Le Simplegadi ISSN 1824-5226

Vol. XV-No. 17 November 2017 DOI: 10.17456/SIMPLE-85

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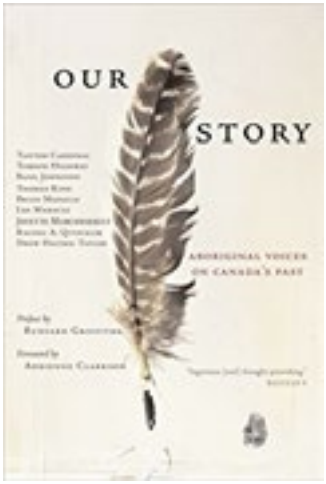
The Re-empowerment of Native Canadians through Literature: A Comparison between Lee Maracle's *Goodbye, Snauq* and Tomson Highway's *Hearts and Flowers*

Tantoo Cardinal, Tomson Highway, Basil Johnston et al. *2005. Our Story: Aboriginal Voices on Canada's Past. Toronto: Anchor Canada, pp. 250, CA$ 21.00, ISBN 978-0-385-66076-1*



http://penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/93029/our-story#9780385660761

Native Canadian oral stories explore the environmental peculiarities of a specific homeland to provide the inhabitants of a given place with a wide knowledge of the space they belong to in order to forge a spiritual relation to the land, i.e. a sense of place. The transmission of stories establishes continuity between the past and future generations, fostering both the embrace of a holistic vision of life and the acknowledgement of each individual's personal responsibility to the earth. Stories, furthermore, are part of a performance where the listeners are co-creators of the meaning of the words they hear and these words are not regarded as terms of a scientific discourse where each lemma corresponds to a single object. On the contrary, they are keepers of a creative power that transcends the boundaries between the ideal and the phenomenal, the physical and the metaphysical, the logical and the mythical, thereby including each human being in a net of relations and connections with the rest of the world (Panikkar 2007).

By virtue of it, colonization can be read as a twofold process: while the dispossession

of lands provokes a physical removal, the assimilation of oral traditions in mainstream literature and painting brings about a spiritual diaspora and an environmental injustice since, through stories, Aboriginal peoples honour the earth as sacred and manifest a deep sense of care for every creature.

To re-appropriate their own patrimony and to recoup the world as a source of a creative power, Aboriginal peoples frame a body of literature that is not *about* them but written *by* them. This literature is conceived as a means of transformation for Natives from being objects of Western ethno-anthropological studies to becoming the subjects of a pursuit of self-definition. Writing encourages the reconciliation of Indigenous peoples with their traditions and lands, thereby promoting the reinvention of an eco-sustainable space but, as a medium of the colonizers' culture, it also arises obstacles. Overcoming the conflict between *orature* and *literature*, in fact, presumes finding in the process of writing analogies and affinities to the Native *modus sentiendi*, which appears realistic since writing is characterized "by an impulse toward wholeness that is the primary motivating principle of the imagination" (Allen 1987: 564).

Sto:loh novelist Lee Maracle and the Cree playwright Tomson Highway are committed in the construction of an eco-sustainable Aboriginal narrative. Their short stories *Goodbye, Snauq* and *Hearts and Flowers*, contributions to the anthology *Our Story: Aboriginal Voices on Canada's Past* (Random House of Canada, 2004), serve as prime examples. In *Goodbye, Snauq*, Maracle recounts the colonization of the Canadian West Coast and investigates the transformation of Snauq, her birthplace, which once was the supermarket of the nation for its abundance of food while now has become an urbanized area, for the Squamish Band Council sold the land to the Canadian government for 92 million dollars. *Hearts and Flowers* is about the eight-year-old Cree Daniel Daylight, who on 31st March 1960, when Canadian Aboriginal peoples got the right to vote, was awarded the first prize at the Kiwanis Music Festival in Manitoba: on that occasion he performed "Sonatina" by Clementi and the duet for four hands "Hearts and Flowers", a piece of music defined by the author as universally transformational.

Both Maracle and Highway alter the European literary canons to suit their own Aboriginal sensibility and, despite adopting different narrative techniques, transfer features of the oral storytelling to the written form to inject a creative force in the English language. *Goodbye, Snauq* is a fine example of literary experimentalism, whereas *Hearts and Flowers* is more canonically structured. Maracle's short story follows the rhythm and progression of the I narrator's stream of consciousness, which, transcending spatial and temporal borders, allows the readers to fall into the story and turns them into active participants in the remembrance of Snauq before its drilling. Readers are so accompanied by the storyteller through the same sensorial experiences of the Salish population by means of rhetorical devices that construct a patchwork of vivid imagistic descriptions. They are deliberately asked to taste the roasted elk, to look at the white camas, to feel the smell of cedar in a longhouse, and thereby, far from being passive observers, they play a crucial role in the imaginary reinvention of the land. The colonization of Snauq is at last a *fait accompli*, but collective remembrance guarantees its survival and, by encouraging the development of an environmental consciousness, may prevent other dispossessions of lands. According to Maracle,

in fact, writing means shaping a dialogic discourse with the environmentalists, including perspectives, and thus taking action, reacting, blocking projects in the north of the country as already done by Matthew Coon Come and other activists. This explains both why the readers, and not the author, stand at the centre of the process of writing and the reason for the lack of a canonical conclusion: it is the readers or the listeners, as co-creators of meaning, who have to draw their own conclusions, since in the Aboriginal sensibility interpretations are not either right or wrong, they are all possible and, as such, valuable.

