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“It is always darkest just before first dawn’s light”: The Social Project of Recent Native Canadian Prose

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**“IT IS ALWAYS DARKEST JUST BEFORE FIRST
DAWN’S LIGHT”:
THE SOCIAL PROJECT OF RECENT NATIVE
CANADIAN PROSE**

Résumé : Les littératures des Premières Nations écrites au Canada ont été toujours animées par un projet social. Tout en reconnaissant que, comme l’a démontré Emma LaRoque, les possibilités de ces littératures ne se limitent pas à des messages culturels et sociaux, l’auteure du présent article se concentre sur des textes choisis des écrivains autochtones canadiens qui manifestent très ouvertement des visions entrecroisées d’un projet social traité comme « le » principal projet contemporain des littératures des Premières Nations. Les textes récents écrits par des auteurs autochtones en établissant un diagnostic très pessimiste de la condition du monde, semblent en même temps viser leur propre objectif par la mise en valeur des éléments relevant des épistémologies et des ontologies indigènes. Ces dernières sont vues, dans ce contexte, comme une nécessité urgente mais aussi elles demeurent ouvertes aux discussions. Les ouvrages sont destinés aux lecteurs qui n’appartiennent pas à la communauté autochtone et qui ne sont pas issus de la société de colons canadiens. De plus en plus souvent les auteurs autochtones introduisent dans leurs textes une profonde conscience globale, en essayant d’agir contre ce qu’ils considèrent comme le mal causé par la globalisation en globalisant la portée et la thématique de leur littérature. Leurs ouvrages suggèrent que s’il y a encore un espoir de guérison et de survie globale, il ne peut être réalisé que par l’intermédiaire de l’éducation et d’une coopération importante de multiples communautés en interaction, tant sur le plan global que local.

Written Native literatures in Canada have—out of necessity—always been propelled by a social project. Their ideological intent is perhaps best expressed by Emma LaRocque’s label “resistance literature” (*When the Other* 18-24) or Jo-Ann Episkenew’s contention that “indigenous literatures are applied literatures” (192). Naturally, sociological, ideological and political issues have likewise featured prominently in the criticism these literatures have inspired, often to the detriment of the critical focus on form, style and language: a

situation which, more recently, has produced double-pronged meta-criticism. On the one hand, it has been pointed out that non-Native critics in particular tend to approach Native texts via non-Native cultural and literary theories and/or lump them all together, applying a generalised and homogenising understanding of Native worldviews and cultures to those texts. Therefore, it has been suggested, a sensitive interpretation by a non-Native critic of a text rooted in a Native culture should involve detailed research related to the particular Native Nation the text refers to (or its author comes from), focused on its culture and language (cf. for example Johnston). On the other hand, the resulting focus on cultural difference has been blamed for producing marginalisation and ghettoisation of Native literatures; and ethnological and ideological approaches blamed for the elimination of or at least overshadowing any interest in their aesthetics (LaRoque, “Opening Address” 12-13). As Emma LaRoque has rightly pointed out, the cultural content or social message of Native literatures does not exhaust their possibilities, therefore “literary critics must begin pay closer attention not only to cultural differences between and among native peoples, but (...) also to the plain love of words. (...) Ultimately native literature must be more about art and nuance than about ethnographic trauma or colonial discourse” (“Opening Address” 15). Such approach levels the critical playing field, as literary critics are required to treat Native texts not as social documents, but as works of art; but it also gestures towards the traditional, as Episkenew maintains, treatment of art within Native communities as valuable both because of its “aesthetic beauty and (...) functionality” (192).

In this article I would like to focus on texts by Native Canadian writers which put forward—very openly—overlapping visions of a social project which I see as “the” contemporary social project of Native literatures. All of the texts selected for discussion, while ideologically explicit, are formally and stylistically complex and often unorthodox, thus diverting from the purported “simplicity” of Native textual production. While I recognize their formal complexity and that fact that the form—often clearly inspired by specific tribal traditions of storytelling—supports the ideologies of the texts, it is the ideologies that are of primary interest to me in the present article.

