

Book Review

Aboriginal Oral Traditions: Theory, Practice, Ethics

Renée Hulan and Renate Eigenbrod (editors)
Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2008

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The essays in Renée Hulan and Renate Eigenbrod's edited collection *Aboriginal Oral Traditions: Theory, Practice, Ethics* originated from ideas presented at a conference organized by the Gorsebrook Research Institute at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in April, 2005. Hulan and Eigenbrod, two of the conference's organizers, fondly recall the sequence of panels, discussions, and events they attended as a "dialogue that flowed from session to session over the three days" (p. 9). Though unable, and unwilling, to reduce the more "free-flowing" (p.10) segments of the conference to the rigidity of textual form, the editors invited participants to submit papers produced as an offshoot of these lively debates. The authors note that

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 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 ... (p. 10)

The result is a collection of essays that, at its best, encourages the reader to rethink ingrained assumptions about the purpose and significance of Aboriginal oral traditions.

Tradition is a loaded word, often defined simplistically as a sense of continuity with the past without acknowledging the role of present-day adaptation and innovation. Even the term *oral* continues to be framed in a negative light, perpetually compared to the universal western standard of written communication. Hulan and Eigenbrod argue that, in spite of the Supreme Court of Canada's formal approval of oral evidence, "the colonial binary . . . of the oral and the written" remains a strong force in Canadian society (p. 11). The editors attempt to redress the balance by calling attention to oral culture's continued importance to First Nations groups. Orality is not the by-product of an illiterate society that formerly lacked a better alternative for documenting its past. Rather, it constitutes a chosen method of communication that, even today, best represents the spiritual and social values of the Indigenous nations in the country. The book's contributors reinforce this point by highlighting the importance of oral communication in present-day scenarios. Several authors affirm that spoken language enables Aboriginal peoples to express themselves using their true voices. Andrea Bear Nicholas argues, for instance, that to deny children access to their Native languages robs them of their sense of

legitimacy. This act, in turn, weakens their longstanding association with the lands they inhabit, thereby reinforcing the colonial project of territorial appropriation. Catherine Martin's chapter focuses on language as a medium of artistic expression for a community, as well a source of collective memory. Qwo-Li Driskill, meanwhile, insists that oral performance can offer participants a form of "kinesthetic healing" from the "historical trauma" of colonization (pp. 155-156).

Some of the other contributors in the volume seek to rehabilitate Aboriginal oral traditions as a reliable form of historical knowledge. Contrary to popular belief, Indigenous communities have habitually taken great pains to ensure the accuracy and integrity of the stories passed down to them. Stephen J. Augustine likens a meeting of Elders to a peer review session, where each Elder rigorously compares his or her individual version of a particular story with those enunciated by the rest. These fact-checking practices ensure the stories of a particular community represent a reliable intellectual consensus rather than the impressionistic recollections of a single inhabitant. Other contributors, such as Sophie McCall, approach the problem from a different angle, demonstrating that even the most advanced western recording technologies possess their own significant weaknesses.

The collection's authors also unpack thorny questions of authorship and intellectual property. Aboriginal communities wish to practice their oral traditions but not all of them feel comfortable sharing these precious shards of identity with the wider world. The long history of colonial appropriation and misinterpretation of Indigenous stories reinforces their reluctance. Bear Nicholas describes such instances of cultural exploitation as "assaults" (p. 13), underscoring the visceral link between First Nations and their stories. Martin emphasizes the importance of asking permission, not simply from one person but from several people, before sharing a group's traditional stories with outsiders. Aboriginal narratives do not belong to individuals but rather constitute a community resource and must be treated as such. Michèle Grossman goes a step further by observing that outsiders collecting stories from Aboriginals represents only a superficial form of authorship for the latter. Until interviewees take on a more active role as editors and publishers of their transcribed recollections, they will remain "authors but not authorities of their own textual production" (p. 114).

