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WOMEN'S WORDS

Power, Identity and Indigenous Sovereignty

IN THE WAY OF MY PEOPLE, the Haudenosaunee, I tell stories. My people, as are other Indigenous nations, are people with a storytelling tradition. Our histories, our laws, the ways Creator gave us, are all contained within our stories and our languages. And, for us, the storytelling tradition is a complex idea. There are the sacred stories. Stories that are only told after certain protocols (such as the passing of gifts or traditional medicines) are followed. We do not tell these stories when there is work to be done. Winter is the time for telling stories. Our stories tell our family, tribal, and national histories. LeAnne Howe (Choctaw) writes: "Native stories are power. They create people. They author tribes. America is a tribal creation story, a tribalography" (29). Through our stories we learn who we are. These stories teach about identity and responsibility. These are stories about how to live life, how to be a good "Indian." And sometimes we just tell stories for fun, to laugh, because laughter is healing. Coming from this storytelling tradition, it is odd to know that our stories are sometimes excluded from the material scholars call "literature."

For me the issue is much simplier, I write so I am a writer. I have published books and articles in legal journals, Native Studies reviews, and more recently I have published as a sociologist. I have chapters in books about literary criticism, criminology, and in feminist and Native Studies readers. I have spoken in forums organized by political scientists, sociologists, criminologists, and historians as well as scholars who study law, religion, and English literature. This may be seen as interdisciplinary work but I prefer to see it as trans-disciplinary. My work crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries because the discipline I follow is the laws and ways of my people, the Haudenosaunee. My writing is not anchored in my profession. I don't write like an academic. Not because I can't, but because I don't. Because that does not fill the silence that has existed between "Indian"[1] nations, our citizens, the women, and power. When I struggle and I cannot for the life of me write a sentence or have a complete thought, I write jagged lines and call it a poem. On these days, I am writing to survive. Some days, I resist with my words. I speak to power to take back our power, the power of Indigenous women. Other days I write dreams and hopes and prayers. They are the words of life and of living. My words are my strength. They are my women's power. That question, what is Native literature,[2] is simple. For me, so is the answer. I am a writer. I tell stories.

In the last three decades, the words of Indigenous women who live on the land that has become the country known as Canada, have found their way to bookstore shelves in quite a dramatic way. Maria Campbell's 1973 work, *Halfbreed*, is often seen as the work that marks the start of this trend. Since then there have been novels and books of both short stories and poems by Lee Maracle (Coast Salish); Lenore Keeshig-Tobias (Anishnabe); Eden Robinson (Haisla); Louise Halfe (Cree); Jeanette Armstrong (Okanogan); Rita Bouvier (Métis); Beth Brant (Mohawk); and Ruby Slipperjack (Anishnabe). There are also numerous works by academic authors and Indigenous scholars such as Darlene Johnston (Anishnabe); Patti Doyle-Bedwell (Mi'kmaq); Kim Anderson (Cree/Métis); Marie Battiste (Mi'kmaq); Andrea Bear Nicholas (Maliseet); Bev Jacobs (Mohawk); Emma LaRocque (Métis); Dawn Martin-Hill (Mohawk); Kiera Ladner (Cree); Bonita Lawrence (Mi'kmaq/Métis); Lina Sunseri (Oneida); and so many others. Thinking this list and speaking it out loud to myself, calling up the names even in English, empowers me and it is equally an act of power. It is my circle of women with the gift of words. Those of us gifted with words in Indigenous traditions know stories are not really a new phenomenon among "Indian" people (Grant x). Further, the ability to write stories down is one that should neither be accredited to this century, or the last.

