

Introduction

A Layering of Voices: Aboriginal Oral Traditions

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Oral traditions are distinct ways of knowing and the means by which knowledge is reproduced, preserved and conveyed from generation to generation. Oral traditions form the foundation of Aboriginal societies, connecting speaker and listener in communal experience and uniting past and present in memory. To understand oral tradition as a form of knowledge shaping the work of Aboriginal artists and authors, for example, one listens to the oral narratives in order to know how their voices might be heard within the communities they come from as well as the communities in which they are received. Kimberly Blaeser explains that the oral tradition *informs* literary works by Aboriginal people as writers *translate* “not only oral language but form, culture, and perspective” (1999: 53), for there is “a dedication to an oral aesthetic in the rhetoric, and sometimes in the written works, of many Native authors” (1999: 55). This ‘textualized orality,’ to borrow Susan Gingell’s term (2004: 286), infuses literature written in English by Aboriginal people, and its presence points to the deep influence of the oral tradition in the work. In *(Ad)dressing Our Words*, Armand Garnet Ruffo notes that “[t]he Oral Tradition continues to influence contemporary Aboriginal literatures profoundly . . .” resulting in “a stylistic and thematic hybrid of the oral and written, the past and present, the Aboriginal and the Western” (2001: 6). The double nature of the work that Ruffo describes shows how the difference between oral and written influences the way we think about stories because it is inscribed in the history of contact, but also how necessary it is to go beyond this history in order to understand the art forms created in contemporary Aboriginal culture. One of the goals of the present volume, therefore, is to emphasize the constant presence of Aboriginal oral traditions in contemporary Aboriginal societies.

The perception that Aboriginal oral traditions represent an earlier period in Aboriginal societies--as if the oral were merely a stage in historical development on the way to the written--has much to do with the production of what Gingell calls “textualized orature,” that is, literature that has been recorded and transcribed (2004: 286). The process of writing down oral stories adds layers of meaning through recording, transcribing, translating and editing for the page, and the damage that can be done when stories are recast through this process is well known. Interpreting

oral stories on the page means uncovering each of these layers. The presentation of oral narratives as folklore suitable for children is one of the assaults on Aboriginal tradition that Andrea Bear Nicholas uncovers in the essay “The Assault on Aboriginal Oral Traditions: Past and Present” which is published here. At the same time, communities are undoing this colonial legacy by recording oral tradition, as Murdena Marshall explains, for the sole purpose of teaching and passing the tradition on to future generations (1997: 52). Efforts by communities to reclaim and repatriate stories that have been recorded by outsiders are apparent in the writing collected in this volume, in particular Stephen Augustine’s “Silas T. Rand’s Work Among the Mi’kmaq” and Catherine Martin’s “The Little Boy Who Lived with Muini’skw (Bear Woman).”

Indeed, it was thinking about Rand and his archived work that encouraged the creation of the conference leading to this collection of essays. In 2002, when Renate was teaching at Acadia University where Rand’s archives are housed, the Mi’kmaq artists, writers and academics who responded to her queries about Rand and his collection *Legends of the Micmacs*, which was published posthumously in 1894 and had been out of print since the 1970s, made it clear that composite research was needed to access the many layers of Rand’s missionary work with the Mi’kmaq and his translations of their stories, research that had to be done in both the archives and in the Mi’kmaq communities. The interest in Rand’s work by people like filmmaker Catherine Martin, historian Don Julien from the Confederacy of Mainland Mi’kmaq, Patrick and Elaine Johnson in Mi’kmaq Studies at the University of Cape Breton and Wolfville citizen, Wayne Swift, whose reproduced CD ROMS of Rand’s book have made the so-called legends more accessible, further inspired the creation of an academic event that would emphasize Mi’kmaq oral traditions. But, although Rand was a key figure in the recording process, the research was not about him. As Peter Sanger points out in *The Stone Canoe*, the recently published (re)translation of two stories collected by Rand, although he knew five or six people who tended these stories, only Rand “has become an entry in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*” (2007: 18). Instead of following this conventional practice of favouring both the written and the one who writes, this book emphasizes the importance of oral narratives in their communal contexts. Because written records are still considered to be more trustworthy and valid, there is continued resistance to the inclusion of orally transmitted narratives not only in literary scholarship but also in other settings, be it the environmental debates where Aboriginal perspectives as reflected in oral texts are hardly ever heard; in the courts where, as Drew Mildon shows, they are still questioned even despite the Delgamuukv decision; or in the classroom.