This ardent support of Aboriginal self-expression brings the identities of the book's contributions into sharper relief. Fortunately, this is one area in which the collection excels. More than half of the contributors openly identify as members of First Nations. These Aboriginal authors are for the most part academics, which has the salutary effect of destabilizing colonial binaries of white professor/Aboriginal subject of study. Some choose a conversational tone of address; others employ a more clinical approach to their topic. Such variation is crucial because it demonstrates that there is no such thing as a single Aboriginal authorial voice. Furthermore, it provides a fascinating portrayal of several very different individuals negotiating their Indigenous backgrounds and their professional careers in western institutions of higher learning. Another strength of *Aboriginal Oral Traditions* is its regional specificity. While the discussions have resonance for all First Nations communities, the essays largely focus on Aboriginal experiences in the Maritimes.

Ironically, the variety in tone is also the collection's greatest weakness. Had the essays been grouped into sections according to theme or had each been framed with a short introductory paragraph, the book would have achieved a sense of diversity without a concomitant sacrifice of coherence. As it is, the topic and tone of each essay oscillates with no apparent reason. One senses some editorial timidity on the part of the editors, Hulan (a Canadian literature professor

at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Nova Scotia), and Eigenbrod (also a Canadian literature professor formerly of the University of Manitoba, in Winnipeg, Manitoba). It appears they were reluctant to intrude too much on the voices of their contributors. This wish to let the authors speak for themselves is laudable and certainly in keeping with the book's overarching theme. However, a little more editorial direction would have made for a more unified volume.

The mix of tone furthermore calls to mind the question of audience. Though the editors intend the volume for academics and the wider public, their contributors do not always achieve both aims. The more conversational essays occasionally become a little unruly. Martin's chapter puts forth some valid insights but the structure of her argumentation tends to run in circles. Bear Nicholas presents a brilliant appraisal of Aboriginals' feelings of betrayal regarding the alteration and exploitation of their traditional stories. Nevertheless, her analysis of 19th-century racial science as a convenient explanation for colonialism ignores the fact that Euro-Canadians harboured a sincere, though misguided, belief in its precepts. By contrast, those adopting a dryer and scholarly tone risk alienating novice readers. Greg-Young Ing and Drew Mildon both write detailed legal history pieces that presume a certain level of knowledge on the part of the reader. Michele Grossman offers some fascinating insights on Aboriginal autobiography but the clarity of her arguments suffers due to her convoluted diction. All of these authors are making important and intelligent arguments; they simply need to consider audience a bit more fully.

The collection makes a number of useful contributions to Canadian educational research. First, it sets ground rules for the education of Aboriginal children. Bear Nicholas argues that children must be taught in their Native language, preferably from an instructor who is already a member of their community. Driskill's cogent argument in favour of the therapeutic effects of oral performance, meanwhile, has relevance for arts educators across the country. Second, the volume exposes the insidious colonialism in written texts, including school textbooks and Aboriginal stories collected and edited by non-Aboriginal authors. These warnings should make educators think twice about the tools they use during their teaching sessions.

In sum, *Aboriginal Oral Traditions: Theory, Practice, Ethics* is a worthy addition to the scholarly literature. It complicates western notions of what constitutes oral cultures, offering a nuanced portrayal of its continued importance in Aboriginal societies. It also offers concrete suggestions for encouraging the proliferation of Indigenous languages, stories, and authorship among the public and academics. These are lessons that no one can afford to ignore.

Madelaine Morrison completed her PhD in History at Carleton University in December 2013. Her dissertation, *Domestic Harmonies: Musical Activity in Southwestern Ontario, 1880-1920*, received a university senate medal for outstanding achievement. Madelaine worked as a historical researcher in Ottawa's private sector for two years and was part of the team hired to perform archival research on Aboriginal Residential Schools for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Currently, she is studying in the Master's of Public Policy and Administration programme at Carleton University.