Creating a New Space: From Literary Migrants to Resistance Writers

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Creating a New Space:
From Literary Migrants to Resistance Writers

Angeline O'NEILL

First Nations, Métis and Inuit writers must, in many respects, be the yardstick against which the relationship between literature and migration in Canada is measured. Of course, a brief survey of their varied socio-cultural and historical circumstances shows that these peoples are not migrants themselves in the usual sense of the word. Their literatures, however, are inevitably concerned with issues of migration; the migration of other peoples into and within Canada. The advent of the French and English, and Canada's subsequent movement from a bicultural to multicultural society has obviously had an impact on Canada's Native peoples, as seen most clearly in the volumes of literature written about them and most recently, written by them. My concern is with the latter: more specifically with the literary space in which oral and written traditions meet or, more often, collide. Non-Natives have too often assumed that the oral is somehow inferior to the written; is evidence of a more "primitive" culture. So when oral and written traditions confront each other as a consequence of colonization or invasion, it has frequently been assumed that the Native peoples involved should peacefully (and gratefully) migrate between these literary spaces. In other words, they are expected to become literary migrants. This is not what happens. I suggest instead that many of these contemporary writers create for themselves an alternative literary space in which to conduct the often bitter dialogue between their written and oral traditions. The resulting literature may be described as a powerful form of resistance writing, which effectively re-positions the non-Native reader and literary theorist, such that they themselves become migrants in a strange literary country. Importantly, such fluidity and even rote reversal challenge the notion of fixed borders and expose them as ideological constructs. For First Nations, Métis and Inuit writers, the borders between Québec and Canada or Canada and the United States are always been, abstract. These borders are an intrusion.
Indigenous peoples in many countries have been forced physically and psychologically to deal with the issue of migration. As such, it is not surprising that migration enters into many of their stories, just as the existence of various Indigenous peoples has been absorbed into the myths of non-Indigenous cultures. Coupled with the method of telling (most often the written word is English), myth-making has contributed to the creation of a non-Indigenous fantasy land and to attempts to understand Indigenous peoples into it. After all, as Ronald Wright has observed, «myth is an arrangement of the past, whether real or imagined, in patterns that resonate with a culture's deepest values and aspirations [...] Myths are so fraught with meaning that we live and die by them. They are the maps by which cultures navigate through time» (qtd. in Wilson 4). In other words, cultures mythologize themselves and others in order to make sense of their world.

Patricia McCormack elaborates on this kind of mythologizing in the North American context when she describes the Grand Narrative, adhered to by traditional scholarly analysis as well as North American popular culture, according to which the «wild and primitive» ever-receding frontier was «tame[d] and civilized» by modernity (109). According to this narrative, the Indians would either vanish or «advance» to the point where they were not really Indians anymore. As McCormack notes, the Métis («half-breeds») were wrongly considered to be examples of such advancement (110). Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm elaborates: «the reality is that we have not faded into the earth like snow before the summer sun of «progress» nor have we stagnated in some sort of retrograde time capsule. We have survived and will continue to survive because of, and in spite of the changes» («Says Who» 16). She adds that «mixed-bloods see with two sets of eyes, hear with two sets of ears and those who write find the ability to assimilate and process all of this into a kind of tertium quid: a blending or «mangling» that cannot be completely ignored or discounted by either side» (19).

Akiwenzie-Damm's statements are pertinent to McCormack's consideration of the difficulties involved in attempts at intersubjectivity or the construction of «a third space where [Indigenous and non-Indigenous] partners can interact together to achieve their common goals» (McCormack 110). McCormack argues that building third spaces will be impossible until bridges are built between the various narratives of non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples. I suggest that a significant step in this process occurs in the literary space where the stories and «storying» of oral and written traditions age in dialogue. As Akiwenzie-Damm asserts, so-called «half-
breeds» may be positioned well to make a significant contribution to this process. She speaks from personal experience in the poem «kegedonc»:

> I say
> words are heavy with meaning
> they are the true survivors
> echoing into infinity when we have become bones cradled by the earth
> you say
> we belong to them and they belong to us
> I say to you
> words are my mantouwun my conjurers
> with their magic the spider can be set in her web
> the old people can live in the memory of generations
> people from every direction can be made kin
> the world can be recreated out of a fistful of clay (458)

