

Afterword

Sources of Inspiration: The Birth of “For the Love of Words”: Aboriginal Writers of Canada

EMMA LAROCQUE

AS EARLY AS THE LATE 1970s, when I first began teaching the Canadian Native Literature course in what was then the quite new Department of Native Studies at the University of Manitoba, I started thinking of a conference that would celebrate Aboriginal peoples’ “love of words.” Even then and even in works of non-fiction it was difficult to miss the earlier First Nation and Métis writers’ inventive use of the English language. However, I noticed with some concern that what little critical attention was given Aboriginal literatures — including poetry, short stories, or other creative writing — was primarily focused on personal tragedy, social issues, or anthropology.

Over the last thirty years there has been exciting growth in both Aboriginal writing and the critical study of it. But again, critical treatment has largely ignored the stylized quality in Native writing, focusing instead on culture and postcolonial politics. Given our colonial history, this is perhaps inevitable. Nonetheless, as I point out in my opening address, even in resistance there is much beauty, grace, and complexity in Aboriginal literatures. A love of words kneaded skilfully is intrinsic to Aboriginal cultures, and it is important that this is not only appreciated but given the attention it deserves in contemporary critical contexts.

I grew up in Cree with Wehsakehcha, that chameleon teaser of the human condition. Wehsakehcha stories were not merely “told” or anthropologically recounted. Nor were they intended to be explicitly or necessarily functional or didactic. That would be too mundane. At least for my mother and grandmother, who dramatized Wehsakehcha into my heart. There was animation, movement, song, and play with words.

There was a sense of pure joy in the performative wording of metaphors, similes, and other tropes. Telling “stories” was a highly crafted art for the enjoyment of words — and it was the beginning of my long-held dream for this his toric conference.

The objectives of the conference, “For the Love of Words’: Aboriginal Writers of Canada,” was to bring together scholars and writers to explore the qualitative richness and fluidity of oral traditions and contemporary productions. It was an inspiring experience, and the participants brought such depth, illumination, and artistic and intellectual energy to the conference that we all felt a special issue based on the conference theme should be published. I know that what is “lived” in a gathering is quite different from what is written on paper. Still, I could not help but notice that in many of the papers given, the presenters avoided dealing with the artistic merits of the texts they were examining, and instead emphasized sociopolitical realities as well as cultural information, all of which is of course integral to Aboriginal experience. While all this generated stimulating discussions and lively debates around the implications of resistance aesthetics, I did find myself thinking that perhaps we could have another conference where we could further explore ways in which we can analyze and theorize imagination, beauty, and play of words, which is the stuff of Aboriginal reflection, satire, novels, novellas, plays, and poetry. And the stuff of Wehsakehcha. The challenge now is for all of us to find and/or to translate such a “love of words” in/to English.