

“A Weasel Pops In and Out of Old Tunes”: Exchanging Words

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WHEN I WAS INVITED to give a paper on Marie Annharte Baker's poetry for the conference "For the Love of Words: Aboriginal Writers of Canada," I asked Annharte if she would participate with me on this project. We wrote and delivered the paper together — two voices presenting readings of some of her poems, partly responding to each other, partly overlapping, following our own trains of thought.

Marie Annharte Baker has written three books of poetry: *Being on the Moon*, *Coyote Columbus Cafe*, and *Exercises in Lip Pointing*. She has also, of late, experimented with visual art, and it is not surprising that she works with collage. Recycling and reworking bits and pieces which are found or 'to hand' into new forms, bricoleur-style, is a process which she foregrounds in poems such as "Raced Out to Write This Up" and "Coyote Columbus Cafe." As one of her personas or identities, Annharte has taken on the "scavenger or scrounge artist," especially in a re-invention of herself as *Rakuna Kahuna*, a "wise raccoon" street name ("Marie Annharte Baker" 63). — Lally Grauer

Annharte: The actual name is Raccoon Woman (*Esibankwe*) but using a street version or nickname suits me.

I am a First Nations writer, Ojibway persuasion and preference. Because of a fascination with oral literatures, I found performance poetry to be an appealing outlet. In order to perform I even have to recycle parts of me as I approach the senior years. I have been able to experience solace (nurturing my child self) in art/collage. As a child, I lost my mother when she became one of the 'disappeared women' of ndn country (i.e., Indian country) because of family and community genocidal effects caused by the residential school system. When I was little, I always saw my mother producing arts and crafts, and so in my recent visual art work, I regained

a unity with her spirit.

The therapeutic tool I employ is humour which verges on the edge of outrageous/excessiveness. In art, I express a vision of personal change and accept myself as wounded but on the mend. ‘I am my art’ is the popular saying which encompasses all.

Grauer: In Annharte’s poem “Bird Clan Mother,” the hoarder and scavenger “Prehistoric possum mother” appears (*Being* 40).

Annharte: Here, the poet persona evolves from “Prehistoric possum mother” to “Bird Clan Mother” (40-41). She is able to escape the stress and competition of life to regain personal vision and power:

Middle of my junk room
 Dream eyes seeing small
 Prehistoric possum mother

Running footsteps jiggling
 Babies hanging on a long tail
 Curved over her back

What was chasing
 My little friend
 Just before dinner?
 * * * *

Gliding like a Bird Clan Mother
 I did take off wherever to begin
 Crafty ways, I hunt myself

Whoever sees my shadow overhead
 Knows to run but I slow up
 Beady little eyes blink quick

Ducking the flying jokes I resume
 The feeble crouch run and hide
 This once I will eat squash blossoms

(*Being* 40-41)

Grauer: Even though at times she soars like a bird, she knows she will “resume / The feeble crouch” of the scavenger — but this crouch will also lead her to the “squash blossoms” (40). Marie Annharte Baker is a Rakuna or raccoon Kahuna, not the ‘big Kahuna’ or big boss of common usage. She scavenges the scraps littered around, recombines and recycles language so it does not boss *her* around. In her poem “Raced Out to Write

This Up” for example, she disassembles and rebuilds the word “race,” that hard, seemingly solid syllable.

The poem revolves around an anecdote, a story I learned about from speaking to Annharte. In the poem, the speaker bumps into an acquaintance (later referred to as “Old Whitey”) at the Lebret Hotel who, in one of my favourite lines in the poem, “hugged me like I was his old Tibetan guru out on the / dance floor teleporting again” (60). This acquaintance, a drunken English professor, dismissed North American Indigenous spirituality because, in his opinion, Tibetans are much superior in their religious practices. The speaker in her poem “raced out” to challenge his too comfortable white male privileged opinion and expertise (61).

Annharte: Confronting his racist remarks directly did not result in any awareness or changed behaviour on his part. So the poem itself finishes him off or resolves whatever powerlessness I experienced.

I also race in the delivery of this rant to demonstrate outrage, as so often the polite Canadian response is to remain silent and not challenge racist assertions. There is an attempt to disguise racism by comparisons between diverse groups which result in a ranking system. I mock the absurdity of racial classifications which occur in everyday conversations or academic discourse in which writers are identified in terms of race and use this designated status to represent ‘Others.’

