

Storytelling and Storytellers

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Abstract

Ethnic and cultural identities might be considered mere social and anthropological concepts with which scholars work throughout their research activity. I believe that the history of the two ethnic groups chosen for this research paper confirms and at the same time proves that they are vital elements in order to keep together a group of people who share the same values and beliefs. In the same work we find a brief description of ethnic identity features and examples. Therefore we find out that, frequently, an ethnic group is a distinct category of the population in a larger society characterized by a different culture. Distinct ethnic and cultural groups were known even 2500 years ago and researchers consider that ethnic groups might be the consequence of migrations of whole societies (or partial), military conquest or changes of political boundaries. Among the features that characterize ethnic groups we note the control of a territory where the future generations may perpetuate the initial heritage. We find also another case: different ethnic groups occupy the same area but use different resources.

Keywords

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This When Penny Petrone describes the Indian literature, she makes distinction between literate cultures, represented by written texts and word, namely the ancient oral traditions. Later on we shall find that we cannot speak about differences in terms of more important and less important, more interesting and less interesting or more well-grounded and less well-grounded. The presumption that written texts are more reliable and worthy to be taken into account against oral literatures turns out to be a false one. Both types of literature dwell, to a certain extent, on the same matters: the Genesis, religious approaches, war issues, the relation between man and nature, the relation between man and Divinity. We have considered appropriate to treat this subject separately in this work because in both our novels we find the motif of storytelling: in *Halfbreed* we meet Cheecum, Maria Campbell's grandmother, who often told her stories of the Rebellion and of the Halfbreed people, while in *Medicine River*, Lionel is one of the elders on the reserve and he travels abroad in order to tell stories about their life in reserve but also their past.

Maria Campbell describes herself as a storyteller, in spite of the fact that she is the writer of four books and co-author of a play. *Halfbreed* (1973) was her first publication, an autobiography that describes the situation of the contemporary

Métis. *Little Badger and the Fire Spirit* (1977), *Riel's People* (1978) and *People of the Buffalo* (1978) were written in answer to needs expressed by her grandchildren. *The Book of Jessica* (1989) includes the play she co-authored with Linda Griffiths and documents the difficulties of cross-cultural projects. She helps run the Gabriel Crossings Foundation, a native arts school dedicated to the preservation of traditional culture and to the arts.

Thomas King's short stories and poems, which began to appear in journals in Canada and the United States, reflect his dual heritage (his mother is of Greek and German descent and his father Cherokee). The subject matter and the style of his stories and poems remember two categories: Western, modernist short stories about adult relationships and native, orally derived stories about the Trickster. His first novel, *Medicine River* (1990) is interesting because of the way it combines a modern setting with characters not too far removed from the character types of Trickster stories. *Medicine River* is a moral story about individuals in a community and the ways he interacts with it.

At this point of the paper I should provide a brief description of Storyteller who turned out to be not only a skilled entertainer, but was also an historian, a teacher and a healer as well. Stories could not be told just anytime – each group had their specific time (for instance, some were winter stories, others were told only in the summer or spring). Stories are precious to all Aboriginal people, but to the Halfbreed they are the greatest inheritance of all. Very often it is compared to Land, and we are familiar to their view about land: you can't give away because it doesn't belong to you. Land represents the Mother. No one has the right to tell a story that is not his/her own and if they do this thing it is only if the story had been given to them or if the story was purchased by way of trade. Even then, the storyteller must begin the story by telling how he/she came by it and the name of the original creator. The storyteller who had been given the story could not pass it on to anyone else without the permission or prior consent. Before the European's arrival to Canada and for a long period after this arrival, the natives of Canada had an oral literature that had been transmitted from generation to generation. It is characterized by storytelling and public ceremony which involves oration and song. Indian peoples do not have a common literary heritage because tribal literatures are specific to each of the five cultural groups in Canada (Eastern Woodlands, Plains, Palteau, sub-Arctic and Northwest Coast where more than fifty languages are spoken. Such an oral culture reflect a great diversity in their histories and literatures.

