

2007

The Power of the Word: cultural representation and social engineering in Native Canadian and Aboriginal Australian literature for children

Angeline O'Neill

University of Notre Dame Australia, aoneill@nd.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/arts_conference



This conference paper was originally published as:

O'Neill, A. (2007). The Power of the Word: cultural representation and social engineering in Native Canadian and Aboriginal Australian literature for children. *Thinking Society, Thinking Culture, First Annual Symposium on Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences*.

This conference paper is posted on ResearchOnline@ND at https://researchonline.nd.edu.au/arts_conference/6. For more information, please contact researchonline@nd.edu.au.



The Power of the Word: cultural representation and social engineering in Native Canadian and Aboriginal Australian literature for children

Dr Angeline O'Neill, School of Arts and Sciences, University of Notre Dame

There are many similarities between the treatment of Indigenous peoples by their colonisers in Canada and Australia. Clearly, the English language was and still is a powerful tool of colonisation. It is a technology of power, the impact of which has devastated an alarming number of oral cultures and their native languages. Drawing on Indigenous and non-Indigenous textual examples, this paper is premised upon the fact that the process of writing in Standard English severely limits what can be said and who can speak. As such it mirrors the nature and development of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations in Canada and Australia. I suggest that this is nowhere better seen than in the development of a literature supposedly specifically for children in both countries and the nature of the changes which have taken place as the stereotyped Indigenous Other becomes the empowered speaking Self.

How are the complex cultures, values and beliefs of various Indigenous peoples simplified and represented to children? Who has the right to do this? What ideologies pervade these representations and how are they bound to preconceived notions of oral and written traditions? As a site for cultural and textual exploration and experimentation, children's literature will play an increasingly important role in Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations. In the process it will also contribute to changing perceptions of "literariness" and literary value. While all readers are culturally conditioned, the child reader - who is often described as naïve - is still in the early stages of cultural-conditioning. Indeed, if the patriarchal world of Western literary and cultural values is to be challenged, then the acceptance and appreciation by adults and children of Indigenous literature for children seems a good place to start. After all, children's writers are responsible for the transmission of cultural and literary values to an impressionable and potentially powerful readership.

Dr Angeline O'Neill has published in the areas of comparative Indigenous literature, children's literature and Australian literature and has co-edited an anthology of Australian Aboriginal writing, *Those Who Remain Will Always Remember*. She is presently guest-editing a First Nations edition of the journal of Comparative Literature and Culture. She teaches courses in Comparative Indigenous Literature, Children's Literature and Australian Literature at The University of Notre Dame, Australia.