Grauer: The poem addresses “white racists” and the values attributed to colour in their lexicon (*Being* 60). In her line “white racists notice the colour which they don’t have,” she suggests that white racism is based on the idea that “white” is the neutral norm, while everyone else is perceived as “coloured” or “mixed.” The poem recycles the word “white” through a spectrum of colours: “you might be off-white a bone white

a cream white alabaster white dingy white if you don’t wash often enough ... white with freckles who is colour blind... .” She herself, made conscious of her colour in this colour-blind (to whites) society, “write[s] her black ink on white paper” (60).

Annharte: The line, “I white out write out my colour lighten up” describes the writing process as a necessary accommodation to the prevalent aversion to racial mixing (60). The line also affirms that the more I write, the more white I will appear to the white supremacist writer or reader as I will no longer be considered illiterate or an exotic anomaly of my kind. In the opening lines of the poem, I state this dilemma:

I often race to write I write about race why do I write
about race I must erase all trace of my race I am an

eraser abrasive bracing myself embracing (60)

Grauer: I see the word “race” being repeatedly embedded and re-contextualized here, changing its effect. First of all, there are the repetitive sounds of the words, which catch us up in their rhythm and tend to make “race” into a playful nonsense sound. Annharte recycles the word into a number of rhymes and syllables, into verbs as well as nouns. Words in which she embeds the syllable “race,” like “eraser” and “abrasive,” emphasize the functions which the concept of race is employed to carry out — making some visible, others invisible, some powerless, others powerful. Its meaning gets changed when it appears in a word like “embracing,” which disarms the connotations of separation and othering denoted by the word “race,” especially in the phrase “myself embracing.” Or, is “embracing” a neologism for a kind of projection of race onto things, or an internalization of racism, like “embossing” (60)? And then there are the puns — “race away” as in running fast, or writing about race and being “raced out” as in exhausted, racially erased, bummed out or tired of race (60-61). With all of this repetition and popping in and out of other words, the word race starts to become multiple and ambiguous, blurring the confines of conventional meaning on which it relies to perpetuate itself. Yet at the same time my attention is drawn to the word race, stimulated by the repetitions and reorientations to consider its toxic implications. As a reader, I feel liberated, given some space by Annharte’s playful handling of a word that usually chokes, shames, and shuts down.

Annharte: I use a polemic Bitch/rant style to shock listeners into paying attention. Poetry is confused with polite discourse. So much energy is transmitted from poet to audience when everyday words are exchanged, as did Emily Dickinson, with her ‘slant’:

I’m a half and half breed a mixed bag breed bread and butter bred
 my whole grain bannock will taste good to me even if I smear on red
 jam sink my white teeth down the red hatch to the black hole that
 is behind it all the whole black of me the whore backing up be-
 hind me the sore holy part of me which is the blackest darkest most
 colored most non-Indian, non-white slice of me bred to wonder.
 (*Being* 61)

In these lines that end “Raced Out to Write This Up,” I collapse the image of colours because I do agree with Martin Luther King that a person must be appreciated for the content of character and not colour. I also salvage everyday words (and brand names) to establish familiarity for a

Native audience.

Grauer: Annharte piles on the puns, the jokes on brand names such as Half and Half and Wonder Bread, and rings the changes on the sounds of “black” and “red.” The mixing up of words creates joyful nonsense and newly meaningful definitions like being a “mixed bag breed.” She moves from the outside, where society makes finer and finer racial distinctions based on skin, into the common dark red and black insides: the organs, blood, guts and assholes we all share (like skin). She also playfully juxtaposes racially distinguishing colours in food with racial discrimination based on skin colour, making the latter absurd. The poem, by deftly reversing the order of words and repositioning them, exchanges the sham name for a spongy, white substance totally lacking in nutrition for the hopeful idea that we are “bred to wonder” rather than to discriminate based on “race” (61).

