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A history of the portrayal of Indigenous Peoples in literature

The foundation of settler society’s perception of Indigenous Peoples

Early writings about Indigenous Peoples were authored by explorers such as Samuel de Champlain and Jacques Cartier in the 1500s and 1600s, missionaries such as John McDougall in the 1800s, anthropologists such as Diamond Jenness and Franz Boas around the turn of the century, and literary writers such as James Fenimore Cooper and Stephen Leacock in the early-to-mid 1900s. Most of these writers referred to Indigenous Peoples as an inferior, vanishing race—a description that is degrading and offensive to most Indigenous Peoples for obvious reasons, and inaccurate in ways that still escape some Canadian publishers and editors today.

In *The Indians of Canada* (1932), which was for decades considered *the* authoritative anthropological text, Diamond Jenness writes in the first paragraph: “When Samuel Champlain in 1603 sailed up the St. Lawrence river and agreed to support the Algonkian Indians at Tadoussac against the aggression of the Iroquois, he could not foresee

that the petty strife between those two apparently insignificant hordes of ‘savages’ would one day decide the fate of New France.”⁵

Most of the literature written by explorers, missionaries, and anthropologists provided little insight into the cultural realities of Indigenous Peoples. Yet, this literature influenced the intellectual foundations of settler society, in its perception of Indigenous Peoples as primitive and underdeveloped. Indigenous intellectuals, such as the late John Mohawk, have further argued that Darwinian concepts—construed, consciously or subconsciously, to locate Indigenous Peoples somewhere on the evolutionary scale between primates and *Homo sapiens*—also shaped settler society perception.

It was a perception conveyed in the work of high-profile Canadian literary writers, such as Farley Mowat and Stephen Leacock, whose mainstream popularity served to reinforce it.

Imposter literature

Imposters such as Grey Owl and Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance had considerable notoriety lecturing, writing, and publishing while masquerading as Indigenous people (although Long Lance did have some Indigenous ancestry). Generally, these writers displayed a less condescending and more positive attitude toward Indigenous Peoples, although their work tended to reinforce the stereotypical image of Indigenous Peoples as glorified remnants of the past, à la notions of the noble savage. As noted by Robert Berkhofer in *The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present*, “Although each succeeding generation presumed its imagery based more upon the Native American of observation and report, the Indian of imagination and ideology continued to be derived as much from the polemical and creative needs of Whites as from what they heard and read of actual Native Americans or even at times experienced.”⁶

The legacy of the charlatan tradition set by Grey Owl and Long Lance was evident in the work of writers such as Jamake Highwater

and Lynn Andrews in the 1980s. It may have also played a role in the 2017 controversy about Canadian author Joseph Boyden, which led to a highly public discourse on issues of Indigenous identity and authenticity.

Non-Indigenous academic writing

From the 1980s to the present, a wave of writing by non-Indigenous academics has taken place. Many of these authors are involved with higher-level academic and government institutions, and have established themselves as authoritative Indigenous experts. The majority of these writers are knowledgeable and supportive of Indigenous Peoples' political and cultural aspirations, and they must also be credited with increased public awareness of these aspirations in recent years. Writers such as Michael Asch, Thomas Berger, Menno Boldt, Ken Coates, Jaskiran Dhillon, Allison Hargreaves, J. R. Miller, Bradford Morse, Rick Ponting, John Ralston Saul, Sally Weaver, and others, are part of this tradition, which has evolved into an important category that could be referred to as "allied academic literature."

However, while much of this body of work has observational and analytical value, it has ultimately not expressed Indigeneity and Indigenous epistemologies, nor has it expressed Indigenous Peoples' internal unique perspectives on contemporary Indigenous political and cultural issues. Although this body of work is predominately well intentioned, some Indigenous writers, such as Lee Maracle, Leroy Little Bear, and the late Howard Adams, have stated that it can tend to reduce emotionally, historically, and culturally charged issues to dry information laden with legalized or academic jargon. As stated by Adams, "Academia is slow to reexamine what has been accepted for centuries. . . . These myths have been so deeply ingrained in the peoples' psyche that even Aboriginals will have to go to great lengths to rid themselves of colonial ideologies."⁷ It should be noted, however, that the Indigenous allied academic movement has progressed and evolved to the point that this could change and, perhaps, is beginning to change.

A view commonly held by many Indigenous Peoples—as well as many mainstream historians and academics—is that contemporary literature conveys an improved portrayal of Indigenous Peoples, but that some of it also persists in conveying subtle inappropriate stereotypes and faulty academic paradigms.

