

# Afterword

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I lost my talk  
The talk you took away . . .  
I speak like you  
I think like you  
I create like you  
The scrambled ballad, about my word. <sup>1</sup>

— Rita Joe

**I**N 2003, I WAS INVITED by the Canada Council for the Arts to tour Australia as part of a group of Native writers from across Canada. The objective was to meet and travel with Aboriginal writers from Australia, while doing a series of readings to showcase our own work and forge links between our two groups and countries. When the Canada Council contacted me, they gave me the names of the other Native writers from Canada who would also be on the tour. Because Native literary arts — the writing of contemporary poetry, fiction, and drama by Native people in Canada — only emerged in the late 1960s (beginning mostly in Native newspapers and magazines),<sup>2</sup> it is relatively new and the number of Native writers still small compared to non-Native writers. Therefore, most of us know each other, look forward to seeing each other when we can, and, in some ways are like a big family. This is not to say that our literary family hasn't grown. Younger writers continually join us just as older writers pass on their words and inspiration when they move on to the spirit world as Rita Joe did not so long ago.

However, when the Canada Council gave me the list of writers who would also be on the tour, there was one name that I didn't recognize. I had no idea who this writer was, and I certainly hadn't read her work, neither in books nor in journals. I was perplexed. Her name was Rita Mestokosho, and I was to learn that she was an Innu poet from Ekuanitshit (Mingan), in the territory of Nitassinan, located on the east coast of northern Quebec. I also learned that Rita's first language was Innu, and French her second. As Rita was not fluent in English, she

read nearly all her work in the Innu language while on tour, although at times she read some of it in French. Because I speak some French, I was able to communicate with her. And while a number of the writers did speak their own Indigenous languages, Rita was the only Innu speaker. It is easy to imagine then the isolation that she must have felt. As we know, language can either bring people together or separate them.

It occurred to me then that here we were, an assembly of Native writers from Canada touring Australia with the goal of forging links with other Indigenous writers while “one of our own” stood on the periphery of our literary family, isolated by a linguistic barrier. To say the least, it was ironic. I subsequently had the opportunity to read Rita Mestokosho’s poetry, along with other French-speaking Native writers, thanks to Maurizio Gatti’s groundbreaking anthology *Littérature Amérindienne du Québec*. Struggling through the anthology in my far from perfect French, a door opened for me as I read the thirty-one writers and learned about their cultures, their experiences, their facility with language. And it also occurred to me that there are writers right here in Canada whom we, meaning English readers, need to know better — for these writers, too, are part of our literary family. I wouldn’t hesitate to say that these writers too, want to know what is going on in English Canada. I think for Rita Mestokosho the tour was also an eye-opener, for although she could not understand all that was being said in English, she undoubtedly heard and saw the vibrancy and passion of other Native writers from other parts of Canada. I certainly heard and saw it in her work.

When Michèle Lacombe and Heather Macfarlane approached me to write the afterword to this collection of essays, I agreed immediately. Having attended countless conferences on Native literature, both in Canada and the United States, the Carleton conference where the papers in this special section were initially presented was the first time that I encountered a comparative approach to Native literature focusing on both the English and French languages. As far as I recall, all the conferences that I have attended have always examined the literature in the context of the English language. Certainly, at times, various scholars have made reference to the use of Native languages within the body of English-language produced work, but to my mind, their approach has always been cursory at best, providing more or less a passing glance. For the most part, the presenters have always been ostensibly unilingual

English speakers focusing on what they know and have been trained to do, examining English-language texts. And yet colonization on Turtle Island, in what is now Canada, began with the arrival of Jacques Cartier in 1534. Moreover, the French and Native languages dominated relations until the cession of New France to Britain 1763 — the French fact in Canada soundly established and leaving an indelible mark indeed by that time.

Another reason that I agreed to do this afterword is because I grew up in northern Ontario in the 1960s and 1970s and experienced Canada's linguistic divide first-hand. What I remember about growing up in Chapleau was the sense of isolation each of the various groups, anglophone, francophone, immigrant, and Native, experienced in relation to the others. This is not to say that we did not acknowledge one another at school or at hockey games, for example, and in some instances even marry each other, but for the most part each group tended to keep to themselves. Interestingly, an unusually large number Native people lived in town compared to most northern communities, where Native peoples tended to be isolated on reserves. The reasons are complex, but undoubtedly the residential school located on the outskirts of town until the 1950s, the huge Department of Lands and Forests base, the railway terminus, and the three lumber mills had something to do with it. The point is that Native people living in town came both from the vicinity as well as from outlying regions like northern Quebec, and, in hindsight, it is strangely ironic that even we were divided along linguistic lines, namely by the colonizer's languages. Accordingly, even the Native people lived in either the English or French parts of the community. I wonder now about the friends I might have made but never did.

With a larger Native population in English Canada, it follows that there are naturally more Native people writing in English. In fact, we know that since the 1980s the number of Native writers working in English has continued to grow steadily, and that since the 1990s critical reception to the literature by mostly non-Native academics, has also grown by leaps and bounds. One would be hard pressed to find a university without a minimum of one course in Native literature these days or at the least Native texts included on Canadian literature course. But what of Native writers in francophone Canada; what is going on there? While there is some work being done in this area — I'm thinking here

of the work being done by Maurizio Gatti, for example, in unilingual French, and of the papers included in this special section —it is still comparatively new compared to the scholarship in English Canada. There are a number of reasons for this, but unquestionably it is connected to Quebec's own colonizing history, its place in English North America, as well as its sense of nationalism and nationhood. This to say that the study of Native literature in Quebec is still in its infant stage when compared to the surge of interest in English Canada.

While Rita Joe's seminal poem "I Lost My Talk" warns us of the dangers of losing one's Native language, and it is certainly paramount to protect and promote Native languages, we invariably see the majority of Native writers in Canada working either in English or French — with some embedding their Native languages within these dominant languages. Of course, this has to do with centuries of colonization, the loss of language, and the intergenerational impact of the residential school experience, but it also has to do with Native writers wanting their work to reach as wide an audience as possible. The writing in French and English will not abate; if anything, it will continue to grow, and if scholars want to get the full picture of what is going on in "Indian country," they will have to tap into both sources, French and English (not to mention the Native languages themselves). I would even go so far as to say that to examine only one of these bodies of work is like reading only half a text (or maybe two-thirds). And so I welcome this comparative collection of essays with open arms. I will close by saying that such a comparative approach not only indicates the potential of the field but hopefully serves as a beacon for things to come.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> From Rita Joe, "I Lost My Talk." in *Song of Eskasoni*.

<sup>2</sup> See Armand Garnet Ruffo, "Where the Voice Was Coming From." *Across Cultures Across Borders: Canadian Aboriginal and Native American Literatures*. Eds. Paul DePasquale, Renate Eigenbrod, and Emma LaRocque. (Peterborough: Broadview, 2010): 171-193.

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