Annharte: I also use a rant to depict contradictions in meaning as when the word race is linked to class:

It is classic to want to write about class not low class but up the nose
class I know I am classy brassy crass ass of a clash comes when I move
up a rung (*Being* 60)

There are so many class barriers besides racial ones that are employed to exclude the ‘Other’ in English. The colonial mindset of Canadian English usage avoids the diversity of spoken language. A Winnipeg patois that I learned has words from many languages such as Chinese, Ukrainian, French, Yiddish, Caribbean, and Black American dialects.

Grauer: Elsewhere Annharte has written about “borrowing” from “underclass English vocabulary” as a source of invention for poetry (“Borrowing” 60). She also replaces and recontextualizes the language of colonization, playing with words such as “discovery” and “conquest” in the poem “Coyote Columbus Cafe” from the volume of the same name. While the Columbus quincentennial (to which this poem responded) conjured up the conquering colonizer in a three-masted ship, Annharte scuttles (around) this image, superimposing or inserting the persona of an Indigenous woman looking for a pick-up in a bar. It is she who has “time for one more cruise / & conquest sneak up time” (*Coyote* 11). This intrepid explorer knows the proper approach:

*Boozho Dude. Hey, I'm talking to you, Bozo Dude. My name's Con-
quista.*

Come on adore me. (11)

By chopping up and recycling the word ‘conquistador,’ Annharte sneaks up on the reader, surprising us into the energy of laughter. This woman definitely has

... an attitude how to frequent
with colonizers (dey got me surrounded)
the right time is now
to get discovered again
& again very frequently
on a repetitive basis (12)

I have been somewhat uncomfortable with this character, one who “tease[s]’em up to the climax” (12), who “lie[s] and trick[s]” (13) — is she a prostitute, victim of the colonization process which has left her nothing but her body to sell? But when I hear Annharte read the poem, I’m always energized by this persona’s agency, teased up no end when she asks “*hey, you on the Columbus trip,*” “*what is paler than stranger?*” or “*Do you feel like a wounded / buffalo raging within?*” (13). While she poses “baffling questions,” Columbus is the one with the insecure “Woody Allen ... spiel” (13):

I don't know anybody on this boat. Strong chance we won't make it to land.

* * * *

The map I made shows the Indies beyond the curve in the earth. Most of the crew are already around the bend. (13)

Annharte: I am not so worried about whether the speaker is a prostitute as she might be also denigrated as a type of barfly or frequenter of clubs, pubs and bars. She represents the tough street women I knew as a child and have found to be great storytellers. The colonial frontier that I see is either the local watering hole or the classy drinking establishment. The firewater scenario or hang around the fort environ is the domain of the street savvy lady. As a child, I heard the stories being told about the night before the other night of many entertaining nights. Main Street in Winnipeg was the most popular location but because of restricted drinking laws, parties in rooming houses or hotels also happened.

A favourite memory for me is the night on Halloween when women relatives dressed up as men and liberated beer parlours on Main Street.

Those were the days when there were signs to indicate separate entrances for ‘men only’ or ‘ladies and escorts.’ One of my cousins was dressed like a railroad engineer with striped overalls and a cap that held up her long hair. We (underage kids) waited outside until the women would be ‘escorted out’ after they were discovered as gender imposters. Each stop was a separate and unique performance of defiance of both custom and law.

Grauer: An explorer of the colonial frontier, but not contained within the colonized images of Indigenous women, the persona in “Coyote Columbus Cafe” is offered to us as another scavenger author figure, a “Coyotrix” who contrasts with the c-word Columbus in that she dominates not through appropriation and colonization, but through unsettling tricks of wit and wordplay, unpredictable in her shifting approaches and sudden ambushes (*Coyote* 13). Through language, she “put[s] her ‘c’ mark,” chooses how to “abuse” her clientele, and “tease ‘em up to the climax” so that language and her clientele “give” in (12).

