington, 1990:288).

These words, spoken in a trial in 1987 by a Dunne-za/Cree Elder of northern Canada named John Davis, make some important comments on orality and literacy. They imply that those who know how to write are in control and use their power to appropriate land that is not theirs. Oral communication on the other hand includes the ability to remember "it" (the injustice) and therefore functions as a weapon, as a means of defense. It is also worth noting that the truth and accuracy of the spoken words is guaranteed by the personal experience of the speaker: "What I do not remember, I will not say."

In a different context, an Elder from another First Nation of Canada gives a similar interpretation of the oral and the written. Harry Robinson from the Interior Salish people of British Columbia includes in his account of the creation story the description of the first ancestor of the White people, the younger twin of the Indian brother, who, as the one who could read, stole "the paper" from God and began life with a lie:

And that younger one,  
 now today, that's the white man.  
 And the older one, that's me.  
 That's the Indian.  
 And that's why the white man,  
 they can tell a lie more than the Indian.  
 But the white man, they got the law (Robinson, 1989:45-46).

Again, from the Native perspective, literacy is associated with political power, dishonesty and injustice. The literate Whiteman did not share his knowledge but used it to manipulate, "hiding some", as Harry Robinson said.

The above comments by two Elders of Canada's First Nations make it quite clear that there is more to the oral and written modes of communication than the ability or inability to read and write. Over the years, "the older twin", the Indian, also achieved literacy skills; however, as the Elder John

David stated, "since not too long ago" only. In addition, although "the older" learned from "the younger" one, education for literacy became part of the colonization process, thus not changing the distribution of political power. So for a long time - and still today - the literature created by Aboriginal people in writing has served the same purpose as the oral act of "remembering it." Emma LaRoque, a Métis writer, noted in her introduction to an anthology of prose and poetry by Native women of Western Canada that

Some themes unique to a people dispossessed stand out: a haunting and hounding sense of loss that drives one to reminisce. "I remember," many of us write, "I remember" (LaRoque, 1990:xxviii).

Remembering orally and remembering in writing: the parallel indicates how *litera-ture* is a continuation of *ora-ture*, or the so-called oral traditions. The symbiosis of the oral and the written seems to be a characteristic of contemporary Native writing that warrants examination. LaRoque emphasizes "the transitional nature" of a literature proceeding "from the oral to the written" (*Ibid.*), while Thomas King defines the writing that blends the two together as "interfusional" (1990b:xii).

In this age of secondary orality, in which words are not "fixed" on paper because we no longer work on paper but on the screen "where letters are flickering dots of light" (Murray, 1991), the oral mode of communication, or orality, is of increasing interest to philosophers, sociologists and linguists. Since Marshall McLuhan's aphorism that "the medium is the message," scholars state in different ways that the oral and the written forms of communication carry implications that clearly extend external characteristics of a certain speech act or form of discourse. According to Neil Postman's assumption, "in every tool we create an idea is embedded that goes beyond the function of the thing itself" (1986:14). This means for both the oral and written media of language that they are not only "processing varieties" (Macaulay, 1990:4) but epistemological realities. For Walter Ong, the difference between "orally based thought and expression" and "the technology of writing" is so essential

that many of the contrasts often made between "western" and other views seem reducible to contrasts between deeply interiorized literacy and more or less residually oral states of consciousness (1982:29).

A similar interpretation of such contrasts between orality and literacy is given by the Métis writer Emma LaRoque who, however, relates such juxtaposition to the specific context of Aboriginal cultures. Commenting on contemporary literature by First Nations' writers in Canada, she claims: "What is at work is the power struggle between the oral and the written,

between the Native in us and the English" (1990:xx). Allusive of Harry Robinson's "twinning" of the literate Whiteman and the non-literate Indian, LaRoque views "the oral" as intrinsically "Native" and in conflict with "the written" which is identified as the colonizer's medium, "the English". As authors of Aboriginal descent are writing and publishing in and for mainstream society, they are well aware of the power struggle in which their writing is situated and they express the difficulties they encounter in epilogues, introductions and prefaces to their works.

