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Reviews

Before the Country: Native Renaissance, Canadian Mythology. By Stephanie McKenzie. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. 233 pages. $55.00 cloth; $27.95 paper.

Stephanie McKenzie, in contemplating the interconnectedness of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal texts in the 1960s and 1970s, offers a comprehensive exploration of the influence of Aboriginal writing on Canadian postmodernism and an intriguing discussion on the fallacies of a "Day of Atonement," Northrop Frye's term for the potential reparation between Natives and non-Natives at the time of Canada's centennial. McKenzie clarifies her argument by reiterating it a number of times throughout her study, a welcome elucidation of a potentially perplexing subject: "In Canada, Aboriginal voices would arrest, with collective acts of remembrance, the teleological trajectory of what could be called romantic nationalism" (8).

Published by the University of Toronto Press, McKenzie's treatise exhibits a number of technical problems, including the misspelling of the name Kroetsch in the subheading of chapter 5: "Robert Kroestch's *Badlands* and Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café*" (136). Chapter 2, "The Seventh Generation," also shows a number of mechanical difficulties in the misspelling of the words *significant* ("signifiant") on page 50 and *cardinal* ("Carninal") on page 52 and a faulty quotation on page 52: "In a small pamphlet entitled *Two Articles* (1971), Wilfred Pelletier made the following assertion: 'Indians really don't want to fight for their rights,' Pelletier stated." In chapter 3 McKenzie interprets a block quotation on page 65 and repeats the words of Australian Aboriginal scholars she has already used in that very block quotation just half a page up. Perhaps the intensity of her deliberation on the exchange between a desire for a Canadian mythology and a Native Renaissance led her or the University of Toronto Press to mistake the correct title of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's work, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, for *Decolonizing Mythologies* both on page 67 and in the works cited section (212).

Despite these oversights, McKenzie offers an important interpretation of the place of Aboriginal Canadian letters in the 1960s and 1970s. Cognizant of the dangers of asserting definitive truths as an author, she states quite plainly

and reasonably early in her investigation that she will "not offer neat answers to the large questions" *Before the Country* posits, opting instead to "story the nation." McKenzie signifies that she will demonstrate how Canadian history "shifted shape" with the proliferation of Aboriginal writing in the years immediately preceding and directly following Canada's centennial (8).

Postmodernism underscores McKenzie's concern with Northrop Frye's preference for mythology over history. Whereas history imposes a rigid definition of truth in the pursuit of a patriotic national story, one that McKenzie dubs romantic nationalism, mythology—particularly Aboriginal mythology in Canada—offers a sense of pride in its literary past (49). She argues that critics such as Dewart, Lampman, MacMechan, and Brown "claimed that Canadian literature did not exist" because "it needed to be discovered or created." Conversely, McKenzie contends, Aboriginal Canadian writing of the 1960s and 1970s "discloses a sense of confidence about the past and a certainty about tradition not found within the bulk of English-Canadian literature" (52). She even contrasts the jealousy and humility that these non-Aboriginal thinkers and writers might have experienced to the feelings of "confidence and security" Aboriginal authors of the Native Renaissance seemed to convey. Borrowing from both J. E. Chamberlin and Stan Dragland, she advises readers to "interrogate ways of thinking—and to challenge one's own cultural framework" (68). She suggests that the close connection between Aboriginal writing and the land differs from Western literary customs specifically because Native poetry may not employ mimesis such as simile and metaphor in the way that Western poetry uses these literary devices. Moreover, McKenzie suggests, another difference is that "much Aboriginal poetry which depicts land is composed with very few adjectives and adverbs and is dependent, instead, on strong nouns and verbs" (71). Quoting Chief Dan George's entire poem, "My Heart Soars," she may have presented her contentions about these differences more convincingly with a few more comparative examples between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadian poets.

Other differences that McKenzie asserts between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal writing during the Native Renaissance in Canada include what she describes as the sparsity of Aboriginal writing compared to the "playful metanarratives" of Canadian postmodern literature. Considering the contemplations of Agnes Grant in *Native Literature in the Curriculum*, Wilfred Pelletier and Ted Poole in *No Foreign Land: The Biography of a North American Indian*, and Jeannette Armstrong in *The Native Creative Process*, McKenzie asks if the high value placed on silence in Aboriginal cultures finds its way into Aboriginal literature as a recognizable aesthetic. Suggesting that "the emergence of a pan-Indian voice" may be closely linked to "the importance of listening," she follows this with a necessary proviso: "It is important to recognize, though, that Native texts of this time period were not homogeneous, certainly not static" (106). Much later in her book, she assesses critics of Native literature and their deference for the notion of an apparent "communal" characteristic in Aboriginal writing. Although she does not revisit the silence and the pan-Indian voice she has examined earlier, McKenzie does consider the heterogeneity of Native writing and Aboriginal people by quoting

Waubageshig on this matter, leaving one to wonder if he might level the same criticism at her comments on the emergence of a pan-Indian voice: "Too often in the past, statements uttered by individual native people have been regarded as being representative when, in fact, all that was being presented was one man's viewpoint" (176).