In her work *Native Literature in Canada. From the Oral Tradition to the Present*. Penny Petrone sustains that the culture inherited by any group of people is more accurately determined by its language and that an advanced and complex society is a society whose members share the same languages. Indian languages have a complex structure and are used with great precision. For a better comprehension we will refer to the nineteenth-century Ojibway, George Copway, the first Canadian Indian who published a book in English and who quoted the scholars who studied the Indian languages: "every word has its appropriate meaning, and with additional syllables give additional force to the meanest of most word" (quoted in Petrone 1990:9). In ancient oral traditions the word has a great

importance, either it is spoken, intoned, or sung. To the spoken word is attributed the power to change the physical world through language. Words are considered to possess the power to change reality. "They are life, substance, reality. The word lived before earth, sun or moon came into existence" (Petrone 1990, 10). The history of a people was carried in the spoken word. Europeans who had contact with Indians were very surprised to find that such a people who knew nothing about wheel and writing knew the power of the word. Native people from Canada have created a vast and diversified body of oral narratives. Each linguistic group has its own features regarding the regional ecologies, values, customs, religious and philosophical beliefs. Many narratives were considered private property in some tribes, or in societies within the tribe (for example, the Midewewin Society of the Ojibway) and were owned by a particular person or family. This meant that only a limited number of persons, usually the initiated elders, knew them. Therefore, only they had the right to tell or to perform the associated rituals. Such restricted access to certain knowledge ensured their power and authority. There were cases in which many stories were lost because there were no successors left to remember them. Nevertheless, there were many stories which could be heard by everyone and which were not necessarily associated with rituals and ceremonies. According to the same author, Penny Petrone, such stories were ordinary and they were told for entertainment or instruction.

Storytelling and storytellers are not simply ancient cultural elements of Indian and Halfbreed national identity. At the contrary, they are currently existing in Canadian cultural space. We have chosen the most representative examples of organization which focus their activity on preserving the art of storytelling:

A. Storytellers of Canada/Raconteurs Du Canada is the National organization for maintaining and practicing oral traditions in Canada. Membership includes a coordinator, local representatives and local storytelling groups who encourage membership.

According to their mission statement the purpose of this organization is "to function as national representative for those involved in maintaining and practicing the oral tradition of storytelling across the country. It is dedicated to furthering the art of storytelling and bringing the diverse peoples of Canada together through story". Among its aims: to promote, support and contribute to the growth of storytellers' work, and to ensure the continuing development of the art of storytelling as an integral aspect of Canadian culture. Furthermore we shall expose its objectives and services which Storytellers can use according to their website:

1. "To promote and further develop storytelling as an art form by providing services to members and to the general public.
2. To facilitate communication among storytellers nationwide and to develop links with storytelling groups and organizations internationally.

3. To encourage the participation of all the peoples of Canada by promoting storytelling as a common root of our differing cultures”.

- ”Advocates for the art form of storytelling;
- Advocates for storytelling groups and individual tellers;
- Provides opportunities for education, training, and professional development;
- Promotes communication between storytelling groups and storytellers;
- Maintains a website;
- Provides a directory of members;
- Provides conferences and meeting opportunities;
- Provides a newsletter;
- Develops and maintains a principal contact with other national gatherings and professional associations”.

Another organization we consider worthy of our attention is

B. The Storytellers School Of Toronto/Storytelling Toronto” which sponsors the annual festival in Toronto, offers courses in Storytelling, publishes a journal titled *Appleseed Quarterly*, a newsletter titled *Pippin* and supports storytelling projects”. Storytelling Toronto describes itself as “a registered, non-profit charitable organization that supports creative work in the art of storytelling. The School publishes *Pippin* (our newsletter); offers courses; promotes and subsidizes the work of storytellers in education; and produces the Toronto Festival of Storytelling” (<http://www.storytellingtoronto.org/>). Their activity is focused on inspiring, encouraging and supporting the art of storytelling for listeners, tellers and for those who have not heard. The objectives noted are:

- ”To teach courses in the art of storytelling;
- To promote and celebrate artistic excellence in the art of storytelling;
- To actively develop programs such as professional development workshops for use in schools, libraries, and cultural groups;
- To serve as a referral centre for performing storytellers;
- To sponsor festivals and storytelling events;
- To promote the collection and telling of stories in rural and urban Canadian society;
- To serve as a major North American centre of resources for storytellers;
- To be the centre of a community of those interested in storytelling”.

I have decided to emphasize the importance of the ancient activity of storytelling and the status of storytellers because it is obviously that currently it is a frequent element in the Native culture (worthy to be integrated in literature and in

national schemes which promote the preservation of cultural heritage) and it proves to be associated with the longevity of these ethnic groups.

In Maria Campbell's same novel we find more than the White/Native cultural clash, we also meet the Indian/Halfbreed difference, thus hybridity becoming a third space defined by Homi Bhabha like the space between "the cutting edge of translation and negotiation that carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (quoted in Bottez 2004: 229). The complex archetypal mechanism that brings about hybridization is "The Other". As we will see in the following quotation the wish to be the other is met on both sides. We do not witness only the wish of the colonized to be the Other, and to enjoy his rights and benefits but also to the colonizer's attraction to something new and unfamiliar. "This was common in our area: the White men were crazy about our women and the White women, although they were not as open forward about it, were the same about men" (94).