The poet evokes a space constituted by words. While the transformative relationship between words and reality belongs to oral tradition, the poem itself is nevertheless written. The power of words and narrative to recreate the world is assumed and the anonymous - «I» and «you» - seem to both highlight and bridge the gap between oral and written traditions, inviting all readers to explore the resulting literary space. Perhaps it should not surprise readers then that kegedonc is also the name of the Indigenous publishing house with which Akiwenzie-Damm is heavily involved, a Native-owned and operated company based on the traditional territory of the Chippewas of Nawash First Nation. Indeed, its mandate is
to foster the creative cultural expression of Indigenous Peoples through the publication of beautifully crafted books which involve Indigenous Peoples in all levels of production and by supporting activities which promote Indigenous literary development and the development of Indigenous publishing. (Keagedonc)

Many Indigenous writers have already entered into this literary space, appearing to outsiders metaphorically to migrate from oral to written traditions in the process. But, as Joy Harjo (Muscogee) and Gloria Bird (Spokane) say in the introduction to their anthology, significantly entitled Reclaiming the Enemy's Language, it is not so simple:

> To write is often still suspect in our tribal communities, and understandably so. It is through writing in the colonizers' languages that our lands have been stolen, children taken away. We have often been betrayed by those who first learned to write and to speak the language of the occupier of our lands. Yet to speak well in our communities in whatever form is still respected. This is a dichotomy we w-'unways deal with as long as our cultures are predominantly expressed in oral literature... (Harjo and Bird 20)

When the lands of those aforementioned tribal communities were taken, the language of the invader was forced on the dispossessed inhabitants; and, according to Harjo and Bird, it was not until they began to create with this new language and made it «usefully tough and beautiful» that they could really say they «owned» it (23-4). To an extent, this process of creation required them to re-invent themselves in order to undo some of the damage wrought by the «Others» - hence the title of the anthology. It also meant becoming aware of the nuances of the English language: for example, the use of such terms as «minority» as opposed to «dominant» culture (Harjo and Bird 24). Harjo and Bird remark on the «mental bondage» (25) of literary stereotyping and romanticization, and the broader community's frequent focusing on what has been «lost» as evidence of a dying culture. Nevertheless, Reclaiming the Enemy's Language is a celebration of an ongoing journey: it is «the harmony of diverse native women's intellectual, creative and emotional genius that has always been alive, only our access to it has been limited [...] It is a connection taken in with our mother's blood and milk, constructed of the very earth on which we stand» (Harjo and Bird 31).

In order to communicate intellectual, creative and emotional force, many of the writers in the anthology amply demonstrate Standard English so that it becomes another kind of «English»: «English is official, normative, authoritative, monologic; English is unoffical, obstreperous, disruptive, polyphonic, and, from the perspective of the centre (legislatures, courts, schools, publishing houses), ungrammatical, colloquial, unmelllible, wrong» (Grace 233). Such a conscious manipulation signifies a moment in the movement from supposed literary migrant to resistance writer, and a step towards another literary space. Odilia Galvan Rodriguez (Lipan Apache) exemplifies this movement in Reclaiming the Enemy's Language:

> I write about the world that I see and would like to change [...] I listen to my voices: the grandmothers and grandfathers who see what's going on, what we are doing or not doing to the earth and ourselves. My writing calls them from the other side. (Rodriguez 410)

Her piece «Lost Rites» is both graphic and uncompromising:

> your body should have been washed in the finest herbs and flowers then wrapped in soft cloth / instead they slit you open like a fish / suspected you like so many sides of beef left you ripe / bleeding the blood where they would find the drags they say took you to the next world / you should have been dyed blue have been given a special tattoo
so your ancestors would recognize you / those hunters
and gatherers you were so proud of would call you back
let you inside the special red door (Rodriguez 410-11)

