

AN UNCOMFORTABLE DISCUSSION

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Abstract / Résumé

I have questions about the construction of the Aboriginal elder and about its accompanying rhetoric in the current political discourse. There are many contradictions and conflict created by the lack of critical examination and discussion of this important issue. For example, the politics in many of our Aboriginal political, social, and legal institutions include “pick your favorite elder” and “duelling elders,” and there are continuous disputes about elder authenticity. I explore some of these questions and contradictions in the small story of Maggie.

Je me pose des questions sur la construction de l'aîné autochtone et sur la rhétorique qui l'accompagne dans le discours politique courant. De nombreuses contradictions et de nombreux conflits sont créés par le manque d'examen critique et de discussion au sujet de cette question importante. Par exemple, dans bon nombre d'organismes politiques, sociaux et juridiques des Autochtones, la vie politique comprend des éléments tels que « choisissez votre aîné préféré » et les « duels d'aînés », ainsi que des conflits continuels sur l'authenticité des aînés. J'explore certaines de ces questions et contradictions dans le contexte du récit de Maggie.

I have friends who may be considered elders. These people are old and wise. They care deeply about the world around them and are generous with their support to others. I share this in order to situate myself because I am critical about the construction of the Aboriginal elder in the current political discourse. By way of further situating myself, I am a grandmother and I participate in sweats whenever I can.

I am troubled by the largely unexamined and contradictory rhetoric about elders that has become a constant refrain in the Aboriginal discourse. Over the years, I have seen old Aboriginal women disrespected and sitting ignored in classrooms. I have talked to many old Aboriginal people who fear their children and grandchildren. I have seen old Aboriginal people who ache with loneliness as they look out their windows to watch cars drive by. I have talked to old Aboriginal people who are judgmental and angry about the younger generations. I have talked to old Aboriginal people who are dictatorial, abusive, and disrespectful. I regularly see old Aboriginal people laboring and working hard while their grandchildren sit for hours on end in front of loud television sets.

Elder abuse as well as abuse by elders is a problem in many of our communities. I doubt that these are disconnected phenomena. The lack of critical examination of this important topic has widespread consequences. For example, in many of our political, social, and legal institutions, the politics include “pick your favorite elder” and “duelling elders.” Then there are the various authenticity fights (i.e., who is the real elder?) and name calling such as “popcorn elder.” By what authenticity standard do we judge one another? By what standard have I attempted to authenticate myself by disclosing that I am a grandmother who attends sweats?

There are other problems, too. In one community, the elders and youth were put together in a language and cultural program. It turned out that they didn’t even like one another and wouldn’t talk to each other. In this case, the elders thought the youth were useless, lazy, and spoiled—and they made disparaging remarks about the youth. The youth were angry at the elders for playing bingo all the time instead of protecting them and their younger siblings in their homes. The youth let their hair hang over their faces and refused to look at the elders.

There was another dynamic, too. On the one hand, the elders were tired of being expected to know all the answers to complex and difficult questions. On the other hand, the youth were tired of being underestimated as if they knew nothing. This was one of my most challenging experiences and while the problems weren’t solved, for a moment at least, the elders and youth saw each other as people.

The people we call elders have not emerged from colonialism un-

scathed. Despite this, some old Aboriginal people are wise and have much to offer. This story of Maggie is written in remembrance of my grandmothers. Both of them drank too much and partied too hard, but they should be remembered and honored as survivors of colonialism nonetheless. This is a story about these uncomfortable contradictions.

Maggie

The old woman is sitting in her kitchen. She wears a kerchief with bright red and yellow flowers tied around her head. Beneath it, wisps of fine white hair escape. Her face is a mass of tiny wrinkles and her hands gnarled with work. She sips her tea from a heavy porcelain cup with a dark green stripe. She is watching the dawn arrive, the light touching the hillside and trees, brightening the world. The robins have been singing for over an hour.

She takes another sip. She is alone in her little house. She glances about at the quiet kitchen and at the old black dog sleeping on the mat beside the door. The dog snores a little; its muzzle is white. She finishes her tea with a slurp and gets up intending to put the cup in the sink. Instead, she sits back down at the kitchen table.

She reads the article again, just to be sure. Yes, there it was. That Tomson Highway (2005:109), he really did say that life has to be breathed into the new trickster, who is “passed out under some bar table at Queen and Bathurst, drunk out of his mind, to pitch him off the floor, make him stand up, back on his own two feet – so we can laugh and dance again.” “Well I’ll be,” she says quietly. She thinks there must be quite a few tricksters around the country judging by what she’s seen.

She looks at her hands and at the strings attached to them. There are strings on her feet too, and one protruding from the back of her kerchief. She wonders about who pulls the strings to make her perform. Every once in a while she catches just a glimpse. The strings seem to control her only at public events where she does her duty as an elder—whatever that is. She does her best to be an elder, but she doesn’t really know what to think about this role, whatever it is. She doesn’t feel like one.

She sighs deeply and wonders whether the price of visibility and acknowledgment as an elder has been too high. She considers her life now. When she isn’t an elder at a public event, she is alone in her little house. Drinking tea. Invisible. What is the show? she wonders. Who is watching?

She wonders about who pulls the strings to make her perform. Every once in a while she catches just a glimpse. What is the show? she wonders. Who is watching? She doesn’t even feel like an elder, what-

ever that is.

She gets up from the table and goes to the counter where she opens a drawer and pulls out a pair of scissors. She cuts the strings, one by one. Then she takes off the kerchief and does a little dance around the kitchen. More of a shuffle really, but that is okay. She notices that she is breathing—freely. She looks down and sees the shapeless house dress and floppy slippers. Shaking her head at her sad-sack attire, she pulls the dress over her head and throws it across the room. She kicks her slippers off. The dog is now watching her closely, its head resting on its front paws.

She goes into her bedroom and roots around in the closet. After much grunting and groaning, she selects a t-shirt with “phuck housework” on the front. Where did that come from? She grins—must have been a granddaughter with a sense of humor. She digs some more and finds some sweats. Then, triumphantly, she locates a pair of rhinestone sandals that she recalled someone gave her a long time ago. She outfits herself and brushes out her long white hair. She considers cutting it, but decides against it. In the mirror, her image looks back at her and she smiles to herself. Most unelderly.

“My name is Maggie,” she says aloud, “I am a woman, a dancer; I love to laugh. And I am old. And, yes I am a Cree woman too.”

Maggie looks at the dog. “And your name is Watson,” she tells the dog.

Maggie and Watson leave the house and walk into the sunshine filled with many robin songs. They climb into her blue little pick-up truck and drive off. Somewhere. Maggie doesn’t care. She just drives. Watson’s nose is hanging out the window catching the scents of wonderful and mysterious things. Maggie starts to sing at the top of her lungs. Watson smiles.

She is still driving because she hasn’t found a place where she can stop and be Maggie yet.

Reference

- Highway, T.
2005 “Why Cree Is the Funniest of All Languages.” In Drew Hayden Taylor, Ed., *Me Funny*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 159-168.