One of the ways Annharte sneaks up on the reader is by recontextualizing the languages of social control — of government, social work, therapy, self-help — which start popping in and out of the colonial story of Columbus in the hands of the Coyotrix:

Columbus did lack
 cultural awareness
 equity
 affirmative action
 political correctness (*Coyote* 14)

As Annharte has said, in “Borrowing Enemy Language,”

While standard English is spoken in Native homes and workplaces, foreign spiel like bureaucratese is also heard around the kitchen table and to communicate with family matters. Even the most personal thoughts or intimate experiences may be articulated in the strange lingo of cultural outsiders. Some conversations are laced with words borrowed from A.A. meetings, government sponsored conferences, educational workshops, and from a mere glancing through handouts or manuals. (59)

Annharte: The Coyotrix administers a “random coyote IQ test”:

what is paler than stranger?
 I warn you multiple answers possible
 circle (a) the landlord comes around
 first of the month to collect rent
 wrong answer but don’t pick that one

please follow directions and circle choice
 what about (c) landlord of colour?
 right answer is (d) I got my rights
 (b) I am the landlord around here (*Coyote* 13)

Grauer: This apparently scrambled list of choices pasted together in what appears to be a random combination plays with the tight codes of official forms and tests. Patricia Waugh, in a discussion of “play with permutation and combination” in metafiction, points out that “the element of chance in combination may throw up a whole new possibility which rational exploration may not have discovered” (43, 44). Annharte’s Coyotrix-explorer gives us a mix of official language and vernacular assertions which generates for me connections between colonialism and landlessness, race and status, and reminds me, in the final line, of Aboriginal rights. The lines further unsettle possible colonized or colonizing readers by undermining the supposed logic of official authority through laughter, mocking, and mimicking the confusion generated by colonialism enforcing its own contradictory rules. As well, Annharte’s juxtapositions suggest to me the indigenous coyote anti-logic of ‘both ... and,’ of multiplicity and flexibility, right and “wrong answer,” renter and landlord, having no rights and the oldest rights in the country (*Coyote* 13).

Annharte: Lally asked me what I was alluding to with the question “*what is paler than stranger?*” (*Coyote* 13) — is it a reference to the “pale stranger” of the colonizing newcomers? Well, it is very strange and pales with the passing of time! Sounds like Hamlet’s ghost father! Perhaps the riddle means that even ndns (a cyberspace terms for Indians) don’t know the right answers much, but have to be told!

I have always been fascinated by how the exact colour of skin does not indicate cultural knowledge. I guess our memories are getting bleached out by the implanting of colonized images of ourselves. We are now taught Native Studies, which has been developed by white experts. Sure, the ndn was an informant. Much literature found in the Native Canadian section of a bookstore was written with the help of informants. We did not author our own texts, apparently. Our own writings and viewpoints were not being published. Also, many books were published that had appropriated voices or made bogus claims of identity or expertise. Maybe what I am protesting too much is that ndn writers are still often taken to be informants. They have to inform on others and not just express! It always pales the mind with strange ‘post-indian’ delusions.

I am in partial agreement with Gerald Vizenor's controversial views about contemporary Indian identity. I agree that representations of Indians are "simulations" (Vizenor 1) based on the absence of a native voice. GV or the Viz, as I call him, prefers to have that term *indians* rendered in italics. I prefer to use the spelling "ndns." He uses the term "postindian" in his writings and interviews to indicate that native authors have to work against the popular stereotypes as well as the historic accounts of "victimry" (84). Descriptions of Indigenous peoples fostered by social sciences and other academic writings have little or no connection to the portrayal of real and living people. Our vision must offer 'visionary' possibilities of ourselves as a continuing and contributing group though we are extremely diverse in thought, language and culture.

So if I asked myself the rhetorical question "what is paler than stranger?" then I would have to admit that I have a 'patchy' ndn identity. I have had to salvage and piece together sometimes opposing or contradictory ideas to meld into a cohesive personal identity. I have been 'impaled' by the struggle to find answers to Ojibwe history because it has had to become so 'underground' to avoid becoming a 'simulation.' Many simulations do, however, exist in spite of the protection of sacred knowledge.

I have used the Coyotrix persona (image) as a transformer of our internalized colonized mentality. The inner Coyotrix teases or tweaks meaning out of the verbiage that surrounds us. It would seem that the coyotrix is mixing it up or making it strange again. I think it is also a way of finding constituency and community with the use of words in a poem. I love the joking and even at times absolute ridicule of ideas and concepts held to be especially sacred or unquestionable. If there was an irony to the five hundred years of discovery, it would probably be that we have to 'rediscover' ourselves as colonized people and need to 'rediscover' more authentic identities congruent still with our original cultures as remembered or practised.