Cultural identities are the "unstable points of identification . . . which are made, within the discourses of history and culture" (quoted in Richard L.W. Clarke). In order to understand its formation Hall explains the model of Caribbean identity. The "black Caribbean identities could be seen as "framed by two axes or vectors, simultaneously operative: the vector of similarity or continuity [the first model of identity]; and the vector of difference and rupture" (quoted in Richard L.W. Clarke). Paradoxically, what is shared by the colonized individuals is "precisely the experience of a profound discontinuity" (quoted in Richard L.W. Clarke). The Native oral cultures reflect the great diversity of their histories and literatures. Canada's Indian peoples do not share a common literary heritage precisely because of the existence of the five cultural groups which have their specific languages. In spite of this diversity, the unifying element from the point of view of rediscovered ethnic identity is the colonizer's arrival and the discontinuity triggered by this event.

Taking into account the notions of both displacement and deferral which discuss the Caribbean ethnicity, Stuart Hall implies that the Caribbean is neither an isolated and autonomous place which exists in a social and historical vacuum nor is the past separable from the present. On the contrary, the Caribbean society as we know it today is a dynamic entity due to its relation to other socio-historical entities whose inhabitants migrated to and came to form the region. Therefore, we may find the same explanation for the Halfbreed society which similarly to the Caribbean one is the result of a dynamic process and of two entities which interacted, at a certain point in the history, through colonization, dislocation and assimilation. In the case of the Native peoples we may preserve only a part of Hall's assertion namely that they represent one of the two entities which interacted in a particular moment but their formation as an ethnic group is not produced by this clash of civilization. Hall admits the irreversibility of history and of the colonizers' influence on the colonized. He also states that a continuous collision with the colonizer is not favourable for the colonized because it turns out to be frozen "into some timeless zone of primitive and unchanging past" . Maria Campbell argues the reason which stands at the basis of this novel" (...) and if I

was to know peace I would have to search within myself. That is when I decided to write about my life. (...) I write this for all of you, to tell you what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in our country. I want to tell you about the joys and sorrows, the oppressing poverty, the frustrations and the dreams" (2). Her novel is not an offence brought to the Whites nor a means to bring to life some sort of guilt for Halfbreeds' harsh life and dramatic moments. This is a way of reconciliation and of accepting the past, since it turns out to be irreversible.

Writing with reference to Jamaica, Hall states that an "Afro-Caribbean identity became historically available" (quoted in Richard L.W. Clarke) to Caribbean only in the 1970's through an "indigenous cultural revolution", through the "impact on popular life of the post-colonial revolution, the civil rights struggles, the culture of Rastafarianism and the music of reggae" (quoted in Richard L.W. Clarke). These and related factors made possible or became the "metaphors, the figures or signifiers of a new construction of 'Jamaican-ness'" (quoted in Richard L.W. Clarke). From this point of view, Africa "'has acquired an imaginative or figurative value that we can name and feel'. Our belongingness to it constitutes what Benedict Anderson calls an 'imaginary community'" (quoted in Richard L.W. Clarke). What make an ethnic group to be aware of his need to declare its identity and cultural heritage are precisely the moments which involve the constraint to reaffirm their common values, history and mindset, briefly to reaffirm their cohesion. Such moments can be revolutions, riots, rebellions and civil rights struggles. These moments endanger the unity of an ethnic group which until then it might not have felt the desire to express its identity. Once it is aware of the oppressions and the peril of being annihilated as ethnicity, it resorts to a variety of methods to preserve itself: violence or cultural movements.

Maria Campbell's exposition of her life is in fact the cause of her people, a political manifesto of an aboriginal culture which is called by Foucault as a "field of struggle". It represents a political manifesto because it gives voice to an oppressed minority in a world of imperial powers. This minority resorted to a form of resisting cultural, political and economic oppression and of communicating their needs after 1971 when Multiculturalism became official policy in Canada.

Native art had also the role to supplement their income and paid for food, clothing and other necessary things. It was an efficient way which helped them to buy food many times especially when the price of fur was down. While creating the so called Indian stuff, in fact they were passing on cultural traditions and sharing knowledge. They were, as an old Marxist said to me one day when we were talking about the "radicals and revolutionaries." Among the artists we should mention the poet, Pauline Johnson, who lived between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. In both novels, the main characters use introspection in order to rediscover themselves and to set up relations with the members of the community. Once they know themselves, they acknowledge where they come from, what is the history of their ancestors, what are their principles and values, briefly once they arrived to their cultural identity they may become spokesmen of their community. Introspection is also used by the authors in order to

build a bridge between their characters and readers. As characters rediscover their inner self, they are joined by readers.