The ideologies, on the other hand, tend to be rooted in increasingly dark, not to say apocalyptic, diagnoses of the state the world, prompted by the initial realisation described as follows in Stewart Steinhauer’s political tract in the form of a prose extravaganza titled *Voice from the Coffin: Iyisinywak as Weeds in a Monsanto Landscape* (2004):

We indigenous peoples are dying, and no one can hear our cries of anguish. Our voices can’t make it up to the light of the average Canadian day. We’re trapped down here, on the rez, or out there in the inner city ghetto. We have no voice.

(...) The coffin is an appropriate symbol for us; our lands are occupied, we are imprisoned inside those lands. We have no voice in the world of western civilization. We’re in a coffin, buried alive in our home and native land (35).

The story that follows is told, as the cover announces, not by Steinhauer, but by Weypimus the trickster, so perhaps the statement should not be taken at its face value. After all, a voice is issuing from the coffin; and even though it might be weak, the voice is heard, though not necessarily listened to. The story it tells is purportedly “intended for the reading pleasure of white people only” (Steinhauer n. pag.), though the disclaimer this declaration comes from is also clearly authored by Weypimus, given the duplicitous use of the term “reading pleasure”. The roller-coaster of adventures spanning the globe and the universe—and involving Mother Earth, both nurturing and emanating sexuality, leaders and politicians of most powerful countries of the world, as well as Weypimus and Steinhauer—might, admittedly, give one some heady reading pleasure. At the same time, though, us white people and the whole Western world are described as the source of the current disastrous state of affairs making the reading pleasure turn rather bitter, unless you take pleasure in the environmental and social destruction of the world, which turns the word “pleasure” itself into a sardonic joke; and the joke is on us.

In fact, Steinhauer/Weypimus clearly, in a manner common to contemporary Native writers, want both the non-Native and Native audiences to be drawn into the text, to make both realise the state of affairs and the urgent need for action. Though non-Natives are supposed to be the addressees of the text, explicit references and calls to the Native people of Saddle Lake to wake up are woven into it as well. While invasive settler ideologies and practices are blamed for the present crisis, Native communities are not idealised. Rather, both Steinhauer and Jeanette Armstrong in her novel *Whispering in Shadows* (2000) demonstrate that traditional knowledges and approaches to the world are often forgotten while communities live in the dominant-culture-induced stupor (Steinhauer 46). Both authors show the importance of Native activism and educating ventures, of focusing not only on spreading the word outside Native communities, but also within the immediate family and community circle. Both texts demonstrate once again that, as Jo-Ann Episkeneew writes, “contemporary Indigenous literature serves two transformative functions—healing Indigenous people and advancing social justice in settler society—both components in the process of decolonization” (15).

The tricksterish voice issuing from the coffin can be associated with the voice of the contemporary Native storyteller as described by Duncan Mercredi, in only superficially more optimistic terms, in the poem titled “it’s all good this” and punctuated throughout with this statement, which is both candid and deeply ironic:

(...)
 it's all good this
 we storytellers don't cover up the scabs
 or the sores picked at and bandaged up
 without antiseptic
 then tossed back out into the street
 nothing's changed except the year
 but it's all good this
 we can stand up here and tell our stories
 trying to educate outside the circle
 the wagons not yet moved
 for protection
 (...)
 i remember still washing in clear waters
 the river not yet silenced
 (...)
 weetigo was not so evil
 and wesakajak played the fool
 their stories flowed from kookum's mouth
 it's all good this
 no longer silenced
 able to speak
 able to reach
 able to learn
 able to dance without fear
 it's all good this (1-2)

The voice is aimed at people beyond the two groups I have already delineated: beyond the immediate Native community and Canadian settler society. More and more often, Native writers bring to their texts profound global consciousness, attempting to counter what they see as the ills brought about by globalisation by globalising their reach and concerns; and—somewhat inadvertently—by showing the positive side of globalisation, which allows for forging global alliances and imagining global solidarity. Such texts as Steinhauer's *Voice from the Coffin* or the much more nuanced *Whispering in Shadows* by Armstrong do not only demonstrate the dire situation of the Native peoples in Canada—which is definitely not a Peaceable Kingdom in those texts—but see it as a symptom of the attrition of spirit brought about by the Western civilisation, capitalism (and—in Steinhauer's case—also neo-liberalism) and by simple human greed as well as environmental degradation of the contemporary world that take their toll on everyone, regardless of culture and race. Like Steinhauer's text, Armstrong's novel promotes an environmental ethics, a sense of the intricate interconnectedness between people and their environment, reaffirming at the same time the value of the

local; in her case: of family and community. In both the scope is global—while insisting on the importance of place and belonging and a firm sense of tribal identity, the authors indicate nevertheless how individuals and communities are nested in a complex network of a multitude of political, ideological and cultural influences, interdependent.