The Indigenous Voice

The creation and expression of culture by Indigenous Peoples—through any traditional medium, or any contemporary medium, or any combination of these—constitutes what can be referred to as the “Indigenous Voice.”

The contemporary Indigenous Voice is a unique mode of cultural expression that draws from a blend of traditional and contemporary sources such as Oral Traditions; techniques of Traditional Storytelling; film; inanimate, animal, and spirit characters from Traditional Stories; Indigenous historical perspectives; and contemporary Indigenous existence.

Beginning in the 1980s, Indigenous authors have developed and expressed the Indigenous Voice in works that now form distinct, culturally based, contemporary literary forms. These works are the most culturally authentic literary expression of Indigenous realities. Canadian literary organizations and publishers are beginning to realize the significance of these literary forms, after years of marginalizing Indigenous authors through lack of understanding and access. To date, works by Indigenous authors are overshadowed by a greater number of books about Indigenous Peoples written by non-Indigenous authors, who continue to develop a separate body of literature about Indigenous Peoples.

The Indigenous Voice, Traditional Knowledge, and Oral Traditions

The Indigenous Voice is in dialogue with Oral Traditions and Traditional Knowledge—a process alive with connection and transformation. The Indigenous Voice speaks from the continuum of Traditional Stories that have been told on Indigenous Territories for

millennia as part of Oral Traditions. These stories are spiritually connected to the land, ancestors, and the particular Indigenous Nation they come from.

A few definitions might be helpful here. Oral Traditions comprise the stories that have been told for generations, many of which are Sacred Stories. Traditional Knowledge is a wider category: it includes, for example, Indigenous architecture; forest management with fire; medicines and herbology; and knowledge about climate patterns and animal migrations. Traditional Knowledge also includes Oral Traditions. For the most part, Traditional Knowledge is not sacred—but some of it is. The United Nations World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) refers to Traditional Knowledge that is sacred as “secret and sacred.” Traditional Knowledge contains Sacred Stories within Oral Traditions and sacred aspects of, for example, medicines and herbology. Mostly, though, Traditional Knowledge is information.⁸

Extreme caution should be practised in editing and publishing Traditional Knowledge, especially in editing and publishing Indigenous Oral Traditions. Indigenous collaboration and consultation are essential. Publishers should be prepared to find out that, in some cases, publishing Traditional Knowledge is not appropriate. In addition, they should seek the skills of Indigenous editors, and they should assign authorship and copyright properly. Authorship and copyright rest with the Indigenous People who are the source of the Traditional Knowledge.

The many vast pools of information held by individual Indigenous Nations have been transmitted orally over centuries, and comprise unique bodies of knowledge with distinct cultural content. This oral transmission has often worked in conjunction with physical methods of documentation, such as dramatic productions, dance performances, petroglyphs, scrolls, Totem Poles, Wampum Belts, and masks.

Traditional Knowledge and Oral Traditions fit the definition of publishing—which is, as my professor of publishing at Simon Fraser University, Ralph Hancox, stated it, “the transference of intellectual property from one mind to another mind, or from one mind to

many other minds.” If you render them in the language of European concepts, as much as it is possible, it could be said that Traditional Knowledge and Oral Traditions are traditional Indigenous publishing, and the contemporary Indigenous Voice is Indigenous Literature.

It *could* be said this way, but it’s important to note how awkward it is in the context of Indigenous Peoples, who are diverse and distinct.

Contemporary Indigenous Literatures

Indigenous *Peoples* have Indigenous *Literatures*. The singular form (“Indigenous Literature”) is pan-Indigenous—an umbrella term like *European literature* (which contains, for example, French literature, Irish literature, and German literature). The singular form has a place in this discussion, as a way to acknowledge Indigenous works as distinct within world (or Canadian) literature. But the singular form needs careful, informed use. It risks reinforcing an error common to colonial thinking: that what is Indigenous is all the same. In fact, Indigenous cultures in North America are far more distinct and diverse than European cultures, or Canadian and American cultures.

The Indigenous Voice contains highly meaningful and symbolic “worlds” populated with fantastic, inanimate, animal, human, and spirit characters who act out some of the most fascinating tales in world literature today. The body of natural scientific knowledge encompassed in the Indigenous Voice also contains valuable paradigms, teachings, and information that can benefit all of the world’s family of nations. As sectors of the scientific and academic establishment have come to realize, Traditional Knowledge is integral to human survival.

Over the past five decades, Indigenous authors have expressed and developed the Indigenous Voice, establishing contemporary Indigenous Literatures as a new literary form.

