

Introduction to the Special Issue on Native Literature  
of THE CANADIAN JOURNAL OF NATIVE STUDIES

It is with mixed feelings that I introduce this special edition of *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* on Native Literature. On the one hand, I am pleased to bring this collection of critical articles on works by Native authors to the attention of a scholarly audience. On the other hand, however, I am saddened by the fact that Native Literature remains only a peripheral area of Native Studies. Over the last few years, courses and scholarly interest in the field have increased several hundredfold all over North America. Yet, in comparison to the growth of studies in other ethnic areas, or even in comparison to the development of other Native Studies programs, the growth is minimal. I believe that the special attention of an important journal like this will strengthen the support for Native Literature and develop an appreciation for the contributions which Native Literature can make to several academic disciplines.

As Native Literature consists of Native authors articulating their cultural values in their own idioms, Native authors deserve to be heard whenever issues of culture are raised. The strength of this particular issue of *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* is that each of the articles contained herein discusses works by Native authors. A recent conference on "Native Literature" at a western Canadian university focussed on works by white Canadian authors writing about Natives. While the contributions by Rudy Wiebe, Robert Kroetsch, W.P. Kinsella and W.O. Mitchell are worth consideration for their interpretation of Native/white relations, their writings are not Native Literature. The white man's view of the Indian is a fascinating topic for the psychologist or anthropologist as it provides insights into the mechanism of projection. The non-Native has seen the Native as a projection of his deepest savage fears and as his guide toward a holistic appreciation of the natural world. In each case, however, the white man is seeing primarily a reflection of his own fears or his own cultural values rather than assessing Native culture in its own right. We desperately need to focus upon Native culture as Natives themselves perceive that culture and to develop a vocabulary with which to assess the contributions of Native authors.

Paula Gunn Allen in several of her publications, including most recently the volume she compiled for the Modern Language Association, *Studies in American Indian Literature* (1983), has created some critical perspectives from which we can begin to see the field of Native Literature with more clarity. Above all, she asserts the necessity of understanding the holistic approach of Natives toward religion, nature and human life in nature. Allen states that Native Literature "can best be approached as psychic journey. Only in the context of the consciousness of the universe can it be understood" (*Ibid.*:15). For Allen, Native culture is based on an apprehension of a cosmic consciousness, "an enduring sense of the fluidity and malleability, or creative flux of things" (*Ibid.*). In this consciousness, the division between external and internal is dissolved.

As well, the distinction between reality and the spiritual world disappears. As a result, Allen notes that "the two forms basic to American Indian literature are ceremony and the myth" (Ibid. :9). (See also my essay, "Myth and Ceremony in Contemporary North American Native Fiction," *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* II(2), 1982.) Not only does Native literature utilize special structures, but Allen notes that its use of symbols is profoundly different. In short, we need a critical approach that places Native culture and values at its center.

In addition to providing a framework for the study of Native Literature, Allen's book compiles essential materials which can be used in developing Native Literature as an academic discipline. In a smaller way, this special issue, too, adds to the vocabulary required for critical assessments of this field. In this issue we are including a number of different approaches to different areas of Native Literature. The authors included here utilize anthropological, historical, linguistic, and multi-disciplinary approaches to comparative literature. We have included an approach to fiction, to Native oratory, to Inuit works as children's literature, as well as some insights into the role of Native Literature in later cultural explorations. In each case, the text by the Native author is central.

Janette K. Murray's article, "What is Native Literature" is included in this issue for all readers who require an introduction to the field. Murray's article is a general discussion of the books that are already regarded as "classics" by those of us who teach Native Literature. A critical difficulty with Murray's article is that she has not referred to any of the current criticism of the works of writers like N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Silko, and James Welch who have been written about extensively by literary scholars. Nonetheless, her article is succinct and readable and introduces the important works in the field in a manner accessible to those with little background in the area.

Dennis Hoilman's article deals with the creative transformation of historical materials by two of the most prominent Native authors. The first short story published by Leslie Silko, best known for her award-winning novel, *Ceremony*, as well as the first attempt at fiction by Simon Ortiz, author of *Howbah Indians*, were included in a collection of short stories gathered over a two-year period by Ken Rosen. Rosen's anthology, *The Man to Send Rain Clouds*, is one of the few anthologies of short stories written exclusively by Native authors. Hoilman's article examines and evaluates the way in which Silko and Ortiz dealt with the painful story of the killing of a state patrolman by two men from the Acoma Indian Reservation. Silkos transformation of this material into fiction involves in Hoilman's words, a "deeper interpretation of experience" than does the work of Ortiz and indicates her interest in "the mythic dimension of ordinary reality." These interests on the part of Silko suggest the direction of her later work, particularly the centrality of myth in her novel *Ceremony*.

Rota Lister's essay on Native Oratory reminds us of the great abilities of Native orators and of their belief in the power and importance of the spoken word. Unlike white man's words which scatter like leaves, the words of a Native orator, once spoken, were granted an eternal life, a living presence that could be tapped by all those who heard the words. George Orwell in his famous essay, "Politics and the English Language" writes that vagueness and a lack of con-

creteness is the most marked characteristic of English prose and especially of political writing. Orwell asserts that this is necessary when politicians do not want their audience to get a clear picture of what it is they are talking about. Native oratory, on the contrary, is extremely vivid, full of concrete, sensual descriptions taken from the natural world. When a Native orator spoke, the life of the Native could be seen in all of its intimate connections with the world of nature. The Native way of life, the problems which the Natives were having with white settlers, all found their way into vivid images which brought the situation painfully to life. Lister's article makes the case that the Native orators utilized structures that were similar to the speeches of the greatest classical authors. One must, of course, allow for the classical training of the translators, but the fact that speeches across North America translated by a variety of persons reveal these structures, suggests invention rather than influence. Lister's article enables us to read these speeches with a new appreciation for their structural strengths as well as for the beauty and appropriateness of their language.