Grauer: A process of 'rediscovery' seems offered to non-Indigenous colonized readers as well. In "Coyote Columbus Cafe," Annharte moves the concept of discovery from its place in colonial history as a European North American originary event into an ongoing process of exploitation — it is both "a hard act to follow" and one that continues through present day, through such processes as "the catholic Rambo trend" (14):

now they stalk our organizations
get on the board of directors

become an Indian expert
and discover more Indians (14)

She also mocks wannabe appropriators who attend classes and read books such as “How to OutIndian Anyone” (15).¹ Attempting self-discovery through adopting Indigenous rituals is suspect: the Coyotrix advises us to “discover an authentic Indian colonizer / slaver inside you & check your tongue / if still forked continue to discover” (16). The wannabe also needs to watch out for “fakey” elders, who Annharte suggests, are on the “same team” or “sam tim,” in the mock dialect of the elder, bringing to my mind the “tim bits” of Tim Horton as a symbol of ersatz culture:

*You me sam tim.
Sam tim. Lak hocky tim.
Sch-oo — nash, my bah. Tinkobit.
Swish bank a cunt, hey bah! (Coyote 16)*

Annharte: The mock dialect provides the potential for punning. As well, saying ‘shish’ so much indicates the fakey talk because in Ojibwe, the soft sound usually replaces the swoosh sound of just saying ‘sh.’ I also liked the conspiratorial (‘spelling’) tone of saying ‘sh’ all the time. Recently I was sent an email about an ‘ndn dishonary’ so maybe that is in the works. A code to decode or detect medsin men fraud!

Grauer: Yet a continuing process of colonization is not all Annharte suggests in her play with ‘discovery’: Coyote continues, present in the age of television and welfare cheques:

*Check coyote channel check channel check coyote check Just thought
I'd check out my cheque what happened to my cheque do you have my
cheque. (17)*

Coyote can still be ‘channelled’ — but not through attempting to discover Indianness or ‘outindian’ others.

Annharte: I also recognize the money factor involved with identity and performance in the “channel check” inquiry (17). Most ndn audiences realize that we do gather at meetings because we are being sponsored or receiving a subsidy. In the case of the performance coyote, she has to check her doubts about the anticipated payment. The shared joke is the memory about the panic at the beginning of the month when there is a cheque day that takes precedence because of the need for sheer survival.

Grauer: In “Borrowing Enemy Language,” Annharte refers to activist and writer Jimmy Durham’s position that “Indigenous people shouldn’t

‘educate the oppressor’ because anything said or written in English will be used against us” (62). Near the end of “Coyote Columbus Cafe,” the Coyotrix says

when I’m having an Indian taco day
I discover it’s just about too late
not to educate the oppressor
but am I ever good at doing it (*Coyote* 17)

Annharte refuses the roles of educator and informant partly through her strategy of scavenging, replacing and exchanging words, turning us into scavengers who have to seek out meaning. Little is sacred to her scavenger personae, those foraging creatures. As the Coyotrix says at the beginning of “Coyote Columbus Cafe,” “how a weasel pops / in and out of old tunes” (11): the Coyotrix’s teasing irreverence on many fronts can be shocking and exhilarating. I find her playfulness liberating — “multiple answers possible” (10) — but there are strong views here, and I have no doubt education is meant to take place. Annharte’s poking, piecing and performing creates room — not a classroom, but a cafe — for an education that involves and promotes agency, diversity and re-discovery.

Annharte: Because it is the Year of the Dog (2006), the canine compulsion to chase one’s own tale still coincides with the identity quest (especially after years of colonization) as circular and not always a linear progression of pre-ndn, ndn, and therefore post-ndn. For me, the identity quest is fragmented because of the jargon freeze breeze as if we ndns were speaking in forked tongues. Bitching is very natural and should be celebrated in the Year of the Dog. If bitching heats up the dialogue, then maybe the chill of silencing ‘Others’ will be offset. I know the younger hip hop generation has begun to salivate on the naming of themselves as ‘savage.’ Now that is a weasel word pop!

NOTE

¹ The title of the book is a joke, though Annharte says she would love to write such a book.

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