Anishinaabe* author Kim Blaeser has pointed out several characteristics of contemporary Indigenous Literatures:

* This follows a spelling used by Kim Blaeser. Another spelling for this Indigenous People that appears in this book is Anishinaabeg.

- They give authority to the voices of all people involved in the story, instead of a monologic voice speaking out as if it had ultimate authority.
- They give authority to the voices of animals and messages given by spirits and natural phenomena.
- They stretch across large expanses of time, ranging from ancient times to the present to the future, displaying the Indigenous concept that all time is closely connected and that actions can transcend time.⁹

Jeannette Armstrong connected to Indigenous thought in her well-known first novel *Slash* (which, in 1985, was also the first novel from an Indigenous woman published in Canada). She wrote *Slash* from a first-person male perspective. Some thought this ironic, others controversial. Armstrong explained that her choice was based, in part, on Indigenous cultural beliefs that each gender is capable of assuming the characteristics of the other.¹⁰

Indigenous philosophy and traditions are evident in Lee Maracle's novel *Sundogs* (1992), whose style Maracle has called "Contemporary Aboriginal Voice." It is written cover to cover with no chapter breaks, and often jumps out of its own storyline to go out on a tangent, the relevance of which does not necessarily become immediately apparent. This is similar to the oratory style of an Elder speaking in a storytelling or ceremonial setting.

Tomson Highway engages Indigenous ideas about the interplay of the metaphysical and the real in his plays *The Rez Sisters* (1988); *The Sage, the Dancer and the Fool* (1989); and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989); and in his first novel, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998). Highway's work—with its world-rocking transitions between reality and beyond-reality, and characters that transcend these realms—imparts an ancient way of thinking and makes an important contribution to world drama and literature.

These are some of the first examples of well-known authors writing in the Indigenous Voice, and ignoring and departing from

conventional European writing styles and genres. The 1980s was the second decade of Indigenous writing in Canada. Since then, these and other Indigenous authors and artists have further developed Indigenous Literatures as distinct forms.

In Canadian publishing, however, Indigenous Literatures have faced several impeding factors, for example: cultural and language barriers; the residential school system; ethnocentrism in academia; competition from non-Indigenous authors; and a lack of Indigenous-controlled editing and publishing.

Canadian publishing has also had a tendency to pigeonhole the Indigenous Voice—this important, distinct cannon of literatures—as a subsection of CanLit. It is not. It comes from different traditions that developed and evolved in Indigenous Nations long before CanLit existed.

PRINCIPLE 3: INDIGENOUS LITERATURES AND CANLIT

Indigenous Literatures are their own cannon and not a subgroup of CanLit. Contemporary Indigenous authors' works are an extension of Traditional Knowledge systems, Indigenous histories, histories of colonization, and contemporary realities. Indigenous Literatures frame these experiences for Indigenous readers and provide non-Indigenous readers with context for these realities.

Contemporary Indigenous Literatures connect to and extend Traditional Stories and Oral Traditions that have existed for centuries and millennia, and that long predate CanLit.

The Indigenous Voice and the individual Indigenous author

Indigenous Literatures are among the artistic disciplines where Indigenous artists are combining Traditional Knowledge (and traditional art forms) with contemporary materials, stories, and art forms.

As with other artistic disciplines, the knowledge and traditions Indigenous authors use come from their own experiences and

identities—they achieve that irreplaceable “perspective from the inside” because they work from within their cultures.

Their work speaks with the most authority when their writing focuses on the Indigenous Nation they are from, and adheres to their Indigenous Protocols.

This is not to say that Indigenous authors should not write about contemporary pan-Indigenous experiences, but rather that Indigenous authors (like all authors who write about any Indigenous Nation from outside its knowledge, traditions, and realities) should consult and exercise caution when writing about Indigenous Nations other than their own.

In creating with the Indigenous Voice, Indigenous authors are using a unique form of artistic license, which is Nation-based—that is, Indigenous Nation-based. It could be termed “Indigenous National Artistic License.” This gives Indigenous authors permission to innovate Traditional Knowledge, and it characterizes part of the relationship between the Indigenous artist and the Indigenous Nation to which they belong. The concept of Indigenous National Artistic License connects to the continuity, adaptability, and evolutionary nature of Indigenous ways of being in the world.

Non-Indigenous authors do not have the same artistic license. They need to enter into a relationship with the Indigenous Nation that is the source of the Traditional Knowledge and Oral Tradition they seek to use. The permission for use must come from the Nation, and must be negotiated to achieve mutually agreed terms.