Jon Stott's article on the shaman in children's literature presents evidence from several sources that western values temper the portrayal of the shaman to make him acceptable to young readers of a different culture. In a review which I wrote for this journal some years ago, I had the opportunity to comment upon the deplorable practice of transforming Native myths into children's books. At that time, I was concerned with the alteration and devaluation of the Inuit stories of Sedna when these stories were turned into a lavishly-illustrated children's book (See *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 1(2):366-369, 1981). I asked, then, whether "Native myths can, or should, be transformed into children's books?" I concluded that "while it is valuable for Native children to have access to the myths and legends of their cultural heritage, it must not come at the expense of the integrity of the original" (368). Non-Native authors, however, mistaking directness and simplicity for naivety or inadequacy in narrative technique continue to rewrite Native culture to satisfy the demands of a non-Native audience. As Stott points out, the shaman, too, has been subjected to this kind of revision. Moreover, he notes, children's stories which attempt to deal with the shaman violate "the spirit, purpose, and content" of the original. Western readers, in particular, do not understand the accessibility of the spirit world to the shaman, and his spiritual visions are transformed into secularized fantasies. Here again we must hearken back to Paula Gunn Allen's insistence that Native values have created a literature with its own structures and emphasis which must be respected. This all suggests that even when we are dealing with Native authors, we must be aware of the tendency to project our own values and to re-interpret their words in our own terms. Stott's article reminds us that we must learn to afford enough respect for Native beliefs in order that we will aim to represent those beliefs accurately regardless of the expectations of our audience.

Robin Ridington's "The Old Wagon Road" is an excellent example of the kind of sympathetic understanding that must take place when approaching and interpreting Native culture. On the surface, the people and situations Ridington

describes would appear unremarkable, yet he sees beyond the surface and penetrates to the heart of a culture that is disappearing. Although a non-Native by birth, by strength of imagination Ridington has become a purveyor of the spiritual essence of the Beaver people. Native author, N. Scott Momaday has written of the importance of the creative imagination in the preservation of Native culture. In his work, *The Way To Rainy Mountain*, Momaday does not mourn the loss of his Kiowa heritage, but instead brings it to life through language and the imagination. Each person who reads that work becomes a Kiowa by taking possession through the imagination of the mythical, legendary, personal, historical and cultural worlds his words create. Similarly, Ridington's words take us to the spiritual visions at the heart of the Beaver people. As he recounts his interaction with Tommy Attachie, he presents an anthropologist's perspective on a phenomenon well known to Native authors - that is, the relevance and importance of the old stories and songs to contemporary life. The dreamer's songs, in Attachie's case, provide a focus and guide in the confusion of contemporary life. As well, he describes the creation of a unique vantage point, or literary point of view, from which to approach Native literature, namely, the "moment of Indian time" which "is continually being created." This moment of Indian time sees past and present simultaneously and sees, at once, the physical present and the spiritual eternal. Ridington's work is a must for those developing aesthetic processes and principles for Native Literature.

Georgina Loucks' essay, "The Girl and the Bear Facts: a Cross-Cultural Comparison" is an edited version of a paper written when Loucks was an undergraduate student in my class in Oral Narratives. The assignment given was to compare several versions of an existing oral narrative and attempt to evaluate and interpret the reasons for the differences based on the culture in which each variant of the story has arisen. There are a great many oral narratives that can be traced across various Native cultures. For a Jungian this is proof of the existence of a "collective unconscious," a recurring configuration of the human psyche that irrupts in various places. Whether one believes in the "collective unconscious," or prefers to believe that multiple versions of a single tale exist due to oral transmission over generations, the fact remains that such recurrences of a single tale enable the researcher to understand the culture traits and values of the society that transmits such a tale. Loucks discusses these "vestiges of a circumpolar paleolithic cult of the bear" in terms of the variants that are evident in comparing the tale as it appears in various Native societies. Her essay provides the student of oral narratives with a perspective on the centrality of Native Literature to an accurate assessment of cultural values and social structures.

I have also included here some suggestions for developing a curriculum in Native Literature and Oral Narratives. As Brandon University is one of the few universities in Canada to offer courses in Native Literature and Oral Narratives, I have received requests on a fairly regular basis from scholars attempting to put together a course for their institution. Each new instructor is faced with the same difficulties in obtaining material, particularly material relevant to Canadian

Natives. It is to make this material available in a published form that I am including my essay on "Developing a Curriculum for Native Literature" in this special issue of *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*.

Finally, the poems were written by children enrolled in the Garden Hill Band school at Island Lake, Manitoba. They were first published in *Island Lake Anthology '82*, collected by Ted Wilson and edited by John Blaikie.

Now it is my pleasure to direct your attention to this collection of articles. It is my wish that these readings will increase your understanding of Native Literature and develop your appreciation for the great variety of its form and techniques.

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## SNAKE

You may have seen him - did you not  
The colour of the moon glowing in the dark  
A world of wonderful colours, yet it isn't safe,  
There on the branch of a tree was a snake,  
glowing the eyes of evil unto me,  
Some red light flashed into my eyes,  
It stopped, the snake was gone.  
It was night when I started thinking  
    about the snake,  
I was dreaming about it.  
Next day we went back to the city.  
I went to visit the zoo.  
Surely enough I saw this same snake.  
I was thinking about the  
flashing red light.  
I heard a strange voice saying "death" it was  
my imagination.  
I thought the snake had said it.  
I never went to the zoo.  
I forgot about everything.

Felix Beardy