At this point, it might be useful to consider what constitutes a resistance writer and how I come to apply this term to some — but not all — Native writers. In her book *Challenging Canada: Dialogism and Narrative Techniques in Canadian Novels*, Gabriele Helms discusses «cultural narratology» (14) as an approach that studies narrative forms in their relationship to the culture which generates them, although these forms also help to shape the culture itself. While she only addresses the novel genre, I am borrowing the term for more general purposes, in keeping with the refusal of many Indigenous writers to adhere to genre distinctions. Helms’ approach shows that «narrative techniques are not neutral and transparent forms to be filled with content» (7). As such, cultural narratology focuses on the dynamism and complexity of the reading and writing processes and it tries to understand the ideological implications of different readings. Barbara Harrow in turn describes resistance literature as «calling attention to itself and to literature in general, as a political and politicized activity [...] involved in a struggle against ascendant or dominant forms of ideological or cultural production» (qtd. in Helms 8). Obviously, such literature requires a readership, and it should be the role of critics and theorists to assist in the education of such a readership. After all, as Helms states, «resistance is always constructed through multiple ideological relations; in other words, it is always mediated» (14).

What, however, is to be resisted? South American scholar Menezes de Souza’s work focuses on Indigenous writing in Amazonian Brazil, and more specifically, the relationship between Indigenous knowledge and writing. A lack of understanding of this relationship has problematized the Brazilian government’s well-intentioned attempts to promote Indigenous languages and cultures. Indeed, the ignorance at the institutional as well as popular level is similar to that in North America, Australia and New Zealand. Menezes de Souza advocates Mignolo’s notion of «border thinking» as a means to change «the colonial balance of power in knowledge production» (6), which may be seen as similar to McCormack’s third space. Discussing the relationship between Indigenous knowledge and writing, Menezes de Souza describes the Eurocentric concept whereby «alphabetic knowledge is seen to be the origin of philosophy and justice because it reified and decontextualized speech and facilitated the transformation of knowledge, now

written down, into an object of contemplation (and the harbinger of abstract thought)» (10). Menezes de Souza considers these assumptions alongside the view commonly espoused by many non-Native organizations that Indigenous languages and cultures need to be enshrined in the Western written tradition for their own protection. Implicit in this view is the contradictory belief that «writing [...] is an innocuous, transparent technology and an essential instrument for the preservation and dissemination of Indigenous knowledge» (Menezes de Souza 7). Clearly, attempts to read Indigenous writing accordingly denies what Menezes de Souza describes as «the crucial point in defining Indigenous knowledges [...] the recognition of their place-based locus of production and use in communities ethnically distinct and socio-historically distant from national centers of political and economic power» (7). Linked with place-based locus is the fact that several of the Amazonian cultures with which she is familiar are cultures of vision where «alphabetic writing which merely registers speech needs to be complemented by the drawing of a visual text to guarantee the registration of knowledge» (Menezes de Sousa 9). In the Canadian context, Sherrill Grace discusses this need to further develop our understanding of writing and text when she explains her use of «writing» to include «many forms of address and activity, many semiotic codes and modes of representation, from music and wall-hangings to radio, television, comic strips, festivals, conferences and speeches» (232). For her, as for many of the writers she discusses, texts are oral / aural and visual / graphic.

With regard to Indigenous literatures, one of the ways in which resistance writing comes into being is when the written word is manipulated to emphasize the philosophical, cultural and literary differences between written and oral traditions. This process further evidences the fact that Indigenous writers are not simply migrants between markedly different literary spaces. Menezes de Souza has made some interesting observations which can be related to these philosophical and cultural differences, which are pertinent to my consideration of Native North American literature, particularly with regard to what he calls «Indigenous perspectivism»:

a philosophy that does not privilege any single viewpoint, but considers all viewpoints, like all the elements of nature, as being inter-related and mutually implicated. There is thus no separation of subject from object; the seer is also the seen. Truth value in Indigenous perspectivism is social: what I see / know as an individual is qualitatively different, socially, from what I and you see / know; what the collective community sees / knows has the greatest social value. (Menezes de Souza 10)
The implications for Akiwenzie-Damm’s «kegedonce» are manifest:

[...] this morning I heard a bird’s voice calling to the sun
and I was that bird

I was a swallow swooping into forest
then I was that forest turning my leaves towards the warmth and light

I say nothing
then you sang me your swallow song until my words are loosened
and come pouring out like a dammed river bursting in spring (458)

The merging of speaking voice with «swallow» and then «forest» exemplifies Indigenous perspectivism: subject and object are inseparable and «the see is also the seen» (Menezes de Souza 10). When the swallow song «loosens» the speaker’s words and they «come pouring out like a dammed river bursting in spring», the reader experiences the creation of a literary space at the ideological junction between oral and written traditions. If we agree with Helms that «resistance is always constructed through multiple ideological relations» (14), then «kegedonce» is indeed resistance writing.