Learning from these insights with the support and encouragement of those mentioned, the idea for the conference came to be. Together with Robert Leavitt, Director of the Mi'kmaq-Maliseet Institute at the University of New Brunswick, we began to plan a conference that would address Aboriginal oral traditions beyond the Mi'kmaq context and would comprise theory, ethics and practice. We are grateful for the support of the Gorsebrook Research Institute, especially Director, Colin Howell, and Jackie Logan, who worked tirelessly on the conference and on this book. Financial support was provided by an Aid to Scholarly Workshops and Conferences grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

In April 2005, "Aboriginal Oral Traditions: Theory, Practice, Ethics" created an opportunity for people working with Aboriginal oral traditions to come together and to exchange information and experiences over the course of three days. It was a meeting place for elders, scholars, artists and students engaged in collaborative research between Aboriginal communities, universities and the public sector from all over North America, from different First Nations and Native American communities, from universities, government departments and other public institutions. Among the participants were researchers from a number of First Nations or Aboriginal communities, including Anishnabe, Blackfoot, Cherokee, Cree, Maliseet, Métis, Mohawk, Passamaquoddy and Mi'kmaq communities. Participants offered presentations demonstrating how oral traditions have been subjected to study and also how those fields of study, including anthropology, education, environmental studies, ethnology, history, law, linguistics, literary studies, musicology, Native studies and sociology, are transformed by the knowledge preserved in oral traditions. The knowledge exchanged centered on oral traditions and knowledge of the environment, economy, literature, education and/or health of communities; oral traditions and the continuance of language and culture; and the effects of intellectual property rights, electronic media and public discourse on oral traditions.

The access the conference afforded participants to research and expertise on a broad range of topics pertaining to oral traditions took on a form that reflected the topic in its orality. With daily plenary sessions, roundtable discussions and activities, the meeting became a dialogue that flowed from session to session over the three days. A trip to Acadia University brought together the archivists and librarians most familiar with the Rand papers with those interested in the Mi'kmaq oral tradition as well as those with the knowledge of the Mi'kmaw language and culture needed to study them. The experience was strengthened by the presence and participation of the keynote speakers, Stephen Augustine and Greg

Young-Ing, who attended all the sessions and generously shared their expertise. Throughout the conference, the voices of speakers resonated with others as participants returned time and again to each other's words. Appropriately, much of the conference was oral, and our decision not to record and to transcribe the proceedings seemed to affirm that experience and to separate it from any written work that might follow. Unfortunately, presentations like Kerry Prosper's "The Mi'kmaq and Kat (American Eel) Relationships—Researching with Respect," "Nugu'Lnuigtu Usgu'tmnej" by Alfred Metallic and Diane Mitchell, and Ken Paul's "Traditional Ecological Knowledge" are not represented in this collection nor is it possible to represent the free-flowing discussion that took place during the roundtable on issues regarding compensation for elders' expertise presided over by Isabelle Knockwood and Trudy Sable. (A complete list of presentations can be found at www.smu.ca/research/gri.htm.)

At the end of the conference, participants were invited to continue the discussion in the form of this book. We are grateful for the response of the authors included in this collection. Rather than trying to capture what happened during those three days, this is an attempt to communicate ideas expressed and developed in a new way. With this collection of essays we hope to extend the oral exchanges of the conference by distributing some of them in a new context and in printed form, accessible to libraries, schools and communities. In this way we hope to give the conference another life beyond those three days in 2005.