E. Pauline Johnson (Tekahionwake, 1861-1913) (Mohawk) had her work published, first in Ontario newspapers, in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Gerson and Strong-Boag xiii). In her short story, "A Red Girl Reasoning," written in 1906, Johnson wrote of an Indian woman's thoughts on her marriage to a white man:

> ...I tell you we are not married. Why should I recognize the rites of your nation when you do not acknowledge the rites of mine? According to your own words, my parents should have gone through your church ceremony as well as through an Indian contract; according to my words, we should go through an Indian contract as well as through a church marriage. If their union is illegal, so is ours. If you think my father is living in dishonour with my mother, my people will think I am living in dishonour with you. How do I know when another nation will come and conquer you as you white men conquered us? And they will have another marriage rite to perform, and they will tell us another truth, that you are not my husband, that you are but disgracing and dishonouring me, that you are keeping me here, not as your wife, but as your—your—squaw." That terrible word had never passed her lips before, and the blood stained her face to her very temples. (cited in Gunn Allen 33)

Johnson's written words are now more than one hundred years old. Woven through her words are not just anger but racialized analysis. Indigenous women have been naming and standing against the irony of colonialism and its impact on our lives as women for a very long time. I find great strength in the words of the women who walked before me. I find encouragement because unlike what is written in the historical record, I know my people understood white ways and were always able to offer a critique of it.

Some might choose to see Johnson's work as feminist but as Paula Gunn Allen concludes, her work is best seen as part of the "Native narrative tradition" (9). Carole Gerson and Veronica Strong-Boag wrote that while Johnson was never known as a public supporter of women's suffrage "as far as we know" (xvii), they nonetheless characterize her in the following way: "Pauline Johnson can now be seen as one of Canada's turn-of the-century bright New Women, part of the generation of her sex who pursued independent lives as they contested the boundaries of respectable femininity" (xvii).

This is misleading in several ways. Haudenosaunee women have always led independent lives, at least prior to the coming of Europeans who brought laws and ways that subordinated women. It is ironic that Johnson is taken by "white" women as an icon of their own. Johnson situated herself with her people, and, thus, in many of her poems used Haudenosaunee imagery. White wampum, moccasin-making, the Grand River, Joseph Brant, corn planting, and lacrosse are only a few of the varied Haudenosaunee images borrowed from her people and found in her work. She described one of her goals as: "to upset the Indian Extermination and noneducation theory—in fact to stand by my blood and my race" (cited in Gerson and Strong-Boag xvi). Clearly Johnson saw herself as Mohawk when she wrote below the title "The Iroquois Women of Canada," "By one of them" (Gerson and Strong-Boag 203).

Today, there are voices of many Indigenous women now recorded in print and lining the shelves in Canadian bookstores. It is important for the academy to see this development as a small and recent piece of a much longer history. And within this recognition, it is essential to see voice as a complicated phenomenon. There is no unified subject that can be identified as "Indian" (Ladson-Billings 261). Indigenous voice(s) is a complex matter of gender and multiple consciousness(es) (such as being an "Indian" academic). Each of the distinct First Nations, such as the Mohawk, Cree, Dene, Métis, Saulteaux, Mi'kmaq, Gitksan and so on, have their own languages and traditions. These distinct peoples each have their own knowledge systems. There are similarities but care must be taken not to make unitary that which is rich and diverse. Today, First Nations in "Canada" share many problems and experiences largely as a result of the common treatment that comprised the federal policy of "civilizing" us (Ladson-Billings 261). The sharing of the common experiences of colonialism cause connections among First Peoples, but it is the shared experiences that make us appear monolithic.

Voice is also complicated by the international boundaries we know today. The line, which makes the country of my birth Canada and not the United States, is a line that bisects the territory of my people the Haudenosaunee. It bisects other nations such as the Cree, Blackfoot, Maliscet, Mi'kmaq, and Anishnabe. To speak just to the "Canadian" experience draws an artificial boundary as pointed out by Rene Hulan in her work appropriately titled, *Native North America*.[3] In the introduction she notes that the borders of nation-states have not eradicated the circles of Indigenous people and we write not only as resisters and survivors but as people who continue to attest "to the strength and confidence of" the Native American literary traditions (9).