Armstrong’s sensitive protagonist, an Okanagan visual artist named Penny Jackson, experiences a sense of helplessness in the face of all the suffering she can see, which—she comes to realise—is caused by people precipitating in their crassness a new transformation, which as a species they might not survive. “If we don’t restore balance, eventually all living things will mutate to a new balance. Humans might be spared or not. Probably not. (...) We can no longer cope with the earth’s natural transformation” (Armstrong, *Whispering* 248), she declares. The urgency and hopelessness of the situation is symptomatised by cancer that Penny is dying from at the end of the novel, which also demonstrates the impossibility of remaining untouched by and aloof from world-wide processes and the destruction of Mother Earth.

Steinhauer’s agenda is very explicitly Marxist and staunchly political, but the processes he describes, the apocalyptic end he envisions (44) and the possible means of counteracting the disaster are very much similar to what Armstrong seems to be gesturing towards, though both are rather pessimistic about the real possibility of deep change. Nevertheless, the social project that they present rests on the return to native epistemologies and ontologies rooted in the philosophy of “all my relations”, environmental responsibility, and return to community marked by a strong and nourishing female presence and influence.

The importance of the nurturing female element is particularly explicitly marked in Steinhauer’s text, which ends with Mother Earth’s explanation of the central role of women in “human society. You women make human society out of stuff you find lying around. You are the educators, and the organizers;” and her call to Grandmothers, whose councils should rule the world: “Get up! You and I ... we’re the same...we’re the same life force flowing through everything...get up...” (Steinhauer 135; Steinhauer’s punctuation). Armstrong weaves strong and crucial female presence into her whole text, stressing in particular the role of Penny’s grand grandmother, her Tupa, in shaping the protagonist’s attitude to the world and providing guidance and spiritual nourishment—again an element common in many other texts by North American Native writers.

While the call is to change human societies in general, Armstrong’s and Steinhauer’s texts, and many others, promote also the process of Native peoples’ “reinventing themselves” (LaRocque, *When the Other* 160) and changing the world. This is done at least partly also by creating textual communities, which I would like to call “continuous communities”. I borrow the term from Thomas King, who uses it in his introduction to the anthology

All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Fiction, which he edited. In King's conceptualisation it refers to what he suggests is the understanding of community common to the Native peoples of the Americas, an understanding that is indeed, again and again stressed by the Native peoples in their various writings. A "continuous community" is a family-centered community-in-place, continuous with the landscape in which it has resided and with all that exists, a community extending through time to embrace past and future generations (King, "Introduction" xiii-xv). I borrow the term, but I wish to change its meaning to add an aspect of transculturality to it. The continuous communities I have in mind, and which I can see envisioned in many Native Canadian texts, while not strictly speaking transcultural, nevertheless always indicate a presence of a cultural trade or a desire for it. I intend the term to include two kinds of textual communities: 1. those that manifest and exemplify internal differences and commonalities of Pan-American but also global "Nativity"; and 2. tentative communities involving different minority groups that exist only in the space of possibility some Native texts gesture towards.

The former are continuous communities in the sense that they are based on the "pan-Native" sense of community and understanding of the intimate link between community, place and language that King indicates in his definition, at the same time spilling not only over tribal cultural boundaries, but also over boundaries dictated by the sheer variety of contemporary Native experience as well as cultural and social positioning. They demonstrate that contemporary Native communities are, in fact, deeply transcultural.