Like the conference, this collection of essays comprises the three aspects which are part of a deeper understanding of Aboriginal oral traditions: theory, practice and ethics. Ethics is of particular importance given the context of decolonization in any scholarship on Indigenous texts. According to Peter Kulchyski, the academic discipline of Native Studies is "*structured around an ethical approach and an ethical call, the call of Aboriginal peoples for justice, the call to name forms of oppression*" (2000: 14, emphasis in the original) including, one might add, the silencing and the misrepresentation of the oral traditions which form the basis of Indigenous knowledge systems. Likewise, ethical concerns constitute a thread running through all the papers in this collection—from discussion of marginalization, dismissal and misinterpretation to the transformation of oral traditions into written and performed oral pieces and the validation and repatriation of Aboriginal oral traditions.

As Andrea Bear Nicholas points out, Aboriginal oral narratives are layered and complex. To understand them means serious engagement. Therefore, it is easier for outsiders to replace them with reductive cultural forms like the medicine wheel or to summarize them into digestible units of TEK. What is so important about oral forms of knowledge is context.

These contexts may not be readily available, and they demand protocol and copyright laws, as Greg Young-Ing explains, that are culture-specific and that cannot be learned in a short time. That the process is as important as the product can be seen in Catherine Martin's path to becoming a Mi'kmaq filmmaker: how to translate the oral stories into the film medium was not only her individual decision but involved the collaboration with the community. Drew Milton's contribution which, together with Stephen Augustine's essay, discusses Aboriginal oral traditions in the courts, illustrates the misunderstandings that still abound when the written and the oral clash--in spite of poststructuralist theorizing. Underneath scholarly discourse, there still lurks the colonial binary (with all its connotations) of the oral and the written associated with an ongoing power imbalance of dominant Canadian and Aboriginal societies, so that what is debated in the contributions to this book goes beyond the borders of the academy. And yet, this book also addresses ways of undermining the oral/written binary along with its power imbalance and opens up debates about collaboratively created composite texts.

Contributors to this volume see ethically defensible forms that resist the control of non-Aboriginal scholars or of the recording technologies yet that use both in order to regain agency over their traditions. Sophie McCall's "Amplified Voices: Rebecca Belmore's Reinvention of Recording Technologies" shows how Belmore's deconstructions of anthropological method and representation challenges the oral-written binary. The essays by Tasha Hubbard and Qwo-Li Driskill respectively take the elimination of the binary one step further by dismissing it as irrelevant. Tasha Hubbard's "Voices Heard in the Silence, History Held in the Memory: Ways of Knowing Jeannette Armstrong's 'Threads of Old Memory'" clearly demonstrates the continued presence of oral aesthetic in Aboriginal literature today. Qwo-Li Driskill's "Theatre as Suture: Grassroots Performance, Decolonization, and Healing" demonstrates the decolonizing potential of oral traditions. By analyzing the presence of the oral in the written texts of Aboriginal literature and theatrical performance, these scholars resist genre definitions and highlight the healing power of the verbal and performance arts.

The power and significance of Aboriginal oral traditions reaches beyond the resistance to and transformation of written forms. Indigenous peoples throughout the world participate in the layering of oral-written voices and add their own culture-specific layer like the Warlpiri women whose work is discussed in Michèle Grossman's "Fighting with our tongues, fighting for our lives: talk, text and amodernity in *Warlpiri Women's Voices: Our Lives, Our History*." Greg Young-Ing's "Ethical and Moral Issues in the Transformation of Traditional Knowledge Through

Indigenous Practice” explicitly addresses a global context and synthesizes the issues facing these communities as they fight to protect their cultural and intellectual property. His contribution draws attention not only to the wide-ranging implications of Indigenous oral traditions but also to the urgency of supportive scholarship that embraces theory, practice and ethics. As Kimberly Blaeser states: “Through speaking, hearing, and retelling, we reaffirm our relationship with our nations, our tribal communities, our family networks. We begin to understand our position in the long history of our people” (1999: 54). We hope that this book will encourage future endeavours, both oral and written, which will help to strengthen and reaffirm such relationships.

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