The Anishnawbe writer Basil Johnston states in the epilogue to his collection of short stories *Moose Meat and Wild Rice*, published in 1978, that he feels the original stories given to him orally have been greatly changed by the writing process:

The stories as written cannot adequately convey the real nature or impart the scope of that sense of wit and humour that forms an integral part of the Ojibway people and their character (1978:188).

In her preface to a collection of short stories titled *Achimoona*, the Métis writer Maria Campbell stressed another difficulty when fusing together the oral and the written:

Now came the big job, to take those oral stories and put them on paper. It was hard, we had to change from telling a story to a group of people to being alone and telling the story to the paper (1985:x).

For this writer the essential difficulty of that kind of translation lies in the fact that the communal experience of telling a story needs to be adapted to the isolation of a writer's work. In other words, the circular communication pattern of the oral process happening between teller and listener(s) is transformed into a linear process.

Both Johnston's and Campbell's comments on a published collection of stories reveal the close link between an oral and a written story. It seems that a written story cannot be perceived without its oral counterpart or "original". Campbell outlines the oral creative process preceding the written work by explaining how the stories were first "told" to different storytellers/writers by the various objects of a medicine bundle; Johnston acknowledges different people who had given him the stories orally. In both cases the fusion of the oral and the written is perceived as difficult yet necessary.

The double-tracked performance of telling/writing as described above is sometimes split between two people, an (Aboriginal) teller and a (non-Aboriginal) writer, a process known as collaboration resulting in "as told to" literature. In these cases the power struggle is usually resolved in favour of "the English" side, the dominant mode of producing a text, at the expense

of the "Native", i.e. "the oral" or personal, contextualized and malleable quality of a story told. *Write it on Your Heart*, told by the already mentioned elder Harry Robinson from British Columbia and compiled by the anthropologist Wendy Wickwire, is an example of such collaboration. In the preface to these stories the editor shows an awareness of the questionable aspect of her achievement:

Ironically, to crystallize Harry's stories either on tape or in book form, also fixes these living stories in time. They will now no longer evolve as they have for hundreds of generations. Indeed, this book might be criticized for Homerizing Harry, though in a relatively unfiltered way (Robinson, 1989:23).

The dilemma pointed out in this preface is that the mere writing down of stories told, regardless by whom, destroys their essential character because of the inherent contradiction of preserving something that by its very nature is in constant flux and thus defies preservation. In the context of the above statement, a written text is perceived as the fixation of nothing less than life itself. Doug Cardinal, a Métis architect, expresses his belief in contextualized, person-related knowledge in his paradoxical statement "our elders are our books", "when we lose one of our elders we lose our books" (Boddy, 1989:115).

Harry Robinson did not want his book to be lost forever; hence, he gave Wendy Wickwire permission to "Homerize" him. Their collaboration created a written text that, although abstracted from life, still reflects the oral culture from which it originates. Quite obviously, the style is oral: sentence structures which are common in conversational English - informal and short - repetitions, interjections, questions to include the listener/reader ("Do you believe this?") and demonstrative pronouns to verbalize body language. The stylistic devices translating the oral onto the written page are used to such a degree that the stories need to be read aloud to be understood more fully so that, in the words of one Aboriginal reviewer, "the oral became the written became the oral" (King, 1990a). But besides noticing the orality of the style, the reader of these stories will be drawn into the mind set of an orally-based thought process. For Harry Robinson there is no distinction between past and present, mythological reality and reality documented in writing, history and story. The mythological past of humanity explains the present reality (like the existence of Europeans) and the present verifies the past, much like the story about the literate younger twin, the ancestor of the Europeans, who used his literacy to lie to his older brother, the ancestor of the Indian. The truth of this story from so-called prehistoric, mythological times is demonstrated by an incident documented by the literate culture. In 1929, the government promised the people of Harry

Robinson's community that they would pay for the land they were going to use for building a road. The agreement was written down, the road was built, but the money was never paid. The single fact that the agreement about the payment was written down did not help the Aboriginal people at all (Robinson, 1989:46-47).