As Wolfgang Iser writes, "today in a culture's internal relations—among its different ways of life—there exists as much foreignness as in its external relations with other cultures." In many Native texts, for example in King's *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993) the reader finds a focus on the complexity of North American Native identity: not necessarily on what Native peoples have in common, but rather on the revelations of "foreignness" within the common circle of Nativity. Contemporary Native writing stresses such vital cultural differences at the same time showing cultural mixes, mergers and alliances. This might be achieved, for example, by underlining the nature of many contemporary ceremonies constructed out of diverse elements of a number of partially destroyed Native traditions (as in Emma Lee Warrior's short story "Compatriots"); or by stressing the commonality in difference in the traditions of Native peoples of the Americas, as Armstrong does in *Whispering in Shadows*. In a sense, we can talk here about the existence of transcultural networks in the Iserian sense: overlapping, flexible cultural circles within the "circle of Nativity," which in itself is also permeable. The nature of intertribal relations in the North American space (and beyond) explains also why Native cultures have never allowed themselves to be

comfortably placed within Canadian multiculturalism. It is because Canadian multiculturalism, like other multiculturalisms, relies on the traditional concept of separate cultures coexisting and interacting within one society, the society which is supposed to be neatly separated by state borders from other societies and cultures (Welsch 1999). In North America the Native peoples have clearly demonstrated that cultural continuity and exchange are phenomena that ignore settler-imposed state borders, which run through traditional tribal territories.

Crucially, recent texts by Native writers demonstrate that this continuity extends through South America, and even the globe; and stress the need to recognise the commonality of belief and fate of aboriginal populations not only throughout the Americas, but also beyond, and to forge transborder alliances to promote both spiritual and economic survival. This is one of the key elements of Armstrong’s novel. Her protagonist’s spiritual renewal and new awareness begins with a circle of friendship during which a guest from Bolivia promotes the idea of Pan-American Native cooperation to heal the Earth. Also, another major eye-opener for Penny, which sets her on the path of activism, is her travel to Mexico, which demonstrates to her both the relative privilege in which her people live and the true nature of contemporary economic politics in the Americas. On the one hand, she sees the Native communities of the Americas as one community of the dispossessed and disempowered: “The stories mesh and overlap as one story. Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, Chile, El Salvador, Columbia, Mexico. Millions of brown people, despised, abused, hungry, landless, reduced to slave-like labour. Disease and death” (Armstrong, *Whispering* 148). On the other hand, the dispossessed communities “which are still connected to land in a healthy way” are revealed as “an opposing force” to the system based on life-denying technology, class disparities, competition, consumerism, because they practice “a true natural sustainability” and provide “the only hope for protecting biodiversity” (Armstrong, *Whispering* 147).

As for the latter type of continuous communities, the ones involving diverse minority groups, it seems that more and more often Native writers gesture towards communities of minorities which transcend race and ethnicity, communities of the disadvantaged and discriminated against, underlining the fact that similar social positioning is culturally significant and produces similar experiences and attitudes. At the same time, they quite often bracket out the white majority and hence deny to it textual centrality. Most importantly, these are communities united, even though temporarily, by their transcendence of mutual stereotyping. Lee Maracle describes the process in her essay “Yin Chin.” A similar inclusive move, a gesture embracing intertwining circles of otherness can be found in Fyre Jean Graveline’s autobiographical creative non-fiction *Healing Wounded Hearts* (2004). The author, while affirming the value of traditional stories, tribal mythology and

family stories in the healing process, builds also a new textual community of those discriminated against because of race, gender, sexual orientation, class or culture; a community based on the continuity of aspects of otherness, though there does not necessarily exist a cultural overlap among its members.

Native Canadian writers tend to stress the transformative role of stories treated as a process that has the power to initiate extratextual changes on the individual and social level, and the role of the act of writing as a spiritual “ceremony” (Akiwenzie-Damm 172). Therefore, such textual gestures at creating inter-group alliances might be treated as social interventions. Including settler societies and white people in general in the process, as possible allies—which can be found in some texts, though it is usually not foregrounded—fulfills a similar interventionist function. As Armstrong’s protagonist says, regretting that she gave up painting when she discovered how it functioned within the all-embracing consumerism and became part of the system of commodification: “I knew that putting images out there changes the world, yet I feared the shadows. (...) The story must be told to be understood and changed. One should leap into the void and let the wind carry you. And then things new come. (...) It’s all in the story and how it unfolds” (Armstrong, *Whispering* 292-293).