To understand Native literature one must understand something of the person's tribal tradition as this grounds who they are, as well as the symbols and styles they will use. To understand my sharing, you must know that I am Mohawk from Grand River, a direct descendant of Joseph Brant. I am a Monture but am related to the Smith's, Hill's, and Brant's. My Indian name is Aye-wah-han-day.[4] It means "speaking first." My name grounds me in the gift of words Creator gave me. It is both identity and direction. It is strength and responsibility. It is this location, as Mohawk citizen and woman, which guides the way I see the patterns that in turn ground my understanding of who I am and what I know.

As scholars, we want to make patterns and personal understandings into larger structures such as theories or knowledges. Literature has such a structure and often that structure is not welcoming to the written words shared by Indigenous authors and storytellers. If, for example, you choose not to write but only speak your stories, remaining "pure" in your commitment to the oral tradition, you will not ever be counted as a literary great. Craig Womack considers this an illiteracy campaign similar in nature to the burning of the Mayan codices in the 1540s (13). In educational institutions, in Canada and elsewhere, this exclusion of oratory as a tradition of value, has a particular consequence compounded by the way in which scholars of literature cling to their own cultural traditions. Those traditions that exclude oral literature are equally grounded in culture, despite the fact that the academy fails to acknowledge this fact. Agnes Grant explains:

> A fundamental reason that traditional Native literature is not included in many programs is that looking at Native literature, and literature of all minority cultures, requires a change in perspective by the reader. The absence of the familiar European form, style and content, too often leads to the criticism that such literature is inferior. The possibility of different but equal merit is seldom, if at all, entertained (vii).[5]

It is the required shift in perspective that poses the problem for some readers. Writing, then, for many Indigenous authors is often the act of naming both power and exclusion, as one rarely exists without the other. Often, this act of naming is seen as an act of resistance when most often it is an act of (re)claiming.

The discussion of Native literature as literature is also confounded by certain other assumptions that are tangled into the web surrounding the authenticity debate. Assimilationist ideas and ideals are part of this tangle. Creek scholar Craig Womack, a self-identified two-spirited person, discloses another assumption:

> ...it is just as likely that things European are Indianized rather than the anthropological assumption that things Indian are always swallowed up by European culture. I reject, in other words, the supremacist notion that assimilation can only go in one direction, that white culture always overpowers Indian culture, that white is inherently more powerful than red, that Indian resistance has never occurred in such a fashion that things European have been radically subverted by Indians. (12)

Extending this realization to a structural premise, imaginative literature such as fiction and poetry is, as Lakota scholar Kelly Morgan argues "a more accurate gauge of cultural realities than the ethnographic, anthropological, and historical record" (cited in Womack 15).

Resistance and authenticity are common themes in the body of work known as literary criticism discussing the written words of First Nations. Questions of authenticity ("Are you a real Indian?") are questions that are most frequently raised externally, by those at a distance from our communities. As Marilyn Dumont (Métis) argues, the authenticity debate simplifies and is disrespectful to the great diversity of Aboriginal experiences. She writes:

> ...there is a continuum of exposure to traditional experience in Native culture, some of us have been more exposed to it than others, but this does not mean that those who have been more exposed to it are somehow more Indian, as if we are searching for the last surviving Indian (47).

The debate about authenticity requires a gaze that looks at individuals. We, as Indigenous people, do not see ourselves as separate from our people or our land. This gaze, which has authenticity as its central focus is contrary to Indigenous epistemologies where identity is not an isolated phenomenon.

First Nations identity is a function of community and belonging to that community. It is a fundamental component of both Indigenous knowledge(s) and the voices that breathe life into those knowledge(s). In discussing racialized discourses, Gloria Ladson-Billings writes:

> When René Descartes[6] proclaimed that he thought himself into being, he articulated a central premise upon which European (and Euro-American) worldviews and epistemology rest—that the individual mind is the source of knowledge and existence. In contrast, the African saying "Ubuntu," translated "I am because we are," asserts that the individual's existence (and knowledge) is contingent upon relationships with others. (257)

This contrast in the location of knowledge of Europeans and African Peoples is one that will resonate with First Peoples as well. I am because I know my name, my family, my clan, and my nation.