According to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy introspection is, as the term is used in contemporary philosophy, a means of learning about a person's own current, or past, mental states or processes. It is important to mention that there a number of other methods through which one can learn about his own mind in the same way one can learn about others' minds; such methods consist of "reading psychology texts, by observing facial expressions (in a mirror), by examining readouts of brain activity, by noting patterns of past behaviour". In the same source we find that the process of introspection can dwell on consciousness, emotion, free will, personal identity, thought, belief and imaginary perceptions. These are all elements that can be found in our novels and indeed they are analyzed from an introspective point of view. For a process to be considered as "introspective" it must meet the following conditions. Chiefly, *the mentality condition*: introspection is a process that usually generates knowledge, judgments, or beliefs about *mental* events, states, or processes, and not about events outside one's mind. From this perspective, it is different from sensory processes that normally offer information about outward or the non-mental aspects and events of the individual's body.

What makes *Halfbreed* an important and distinctive novel is that a simple autobiography speaks about the larger issues of discrimination, poverty, and oppression faced by the Métis and the difficulties and harsh life of Métis women in particular. Her autobiography is in fact, as Jack McClelland called it, a biography with purpose because Maria Campbell's story is not merely a personal one, but also gives voice to the Métis as a whole and to Métis women, in particular. As the author narrates her life she analyzes historic events such as the rebellion led by Louis Riel, states like the one of outcast and rejection by Whites and Natives, processes like the one of dislocation and land confiscation by Land Improvement District authorities and feelings like her and her family's when they were ill-treated by the White community and when they felt shame and no pride for being Halfbreed or of despair when their leaders are corrupted with political positions in order to stop their future rebellions.

The introspection helps the author to create communication with her readers and to deliver them a better understanding of the Postmodern Canada: "I hurt inside when I think of those people. You sometimes see that generation today: the crippled, bent old grandfathers and grandmothers on town and city skid rows; you find them in the bush waiting to die; or baby-sitting grandchildren while the parents are drunk. And there are some who even after a hundred years continue to struggle for equality and justice for their people. The road for them is never-ending and full of frustrations and heart-break". The lack of confidence dominates the old generations as well as the new ones. While grandfathers hope to die, the family fathers drink and neglect their families. In this context, poverty, violence and rejection urge Halfbreeds to accept their status and the reality.

Jim Douglas (Douglas & McIntyre of the Vancouver publishing house.)

asserted about *Halfbreed* the following: "It is not an angry book, but it will make you angry; not a bitter book but it will shame you: not a humorous [sic] book but it will make you smile. It has a happy ending but there is no happiness for her people. And she writes it for her people, particularly for the young girls. For their sake she will let herself be publicised...". *Halfbreed* is considered to a book about reconciliation with the past, with sufferings and harsh life they had to endure. In order to achieve reconciliation, Campbell considers appropriate to admit the truth, to accept it and to become the voice of her people. Finally, her last mission is to help the members of her community understand that they have to regain their pride, to learn to consider themselves important members of Canada and to rediscover their ethnic identity and cultural heritage.

We consider *Medicine River* as well as *Halfbreed* is as a case study of race and ethnic relations in Canada and of relation between a person within a familiar and yet a new community. Will Sampson, the main character chronicles the lives of a group of contemporary First Nations people in Western Canada. The story is recounted by the protagonist in a conversational fashion, with frequent flashbacks to earlier moments of his life. In his novel, *Medicine River*, Thomas King creates the story of a little community which reflects the whole Native nation. Will's return is used as a pretext to show the Native community of a little town which seems to be dynamic and colourful in its daily life.

The author uses introspection in order to make the non-native readers understand and perceive better the lives of the First Nations as a whole through the agency of a small scale community. In the same novel we find references both to the past of First Nations and to the present times. Thus, we meet Lionel, the representative character of an old generation with its principles and values, Marta Oldcrow known as marriage doctor because "that was what she fixed better" , Floyd's grandmother and her dead son, "a real good storyteller" who "always had a funny story to tell. He travelled all over the place and always came back with a good story". Characters like Joe Bigbear, Harlen's brother about whom Harlen asserts that "Joe's okay, Will. We're just different" and Louise reflect the propensity of the community, particularly of the new generations like Louise and of those persons who spent a lot of time outside of the community like Joe Bigbear to adjust to different principles, such as individual independence.

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