Harry Robinson's "Homerized" stories are comparable to the tales in the book *Earth Elder Stories* "told" (as indicated in the subtitle) yet written down by the Saulteaux Elder Alexander Wolfe from Saskatchewan. This teller/writer also demands to stay "within the boundaries of the principles and rules that govern oral traditions when transmitting the stories in written form" (Wolfe, 1988:xxii); hence, he follows a cyclic rather than a linear concept of time and does not separate between "mythology" and "history", the "symbolic" and the "realistic", the "subjective" and the "objective", labels created by the literate culture. For example, the story of "The Orphan Children" contains an historical account of the saving of two children as well as a comment on the cultural practice of adoption and the spiritual beliefs of the Saulteaux people.

A similar sense of connectedness transferred from oral to written stories is revealed in the collection *Achimoona* (meaning: 'stories'). Although in the end the stories are created and read in isolation, the device of the story providing objects of a medicine bag ensures that the creative process started out as a communal experience, not just with a group of people but also with the non-human environment. This connectedness determines the images, symbols and themes of the stories themselves: a boy saving an eagle and being saved by him in return; a boy learning to respect everything there is by the power of imaginative transformation; a woman warrior who crosses the great chasm in the world and destroys the fog that blocks the right vision; tribal cultures in different parts of the world that meet in friendship, and the Reserve road that *is* the Reserve. In this sense *Achimoona* is characterized by the tribal aesthetics as defined by Paula Gunn Allen: "Tribal art of all kinds embodies the principle of kinship, rendering the beautiful in terms of connectedness of elements..." (1989:5).

In the stories told, written or edited by Robinson, Wolfe and Campbell, "the oral" signifies a creative process, a stylistic feature as well as a culturally based way of thinking. All three aspects explain Emma LaRoque's identification of "the oral" with "the Native". The Cree playwright Tomson Highway further specifies "Nativity" when he describes the importance of Nanabush, the central symbolic figure of his plays, in his preface to *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*:

We believe she/he is still here among us - albeit a little the worse for wear and tear - having assumed other guises. Without the continued presence of this extraordinary figure, the core of Indian culture would be gone forever (1989:13).

Tomson Highway identifies "the core of Indian culture" with a being from Native mythology often called "the trickster" or "the transformer". The power of transformation that has been described by a European collector of Native legends as "confusing to the civilized reader" (Coffin, 1961:xv) makes this male or female, human, animal or plant-being an essentially oral figure - if orality is to be associated with a state of being and communicating that resists fixation. In Native spirituality, the ability to change oneself into something else is possible because of the inherent equality of all life forms. This belief is symbolized in the different guises of the transformer character (who also transforms conditions and beings other than himself or herself). As a literary character he or she takes on any shape needed "for the story" - a rabbit, a tree stump, a frog, or a bird in some of the traditional stories, or a Bingo Master, an attractive woman or a prostitute in the stories that are adapted to contemporary reality.

Nanabush - or to mention some names used by other First Nations authors: Gluscaba, Coyote or Whee-skay-chak - just about died because the written culture had made cute little children's stories about this persona, stories without any substance, stories nobody believed in. But, like his people, the so-called trickster survived, for example in a story by George Kenny "Whee-skay-chak and Kahkahge". In this excerpt from a work in progress, Whee-skay-chak is a male character who "has been around for a long, long time," in fact, "at least fifty thousand complete seasons of winter, spring, fall and summer. Even though he had been around that long, he still couldn't understand the female of the human species" (Kenny, 1992:130). Usually, understanding women is not a concern for these characters as they are often lusting after women; but in this story Whee-skay-chak "decided against it this time" (*Ibid.*:134) and instead helped himself to some food left unwatched.

Greedy, lustful and often comical in his pursuit of the fulfilment of his desires, human and superhuman, sensuous as well as spiritual, mischievous as well as benevolent, the character of the transformer provides a connection between oral traditions and modern texts. However, although he has been around "for a long, long time", he shares with his people a history of discrimination often symbolized in the literary plots that include him or her. In George Kenny's story, for example, Whee-skay-chak is not recognized for what he is; the human character of the story identifies him as a raven, *Kahkahge*. In Tomson Highway's first play, *The Rez Sisters* (1988), only a dying woman and a mentally handicapped girl understand

Nanabush as the master of life and death and communicate with him in Cree; the other human characters mistake him for an ordinary seagull and a Bingo Master because they are too involved with attaining fulfillments promised by the dominant society, goals such as enjoying the luxury of a bathroom with a perfectly white toilet.