Non-Indigenous scholars studying the writing of First People are often confused by and then impose their understanding of identity upon us. Pauline Johnson is described as a "Mohawk-Canadian," a description few Mohawks will claim. She is called "mixed-race" (Gerson and Strong-Boag xiii) or a half-breed. She is indeed the daughter of Mohawk father (a condoled chief) and a white woman, but this in the eyes of Mohawks does not necessarily distance her from the identity she claims as Mohawk, or Iroquoian woman, as discussed earlier. She was born into the community and on the territory. In an ironic twist, she was also known to the public as a "Mohawk Princess" (xvii). The location she is attributed even though she identifies herself as standing by "her blood and her race" provides insight not into the life of Ms. Johnson, but into the lives and belief patterns (including the demand for authenticity) of the white people who have written about her.

Osage scholar, Robert Warrior, notes that the focus of much of the scholarship called literary criticism operates to "reduce, constrain and contain American Indian literature" (xix). This is precisely what the authenticity debate accomplishes. In this way the criticism promulgates essentialist categories. Craig Womack (Creek), relying on Warrior's earlier work on intellectual sovereignties, disputes these are the most important categories and notes that:

> ...I will concentrate on the idea that Native literary aesthetics must be politicized and that autonomy, self-determination, and sovereignty serve as useful literary concepts. Further, I wish to suggest that literature has something to add to the arena of Native political struggle. (11)

Womack asserts that, "without Native American literature, there is no American canon" (7). Agnes Grant noted: "No Canadian literature course can be truly representative of Canada without literature written by [A]boriginal Canadians themselves" (vi). I am in full agreement because to declare otherwise is to de-story the land.

The authenticity debate is one form of containment. A second is the propensity to declare that Indigenous writings are acts of resistance. The characterization of Indigenous writing as resistance is too simplistic. There is no doubt that some writing by First Nations is about resistance. But it is rarely limited to resistance as our lives are never just resistance. To focus solely on our resistance is to place colonialism at the centre of the discussion. We can never be or dream more than resistance and survival. It also operates to freeze our cultures and peoples in the time immediately before contact. It reinforces the campaign to see culture and tradition in a hierarchy of superiority.

The truth of the matter is, Indigenous peoples around the world have made significant contributions to the development of the states that now enclave them. The influence of my people on the United States' constitution would be but one example (Johansen). Our understanding of the place Indigenous oral and literary traditions hold in the history of the world can be recovered through understanding the ways in which Indigenous writers locate themselves. And this location is always more specific than a claim to "Indian" identity.

Understanding this, Womack argues that the understanding of Native literature, whether contemporary or ancient, must be nation specific. In *Red on Red*, his gaze is therefore turned to his own people, the Creek (1). And, my gaze equally is grounded in the words of Haudenosaunee authors and thus the focus on E. Pauline Johnson. As Kelly Morgan argues, gender must also be a central element of the analysis. As Lakota women are absent from the historical record—except as "docile drudges"—the imaginative writings of Lakota women are vital (Morgan cited in Womack 15). This is a form of nation (re)building.

Womack asserted that autonomy, self-determination, and sovereignty are the fundamental units of analysis in Indigenous literary criticism. Sovereignty is a word that has gotten Indigenous nations into a lot of trouble. It threatens states. This occurs simply because there is an assumption in western thought that there is a single form and system of knowing and therefore sovereignty must have a single meaning. And that meaning is now enshrined in international standards. This is not what I understand Haudenosaunee people to be saying when we talk about sovereignty. It is the power to not only determine your being but also the power to be responsible to that identity. In Indigenous epistemologies, sovereignty means access to well-being for all our citizens. It means being assured of safety (and we cannot ever be sure we are safe).[7]

It may appear that the promise of my title, "Women's Words," has been lost in this discussion. In part this is (or perhaps was, as colonialism has left a large ugly footprint over my own people's gender knowledge) because gender is not constructed among my people in a way that is oppressive. Gender is not a hierarchical distribution of power, where men have more and women less. Gender is not a binary and perhaps we should consider that there are more than two genders (Cannon). Gender is a state that balances Haudenosaunee social systems. My understanding always comes from a woman's place, a mother's place, an auntie's place, a sister's place, and a *kohkum*'s place. And each of these are sets of responsibilities, not roles. One of the most devastating impacts of colonialism has been directed at the women.