The sensorial fluidity of Maracle's storytelling is counterpoised by the structural rigour of Highway's. As a musician, with a Bachelor in Music, the Cree author combines classical music forms with Aboriginal themes, motifs and sensibilities in the conviction that music and the musicality of words are the keepers of a universally transformational power. *Hearts and Flowers* is structured as a sonata in four parts, graphically separated in paragraphs. The progression of the events is chronological and embedded in the sonata's subsequent movements: from exposition, to development, to recapitulation and finally to a coda, which, being partially identical to the beginning of the text, frame the story as a cyclical narration that does not leave its meaning to the open interpretations of the readers. The readers, in fact, can't help but acknowledge the transformation of reality accomplished by the music, whose waves have reached "the flesh and bone and blood" (198) of the people inside and outside the Auditorium, right across the reserves, the shores in the north, and the Minstik Lake Residential School. In the end, it makes everyone cry, the white and the Indians, thereby erasing the walls of suspicion. Suspicion, in *Hearts and Flowers*, is a white sentiment impersonated by the teacher Mr Tipper, with whom Daniel Daylight converses during his trips to the city of Prince William. Mr Tipper is convinced of the inhumanity of Aboriginal peoples and the dialogic dialogue the boy sets up with him is specular to the dialogue of Maracle with her Western readers. The authors believe that language, both in the spoken and in the written form, is not a pure means of communication but a new medium of creative power, a source of nourishment for every human being that, in turn, can modify the way their hearts and minds approach the Other and the Earth. This inherent transformative quality of words and music has changed Mr Tipper and, so far, also Maracle's readers, who, by falling into her environmentalist narrative, are expected to truly and authentically transform themselves, to build up cross-cultural negotiations and mutual understanding.

As Thomas King sustains in his "Introduction" to the anthology *All My Relations*, the main difference between Native literature and literature about Natives regards the function ascribed to the signified. In traditional oral performances words are heard and alive, creative forces of connections to Mother Earth, and so the recourse to phonetic symbolism in writing by Aboriginal authors aims at reinvigorating the silence of the written word. In *Goodbye, Snauq*, for instance, the description of the land before colonization is smooth and sibilant, whereas palatal and dental consonants are predominant when recounting the arrival of the Europeans with their "toxic chemicals waste" (207), "thousands of metric tons of sewage" (*Ibidem*) and "dredging ad draining of the water" (*Ibidem*). All the same, in Daniel Daylight's speeches, liquid and nasal consonants prevail; hence, music is "water-like, limpid, and calm as silence" (197), while, for Mr Tipper, Indian peoples are not human "at least

not according to the government. They cannot vote" (186). The rendering of *orature* in literature by means of alliteration, consonance, assonance and sibilance both by Maracle and by Highway reveals the authors' attempt to guide the readers to the acquisition of a new emphatic environmental consciousness that never turns into an imposition of truth. We are never told what is right or what is wrong, but just invited to follow the text and the subtext to autonomously shape our own thinking.

To date, it is widely assumed that literature has become a source of empowerment for Native peoples, who, gaining ground in the public as well as in the academic discourse, are fostering transcultural understanding between Aboriginal and not-Aboriginal, especially as far as the urge to take care of the Earth is concerned. Like Maracle and Highway, each author is following their own literary path, but the *fil rouge* between the old and the new generations of writers, females and males, is the reconstruction of a deep sense of belonging to the Earth that regards everyone, the colonizers and the colonized, in light of the assumption that, as Tomson Highway maintains, 'we don't own space, space owns us'.

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Giuseppe Barca graduated in Translation Studies from the University of Udine in 2016 and currently works at Wall Street English Udine. His publications include: *Intervista a Giuseppe Pastorelli, Console Generale d'Italia a Toronto*, *Rapporti italo-russi: la prospettiva del mondo studentesco* and *Gli ingranaggi dell'intolleranza*, winner of the Rotary Club Pordenone Award. He was a member of the Italian youth delegation at COP21 (Paris 2015) and at the Second International Youth Forum (St. Petersburg 2012). In 2014 he conducted research on Native Canadian literature in Toronto.

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