In «kegedonce», non-Native theorists and readers glimpse the distance between Indigenous perspectivism and Western philosophy. Laura Smyth Groening’s work also finds that contemporary Western culture continues to embrace polarities, in particular Fanon’s Manichean allegory. Perhaps surprisingly, in the twenty-first century, a series of tropes still continues to create a «uniformity dualistic universe of not only good and evil but also light and dark, culture and nature, reason and the irrational, future and past, civilisation and savagery» (Groening xiv). The creation of such a universe leaves no room for appreciation of Indigenous perspectivism. However, major ideological differences do not prevent some non-Natives from adopting fictional Native personae and contributing to the debate about voice appropriation, a debate with far greater implications than simply freedom of the non-Native imagination. Who can speak? From what position and with what authority? What can be said? This debate issues from the continuing struggle for the power of words as manifested in (self)representation which is itself bound up with the aesthetics and philosophy of oral and written traditions. Akiwenzie-Damm notes that

as Indigenous writers, part of our cultural survival in the future depends on our ability to refocus our attentions creatively and artistically. To step outside of the reactive mode into which our peoples have been placed so consistently. Through our writing

we can continue to break the conventions which have strived to render us voiceless and «illiterate», «Says Who» 23

For her, the voice appropriation debate is about Native empowerment through story not freedom of the non-Native imagination.

According to anthropologist Edward Bruner, «stories make a site resonate with history and experience» (5). Thomas King elaborates when he states, «the truth about stories is that that’s all we are» (32). If we are our stories, living in a world constructed by them, we can better understand the devastation caused by the extinction of any single language and the tragedy of the hundreds of Aboriginal languages that have been lost world-wide under the dominance of such languages as English and French. Our attention is yet again drawn to the enormous difficulties faced when we take an oral tradition and attempt to record it on paper. While the process of writing an oral tradition potentially opens it to a larger audience, without the political and artistic authority shown by so many recent Indigenous writers the value of performance is easily lost, resulting in a Standard English mapping of oral traditions that bears little or no similarity to the original. Non-Native intervention and representation have often resulted in such Standard English mappings. Native academic Peter Cole comments on semiotic imprisonment when he writes in Coyote and Raven Go Canoeing:

anyone with less
than half a mind can dumbfound an audience
with complications
obfuscative dichotomic clarifications unnecessarily gesticated
graphed and overlaid projected labruncaoed charcoalflippe. (Cole 28)

and further, he challenges his non-Native readers:

don’t continue to lock us
in your semantic conceptual prisons
we’re immune enough without being further humiliated
by the cementum of your white discourse. (Cole 29)

In her insightful work, Contemporary American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition, Susan Brill de Ramirez goes one step further than Bruner when she concludes that storytelling is a transformative experience which requires us as readers to move beyond «the level of textuality, beyond the level of langue […] back to the living language, parole, of the story» (Brill de Ramirez 208). This move she describes as «conversive listening-reading» and «it is only…rough conversive engagements that the storyteller-writer,

1 See Ian Mohammed, p. 84.
story-text, and listener-readers are transformed through the direct interrelationships made possible through the power of language» (Brill de Ramirez 208). Once again, we must rethink notions of text. We must appreciate that the process of breaking down literature and language in search of meaning often obscures meaning instead. Okanagan writer Jeannette Armstrong encapsulates this process in her powerful poem «Threads of Old Memory», which deals with the Indigenous orator’s place and the place of language in contemporary society:

When I speak
I choose the words gently
asking the whys
dangerous words
in the language of the newcomers
words releasing unspeakable grief
for all that is lost
dissolving lies in the retelling
I choose threads of truth
that in its telling cannot be hidden
and brings forward
old words that heal
moving to a place
where a new song begins
a new ceremony
through the medicine eyes I glimpse a world
that cannot be stolen or lost
only shared
shaped by new words
joining precisely to form old patterns
a song of stars
sparkling against an endless silence. (231-33)