Canadian Aboriginal writers consider the transformer character a symbol of cultural rebirth because he or she communicates values that are essential in Native cultures. Basil Johnston explains the power of transformation in Anishnawbe culture in the following way: "Beings accept and understand only their own kind. A man understands and accepts another man, an eagle another eagle. Whatever form or shape he assumed, Nanabush had also to accept and endure the limitations of that form and nature" (1976:20). In an oral culture, the technology of survival consists of an intimate knowledge of one's environment and respect for all beings, of "accepting" and "understanding" each other. This is achieved by "becoming the other." The teaching of this way of thinking was and still is communicated in the form of a story; hence, a good storyteller is a person who has

the gift of being able wholly to involve herself into her words, to incarnate herself in flesh and blood in her subject matter. For example, when she told me about the whales, she became a whale and nothing existed, except the whale (Jovette Marchessault, 1990:188).

The teller herself becomes the transformer taking on the possibilities and limitations of another being, a character in the story. It will be argued on the following pages that the narrative stance of the personally-involved teller also affects today's Aboriginal writer.

In Canadian contemporary Native literature, most long prose narratives or novels are written in the first person form. Except for the actual autobiographies, this stylistic device can only to a certain degree be attributed to the fact that those stories are based on autobiographical experiences. More importantly, this narrative perspective may be considered as a device and a technique that make the writer "become" a character - a man in a novel written by a woman (Jeanette Armstrong's *Slash*), a bison (Beatrice Culleton's book for children *The Spirit of the White Bison*), or a youth (as in two novels by Ruby Slipperjack, *Honour the Sun* and *Silent Words*). Each time the author "transforms herself" into that character, accepting the limitations of that character just as Nanabush has to accept the limitations of the being into which he or she is transformed. The reader of a first person narrative may find it easier to understand and feel empathy with the main character through whose perception the story is being told. In the case of Ruby Slipperjack's novels *Honour the Sun* and *Silent Words*, the reader is invited



to take part in the life of two young people, a girl growing up in an isolated Annishnawbe community in Northwestern Ontario and a boy on a journey through different Native communities. The consistency of a young person's perspective, devoid of analysis and explanations of the omniscient (adult) narrator, makes the readers themselves go through a process of transformation, "becoming" that very character: understanding, feeling, smelling, tasting and touching life as the girl or the boy does or learns to do. When the mother of the girl succumbs to alcoholism, the reader is taken by surprise: it suddenly happens; the author provides no clear hints that would have prepared the reader, and in the same way as the girl had not been prepared for this. When, in the second novel, the boy is so afraid of his father that he runs away from him and at the end tries to kill him, the reader is made to understand and believe this fear; hardly any attempt is made to understand the father more objectively.

The truth of the narrative is determined by the limitations of the main character's personality. The subjectivity of this perception is in tune with the concept of truth inherent in the Annishnawbe language. Basil Johnston explains that the English equivalent for the Annishnawbe word for truth (*w'daebawae*) is

not just a mere confirmation of a speaker's veracity. It is at the same time a philosophical proposition that, in saying, a speaker casts his words and his voice only as far as his vocabulary and his perception will enable him. In so doing the tribe was denying that there was absolute truth; that the best a speaker could achieve and a listener expect was the highest degree of accuracy (1990:12).

Hence, the stylistic device of the first person point of view gives credibility to the story in the same way as the elder John David - quoted earlier - guaranteed the accuracy of his testimony with his personal experience. As well, on the political level of "the power struggle" between the oral and the written, it assumes authority opposing a literary discourse in which the Native is constructed as "the Other" (Fee, 1990).

The novel *In Search of April Raintree* by the Métis author Beatrice Culleton, first published in 1983, is a story about two sisters who symbolically represent two ways of existing as Native persons in today's Canadian society. "Making use" of her White looks, one sister tries to forget her Native heritage; the sister with the Native appearance on the other hand, identifies strongly with Native people and the many injustices done to them. April, the one who wants to forget, suffers from an identity crisis but survives physically; her sister Cheryl goes all the way with her people and commits suicide. The story is allegorical as much as it is realistic and autobiographic.