Recent Native Canadian texts, then, while providing a very grim diagnosis of the state of the world, seem to follow a very specific agenda of their own by promoting aspects of Native epistemologies and ontologies both with a sense of urgency and an openness to discussion. This is clearly demonstrated by Armstrong’s *Whispering in Shadows*. A similar agenda is articulated also by Lee Maracle in her essay “Oratory on Oratory.” In the essay Maracle sets out on a project of decolonization through discourse, based on the Salish concept of story and the process of its reception and analysis (“study”). The project is that of effecting individual and social change by a process of negotiation initiated by specific literary practice—a re-vision of Canada and the world based on a fundamental change of the dominant worldview and cultural practice and achieved by discourse. The process of “study” as she describes it is similar to the Okanagan En’owkin process of respectful negotiation of diverse points of view, which Armstrong employs both in her early novel *Slash* (1985) and in *Whispering in Shadows*. Both lead ideally to a consensus that allows for differences of opinion, but also gives hope for individual, and in effect social, transformation and renewal.

While not giving up on the literary agenda, practicing the “love of words”, contemporary Native writers continue to produce texts that are part of an educational and consciousness-raising project, and function as part of a broader agenda of their authors, who are quite often also public speakers, oral storytellers, essay writers, activists, journalists, column writers and academics. Through a variety of activities they attempt to “change the story” fully

realising that, in the words of Jeannette Armstrong, “the contemporary context requires ‘collaborations’ between settler populations and Indigenous peoples currently living their Indigeneity and those ‘re-indigenizing’ themselves in their customs, laws and languages in a contemporary context. (...)” and that it is necessary to “situate the tribal and the local in the global as the basis for an ethic of *Indigeneity* to emerge in the great paradigm shift that the earth requires” (Armstrong, *Indigeneity* 116; Armstrong’s italics). In fact, they seem to be developing both a system of cooperation with the non-Indigenous people, and a globalisation agenda of their own, which is also clear in their literary texts.

This brings me again to Welsch’s reflections on transculturality. He maintains that “the globalizing tendencies as well as the desire for specificity and particularity can be fulfilled *within* transculturality. Transcultural identities comprehend a cosmopolitan side, but also a side of local affiliation (...) Transcultural people combine both” (Welsch’s italics). Given the invasive nature of majority cultures, it seems that a natural consequence of the successful promotion of Native worldviews, for example via the processes of “study” or En’owkin, would be, on a cultural level, a kind of flexible transculturalism that Welsch describes. I cannot, though, see this possibility envisioned in contemporary Native texts, which while affirming the value of Native cultures, traditions and community cohesion, indicate most often the presence of transcultural processes much less flexible than those described by Welsch. These are more often transcultural processes of the “contact zone” type as Mary Louise Pratt describes it, where relations between the coloniser and the colonised are defined “in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power” (7). Some Native texts demonstrate how unavoidable, necessary, and dangerous, but also enriching such processes might be, in particular on the individual level. It is enough to mention here Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998), the novel whose protagonists are both scarred, even destroyed by sexual abuse and racial discrimination, but at the same time enriched and sustained through their various interactions with different aspects of the majority culture, and in particular with western arts: who they are, their version of Nativeness, emerges from the interaction of the Cree and majority cultures. Transculturalism of this sort forms perhaps the fabric of Native life in contemporary Canada, and when stressed in literature constitutes also an effective way to fight stereotyping of Native peoples. Thomas King’s novel *Green Grass, Running Water*, which uses a number of intricate devices to question values of the majority culture in Canada and the United States and to dismantle North American cultural stereotypes of Native peoples, achieves its aim, at least partly, by stressing the fact that “Nativeness” escapes easy definitions and is lived and acted out in a variety of ways, though always in interaction with the majority culture. Quite