It is important for me to share with you some of what it means to be a Mohawk woman. In the creation story of the Haudenosaunee, this is how people came to the world:

> In the beginning, there was nothing but water, nothing but a wide, wide sea. The only people in the world were the animals that lived in and on water.
>
> Then down from the sky world a woman fell, a divine person. Two loons flying over the water happened to look up and see her falling. Quickly they placed themselves beneath her and joined their bodies to make a cushion for her to rest upon. Thus they saved her from drowning.
>
> While they held her, they cried with a loud voice to the other animals, asking their help. Now the cry of the loon can be heard at a great distance over water, and so the other creatures gathered quickly.
>
> As soon as Great Turtle learned the reason for the call, he stepped forth from the council.
>
> "Giver her to me," he said to the loons. "Put her on my back. My back is broad." (Ella Elizabeth Clark[8] cited in Grant 15).[9]

And this is how this land mass came to be known as Turtle Island to my people. It is on the back of that great turtle. The story of creation continues but for my purposes here, this little piece of the story tells of the central position that woman held in creation and how woman were, and are, situated in our worldview. Human life on this earth sprang from this woman's fall. And when she died, from her body grew the plants of the earth. From her head grew the squash, her breasts the corn, and her limbs the bean. These plants are known to my people as "the three sisters." And the creation story locates women's relationship with agriculture and the land for it is the women who "own" those fields. Without these understandings of how the world came to be in the minds of the Haudenosaunee, one cannot understand the words that we choose to write.

I want to close by borrowing the words of another Mohawk author, Beth Brant (Degonwandonti). She wrote these words in the introduction to *A Gathering of Spirit*, and this collection of writing by North American Indian women was the first collection of its kind I came across in the university bookstore when I was an undergraduate student. Over the years it has brought me much solace and it is a cherished collection. She wrote: "We started something, sisters. Our testament is out there now, part of the wind, part of the people's minds and hearts. *We have always been here. We will always be here*" (15).

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[1] One of the first discussions I have with my students is on naming. Aboriginal, Indian, Indigenous, First Nations, and so on, are all terms of colonial imposition. Depending on whom you talk to, any of those names can get you into trouble. There is no "right" choice.

[2] See my discussion in "Native America and the Literary Tradition."

[3] See also Thomas King's "Borders" in *One Good Story That One* (131-145). I mention this story because Dr. King, a man, has created such a wonderful and strong female character. There he tells a story of a Blackfoot woman crossing the border from Canada to the States. As she refuses to identify herself as anything other than Blackfoot, she spends days being bounced back and forth between border crossing buildings. On more than one occasion I have had a border crossing guard impatiently say to me some version of: "So just tell me what side of the line you can't see you live on!" Post 9/11, I wonder if such "tolerance" still exists.

[4] Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna, Sioux, Lebanese) wrote: "The problem of names, common in Indian Country, is an extension of the general problem of identity for people who are overwhelmed by alien invaders who not only rename human beings but the land and all its features" (14).

[5] See also Rita Joe's "The Gentle War," in *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme* 10 (2,3) (1989): 27-29.

[6] "I think, therefore I am" in *Discours de la Méthode*, 1637.

[7] The most recent example where I live would be the Stonechild Inquiry.

[8] Note Ella Elizabeth Clark is a non-Indigenous woman who collected the "myths" of peoples she thought were vanishing.

[9] The Seneca version of this creation story as told by J. J. Cornplanter (1889-1957) is recorded in *Legends of the Longhouse*. I am choosing to work from creation stories that others have written down as this article may be read at any time of the year and is not told following the completion of the appropriate protocols.

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