April's first person point of view not only makes sense as the voice of the survivor looking back, but clearly ingrains in the narrative structure of the novel the effects of the voice of the dominant society upon the sense of self of Native people. April's prevailing first person point of view, which hardly grants her sister a voice, is limited because it is controlled by the limited view of non-Native society on her own people. By telling her story of gradually understanding "the Native", i.e. her sister's, perspective, she makes the reader understand as well.

The oral storyteller's voice presented as a first person narrator in the written text is quite distinctly reflected in the autobiographies of First Nations' writers. For example, Maria Campbell's so-called "life story" *Halfbreed* (1973), is prefaced with the following words:

I write this for all of you, to tell you what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in our country. I want to tell you about the joys and sorrows, the oppressing poverty, the frustrations and the dreams (*Ibid.*:2).

The wording of this preface puts the narrative itself in a communal context: Maria Campbell speaks as a representative of her people, as "a Halfbreed woman", and mentions *the* rather than *her* sorrows. The oral transmission of a story is by definition a communal event because it cannot happen without an audience and because the storyteller would only tell a story that is of significance to more than himself or herself. An example of the "as told to" (auto-)biography is Black Elk's life story which starts in the words of the recorder Neihardt: "...and if it were only the story of my life, I think I would not tell it; for what is a man that he should make much of his winters..." (1932:1). Black Elk goes on to tell the story of a vision; Maria Campbell continues with the story of a struggle, taking the personal point of view to get the reader more intimately connected with a people's struggle for social justice and equality. Both tellers/writers pass on a people's history as a personal story guaranteeing the truth and accuracy of their narrative with their personal experience. However, the "I" speaking or writing in these texts is not the individual "I" of Western society, but rather a communal "I". This shows clearly towards the end of *Halfbreed* where Maria Campbell blends the private together with the political; both aspects are part of one story because they are seen as part of one reality.

The emphasis on oneness as opposed to separations and divisions is an essential characteristic of tribal - and that means also oral - cultures. It is in this sense that stories can be written in an "oral form" (Alexander Wolfe), blending together the individual and the communal, the commonplace and the spiritual, the human and the supernatural, thus reflecting a circular rather than a linear way of thinking.

First Nations' writers in Canada are not only connected with the community of their own people but with the multicultural community of other artists and writers across the country. Without getting into a study of influences, it is worth mentioning some similarities. For example, Thomas King's *Medicine River* (1989) and Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988) are both novels written in the autobiographical mode blending together the past and the present in a comparable narrative pattern. Both authors interpret E.M. Forster's imperative for any novel, "the allegiance to time" (1974:37), as a spatial concept rather than as a linear progression. The main characters move back and forth in time; his or her past is verified by the present and the present gains significance, "meaning" from the past, not unlike Harry Robinson's connections between "mythological" past and "historical" present. Margaret Atwood explains the philosophical basis for her technique in the opening of her novel:

Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space. If you can bend space, you can bend time also, and if you knew enough and could move faster than light you could travel backward in time and exist in two places at once... I began then to think of time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away (1988:3).

Ruby Slipperjack's main character in *Silent Words* experiences time as a spatial dimension made up of layers. Although the narrative structure of the novel appears to follow a linear chronological sequence, the boy's intellectual, physical and emotional growth is related to his environment which he encounters and re-encounters in a cyclical quest journey. He sums up his maturing at the end of the novel by evoking the image of a cross-section of a tree that indicates age by layers added on:

You can't escape the silent words of your memory. They grow on you, layer after layer, year after year, documenting you from beginning to end, from the core to the surface. I built my cabin with silent words (1992:250).

It is a challenge for any writer - Aboriginal or not - to express through the inherent fragmentation and linearity of the medium of writing a belief in the holistic construct of a person and beyond that of the total of creation. Integrating the oral in the written means to translate into writing the "multidimensional words" spoken by a storytelling grandmother: "Listening to her was for me to listen to the collective voice of every living thing" (Marchessault, 1990:188).

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