McKenzie's deliberations and esteem for a range of Aboriginal perspectives are admirable in a climate of discourse that can easily slip into bombast and essentialism on the part of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal observers. The quotations from pages 106 and 176 reveal both the tenuous territory through which critics venture in commenting on Aboriginal literature and the astute, proactive strategies that commentators can exercise in avoiding the quagmire of misunderstanding and deep frustration between different peoples. Although she writes for an academic audience, explaining her use of terms such as *pan-Indianism* and *pan-Aboriginal* would clarify some of the finer nuances and misperceptions these terms tend to elicit in the potentially inflammatory rhetoric often associated with the identity issues pervading discussions on Aboriginal matters in Canada. McKenzie uses *First Peoples* on page 40 and *First Nations* on page 41 without precedent, terminology certainly misunderstood by many, even in the academy. She does, however, provide both historical background and an explication of Linda Hutcheon's theory of "postmodernism" in literature, a crucial explanation that supports McKenzie's assertions about the intertexuality between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal literature and the interplay among mythology and history, Native Renaissance, and romantic nationalism as portrayed in these texts.

A curious omission is McKenzie's decision not to position herself clearly as either an Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal critic. Acknowledging the fallibilities of the written word, a writer posing an argument on postmodern literature might reveal such self-consciousness to convey her suspicion with the "authority" of text and to admit her biases. McKenzie does, however, recommend on a number of occasions that Aboriginal writing needs Aboriginal analysis, especially literature that is inflected with Native language. Such inflections declare a multiplicity of voices and truths, significant concerns in postmodernism.

One of *Before the Country*'s strengths is McKenzie's call for more refined distinction between "strains" of postmodernism in Canadian letters. Advising us to learn about the ancient customs that continue to shape current Native literature, McKenzie argues that "we might be able to separate strands in Canadian postmodernism which render this form distinct from other forms of postmodernism" and "to understand Aboriginal literatures, and possibly the old traditions on which some are based, with more sophistication" (186). McKenzie contributes to the study of Canadian Aboriginal literature and Canadian postmodernism in a second essential way by offering carefully nuanced reiterations of her argument throughout her book. One last time she verifies her meaning by declaring that the Native Renaissance challenged official Canadian history, a "truth" that bewildered romantic nationalists as they tried to understand the differences between Natives and non-Natives: "Aboriginal nations possessed 'sacred' origins to which they could trace their

histories and contemporary writing; the Canadian nation did not possess a comparable metaphysical foundation from which it could legitimize its current history" (181).

Despite Aboriginal Canadians' and their allies' struggles to understand each other genuinely, troubling lacunae continue to plague these efforts. McKenzie aptly deliberates on George Ryga's "The Ecstasy of Rita Joe" as a critical example of a non-Native playwright honoring the memory of a murdered Native girl whose body was found in the inner city of Vancouver in 1966. Joy Coghill produced the play and remembers the visceral response of the audience to Ryga's play. Only after the actors had left the theater and found their way to a nearby bar did the audience gradually disperse after sitting immobilized for several moments in stunned silence. No one clapped at the end of the play.

McKenzie reports on the vitality of Canadian Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal literature in a crucial dialogue between Native and non-Native Canadians: her text provides an important antithesis to romantic nationalism and obscure euphemisms that serve no purpose in reconciliation between Aboriginal Canadians and non-Aboriginal Canadians.

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Beyond Red Power: American Indian Politics and Activism since 1900. Edited by Daniel M. Cobb and Loretta Fowler. Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007. 368 pages. $34.95 paper.

There is no concept or reality more important to Native people and Native nations than that of sovereignty. Native people assert, and rightly so, that they were sovereigns over their lands (unless displaced/conquered by other Native nations) prior to European contact. This is a difficult concept for non-Native people to comprehend. President George W. Bush exhibited his naiveté on this subject and came under criticism from Indian leaders in August 2004 when he stated, "Tribal sovereignty means just that, it's sovereignty. You're a—you've been given sovereignty, and you're viewed as a sovereign entity" (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer Reporter*, 13 August 2004). The difficulty arose over his use of the word *given* because Native people view sovereignty as an inherent standing held since time immemorial, and that the United States has moved consistently over the years to reduce sovereignty and had no ability to "give" or "grant" sovereignty. Jacqueline Johnson, a Tlingit Indian and executive director for the National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) told the *Post-Intelligencer Reporter* that "It's not something that was given to us . . . we've always had [it]."

The sovereign relationship between Native nations and the United States was determined by early comprehensive federal legislation and by three leading court decisions. Three court cases dominate the legal landscape and the opinions written by Chief Justice John Marshall: *Johnson v. McIntosh* (1923),