Armstrong’s point of departure in this poem is the complexity of linguistic representation, especially in regard to the relationships between writers / readers and orators / listeners. It is an acknowledgement that «to practise representation at any level is to participate in a complex, already-in-process activity; it is to employ and deploy tools, codes, signs already in use and heavily invested with constructed meaning» (Grace 24). Armstrong encourages her non-Native readers / listeners to appreciate this fact and so to open themselves to the power of conversive meaning which, according to Brill de Ramirez, focuses on «the connections within and beyond texts and the connections co-created by the specific interaction between the reader and the text – an interaction that transforms the reading process into the inter-relational acts of storytelling and storylistening» (Brill de Ramirez 210). Indeed Armstrong cultivates the power of conversive meaning in her work when she observes that «what we [Native writers] write becomes transferred into the dominant cultural mode and we find ourselves explaining many things: we find ourselves talking in terms that aren’t necessary» («Writing» 56). This problem will be resolved as readers inter-act with texts, and the act of storytelling is complemented by the act of storylistening. Like Armstrong, Simon Ortiz notes the importance of context. For him context «has to do not only with your being physically present, but it has also to do with the context of the mind, how receptive it is and that usually means familiarity with the culture» (Ortz 6). Together Armstrong, Grace, Brill de Ramirez and Ortiz show that, contrary to popular belief, oral literature need not lose its orality just because it is written down. To continue the metaphor central to this paper, contemporary Indigenous writers are not automatically migrants who move between the spaces of oral and written traditions. Rather, many are contributing to the establishment of an alternative literary space in relation to which non-Native readers / listeners may well become literary migrants themselves, called upon to transcend their cultural and literary conditioning.

Not surprisingly, the relevance (or otherwise) of literary theory for Indigenous literary culture is a major issue in academic circles. Kimberley Blaeser (Anishinaabe) aptly writes, in Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature, that what is needed is «a critical voice and method which moves from the culturally-centred text outward toward the frontier of border studies, rather than an external critical voice and method which seeks to penetrate, appropriate, colonize or conquer the cultural center, and thereby, change the stories or remake the literary meaning» (Blaeser 53). The realm of border studies can be an uncomfortable place and much patience will be required of both sides if this new literary space is to be effectively mapped by Indigenous writers and appreciated by non-Natives. As we have seen, an increasing number of scholars acknowledge both the need for and the difficulty of the task ahead. Entering the space of border studies is essential to an appreciation of the rich, dynamic body of Indigenous literatures.

Literary space as discussed here is a troubling concept not the least because it is a border land, a construct of written and spoken words. Arguably, literary space is a story in and of itself. Challenges to Western literary
theory emerge from the space where oral and written traditions collide, establishing the need to reconsider the ways and means by which we approach Indigenous literatures. A problem arises, however, when the reader (usually non-Native) is ignorant of what Menezes de Souza has described as Indigenous perspectivism. It is the absence of this knowledge which has led many readers as well as critics and theorists mistakenly to assign Indigenous writers to the status of literary migrants, somehow caught between ‘primitive’ oral tradition and ‘civilized’ written tradition. In doing so, these same readers find themselves as the literary migrants. Fortunately, as the severe limitations of a purist approach to the study of English Literature are better understood, an appreciation of the union between Indigenous knowledge and production is emerging, which provides a useful steppingstone towards the new literary space presently being mapped by Native writers. It is a space made possible by the power of conversive meaning which focuses on the connections within and beyond texts as recognized and formed by the active reader. The reading process is transformed into inter-relational acts of story-telling and story-listening. Akiwenzie-Damm illustrates this transformation in her poetry and simultaneously advances in her prose an uncompromising space of literary resistance which demands border thinking of all readers. As Akiwenzie-Damm again shows, border thinking is more than an approach to literature: it has the potential to change the way Natives and non-Natives think and live. We can either accept or reject the socio-cultural and political relevance of borderland stories. And whatever we decide will affect future constructions of self and community. Finally, as Thomas King states prophetically in The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative:

> You can have [the story] if you want [...]. Do with it what you will [...]. Just don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if you only had heard this story.

> You’ve heard it now. (167)


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**VI. Lieux d’appartenences / Spaces of Belonging**