interestingly, both Highway and King utilize for their purposes the “homing plot” characteristic of many Native Canadian and Native American texts, in which protagonists, separated from community and tradition, find their way back to both after many tribulations, and draw spiritual sustenance from Native traditions and communal interaction (cf. Lutz 203-205). At the same time the authors clearly demonstrate that the mirage of an unadulterated essence of undifferentiated “Nativity” conceived in absolute opposition to “whiteness” is a false ideal and a harmful cultural commonplace. As Welsch says, in the contemporary world “there is no longer anything exclusively ‘own’ (...) Authenticity has become folklore, it is ownness simulated for others - to whom the indigene himself belongs.” This statement indicating in general terms that in the contemporary world the absolute boundary between “me” and “the other” has collapsed, that one can be alienated from one’s own culture, but at the same time engaged in “performing” and essentialising it for the benefit of oneself and others is validated by many Native Canadian texts. On the one hand, as Emma Lee Warrior demonstrates in her often anthologised short story “Compatriots”, attempts at the rediscovery and restitution of stifled and partially forgotten Native traditions yield in fact new traditionalism, a contrived “authenticity” which relies on a conglomerate of partially recovered traditions of different Native Nations. Both Highway and King point to this aspect of commodified ethnic “authenticity” as a contrived identity imposed by external expectations, at the same time denying Welsch by showing complex authenticity as residing in an intimate sense of community and belonging. Intertribal pow-wows in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, for example, allow the characters to get reconnected with the broadly conceived Native cultural space, even though they might not have much to do with the specific features of the Cree culture that they might call their own. Likewise, many Native essays give evidence to individual attempts at recovering a Native language and tribal traditions not as a way to authenticate one’s Native identity further, but rather to be more fully in touch with a particular Native culture and sense of community that is also communicated through orality or features or oral texts transferred to the printed page (cf. Armstrong “Keynote”).

For Welsch, authenticity equated with folkloric performance (of which, in the Canadian context, multiculturalism has often been accused) becomes a universal feature of the transcultural world ruled, as he says, by “mixes and permeations.” Authenticity of this sort is an act and a burden, which—when acted upon—caters to racist stereotypes, as demonstrated tellingly by King through the figure of a Native actor judged not Native-looking enough to play a Native in a Western movie. As Annharte (an Anishnaabe poet) says forcefully, to perform and to live one’s particular indigeneity are two different things. In her poem “I Want to Dance Wild Indian Black Face”, however, she also shows the performed indigeneity as a temporary relief from lived indigeneity. The speaker of her poem declares:

I want to wear a turkey feather in my hair and join the tribe
of the Creole Wild West. I don’t want to be authentic all the time.

I want to be a Tribal “Hawk” sing some jazz gospel ratty chanting.
Shout my spirit. Claim black and blues brothers same as sisters.

I want to mask Indian, adopt the Indian spirit figure once a year
dance in public with my big black face and talk back to chiefs.

I want to dance wild Indian blackface. I want to be that big bad
black Indian in a carnival parade. I want an Indian day off (Annharte 187).

Her desire to adopt the persona of a Mardi Gras Indian, of a Black American wearing an exaggerated and contrived version of Native regalia, is then a desire to impersonate the impersonator, to adopt a borrowed, contaminated or hybridized, but at the same time reified and ritualised identity. In the end identity itself—even the “contaminated” transcultural identity—becomes a series of performances.

The multi-vectored transculturalism that Welsch sees as the reality of contemporary life world-wide; the kind of transculturalism involving also multiple, culturally meaningful interactions among cultures in Canada, is infrequently approached in Native Canadian literary discourse. Nevertheless, recent Native texts suggest that, if there is hope for global healing and survival it can only be realised through education and meaningful collaboration on the local, but also global level, by multiple, intertwining communities. What is at stake, is not only the survival of indigenous cultures and ways of life, but of humanity as such, the demise of which, however, might be nonetheless imminent. If there is no hope for the human species, then at least there is hope for the natural world, these texts suggest. As Armstrong writes in her novel: “*The night will reach its darkest soon and it will be long. But it is always darkest just before first dawn’s light. And then the bright shafts of light will break over the crisp blue edges of the mountains towering to the east, and the world will be new*” (Armstrong, *Whispering* 287; Armstrong’s italics)

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