

Notes from the Co-editors

I

With the current blossoming of interest in Native writing—on the parts of critics and publishers alike—it may be hard for some to realize how hard a road it has been to bring Native writing to this point of acceptance not as an interesting but ephemeral literary curiosity, but as a vital part of world literature. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the thinkers of Europe and North America debated the question of whether or not the “Indian” was truly a member of the human species, and there were actually serious theories put forward that the only time Indians spoke was when they were making speeches—which came to them as naturally as the songs of the birds. It was only in the last century that no less a cultural icon than Oliver Wendell Holmes, the famed United States Supreme Court Justice would refer to the Native peoples of North America as a “red-crayon caricature of humanity easily to be wiped out.” And it was, many feel, not until Kiowa novelist N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1969 that Native writing began to be seen as something other than anthologies of surrender speeches and “as-told-to” biographies of war chiefs—volumes primarily of anthropological or historical interest. Today, less than a decade shy of the twenty-first century, the Native writers of Canada and the United States are receiving serious attention not only in North America, but throughout the world. Some of the Native poets of Canada and the United States, for example, have had their work translated into more than a dozen European languages.

It may still be difficult for the vast majority of non-Native North

Americans to recognize the strength and diversity of Native literary traditions. The hundreds of oral traditions, which existed for countless generations before the official arrival of Europeans in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, have deeply influenced Native and transplant writers and thinkers and continue their influence to this day. The bias provided by those cultural traditions may make the purpose and assumptions of Native writing quite different from much of European literature. For example, the ideas that "poetry does nothing" or that literature is only the province of a select few are directly antithetical to deeply held understandings in Native cultures where language (spoken or written) not only reflects life, it makes things happen.

The understanding of the central place held by literature and language was never made clearer to me than during the planning meetings I attended in 1991 for a festival of North American Native writers called *Returning the Gift*, which took place in 1992. Both our planning meetings and our conference were graced with the presence and the input of numerous traditional elders from throughout the continent. Tom Porter, a Mohawk traditionalist, who had been invited to open our meeting with a thanksgiving address, listened closely to our discussions in Saranac Lake, New York. I was chairing that meeting and Tom made a motion to catch my eye. I thought he was indicating that he was ready to leave, but instead he wanted to speak. He stood and told us that there was a prophecy among the Iroquois people, an old prophecy. He had never understood it before, he said, but today he finally did. That prophecy was this: "One day our children will speak to the world." Now, he said, he realized that it was the Native writers who were the new storytellers and the new wampum keepers. "Through you," he said, "our children will speak to the world."

The *Returning the Gift* conference brought more than two hundred already published Native writers together for four days in Oklahoma, as well as another large group of younger writers at the start of their careers. I find it exciting that many of those writers are represented in this special issue of *ARIEL*, but I find it just as exciting that there are many more Native writers who were not at *Returning the Gift* or who may not be represented in this

fine, diverse sampling. Native writing is blossoming and those blossoms will seed many harvests to come.

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II

This collection of cultural criticism and literary analysis was initiated by our desire to help correct the serious imbalance between the complex and diverse works of literature by Native writers increasingly available and the scarcity of serious critical analysis of that literature. *ARIEL*'s twenty-fifth anniversary seems a celebratory moment for *Critical Visions: Contemporary North American Native Writing* to appear.

The articles present a range of concerns, but each contributor, whether addressing literary or cultural (con)texts, supports claims for justice and for the social transformations that would make justice possible. Literary and practical issues intersect as authors and critics attend to matters of spiritual, material, political, and aesthetic significance, re-assessing boundaries and sometimes transcending them. Many Native writers of fiction, poetry, and criticism subvert dominant modes of cultural representation and, grounded in traditional modes of narration, establish their own presence, on their own terms. And what their own terms might be is recreated in each text by each artist.

For non-Native literary critics, in addition to the everyday demands of scholarship (an historical, theoretical, and contextual engagement with the text), a rigorous process of self-examination must be undertaken to ensure that the sediment of living in an everyday racist world is not brought into our reading practices. The activity of literary criticism itself has been called into question when the critic belongs to a group that is privileged over, indeed, oppressive of, the writer's community. Some academics and authors worry that First Nations writing will be seen as another commodity, to be consumed, digested, then forgotten. While I do not wish to underestimate the power of greed and the shortness of memory that both Euro-Canadians and Euro-Americans continue to demonstrate, I suggest that the writings in question here are not that digestible or forgettable. Moreover, I resist the notion of totalized power that is sometimes attributed

to the academy. There is fair evidence to suggest that academics are likely to be bringing our light to bear on cultural practices that have been in play for a long time, and I do not think it is useful for us to imagine that we are suddenly in a position to arbitrate the existence of arts that the academy did not create. Besides, academic retreat from the complexities of cross-cultural and cross-racial reading and writing can serve only those who wish to maintain the status quo, to sustain the academy's now precarious grip on an aging world view. Just as the literary critic feels the necessary urge to move out of the text and into the world, taking textual insight and interrogations along, so too does the text bring us into its world, often mirroring the critic, reflecting readerly world-views that may well need revision.

Most writers here, whatever their heritage, have made it their business to position themselves explicitly in order to enact their belief that who one is influences how one reads, and certainly how one *is* read. It may be that any individual reader is indifferent to the question of "who writes"; but critical obtuseness on this subject is not appropriate at this moment. This is not to say that any critic should be silent on the subject of any literary text. Audre Lorde reminds us, "it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence" (44). Rather than retreating into silence and withdrawal, bringing an informed consciousness about one's position can be useful for both literary critic and general reader. This self-awareness need not be the naive assumption that if one merely names one's heritage, or sexual orientation, or class background, one will be thus "positioned," and thus a known entity. Instead, what readers and writers need to do is to discern from within the critical material (whether that be an historical study, social observation, or conventional literary analysis) what values are held and how they are expressed. The questions that engage us as we carry on the necessary and pleasurable tasks of reading and writing our way towards a more livable world are not, now, so much those of fixed identities, but rather closer to the question Adrienne Rich asks of herself, "*With whom do you believe your lot is cast?*" (6). Exploring that question, finding answers that work, even some of the time, even for a little while, require us all to "come out of the house," as Lee Maracle figures it.

For this special issue of *ARIEL*, I have decided against providing a neat summary of my reading of each of the articles. Though readers of academic journals often find the editorial summation a useful, if predictable, aid in selecting what to read of a hefty journal, here, that reiteration claims a space that is better used by squeezing in one more poem. Readers will note that we have decided against establishing a consistent editorial policy on naming. Articles make reference to Native, Indian, aboriginal, indigenous, and First Nations writing and writers. These namings vary according to region and author, and we see no reason to impose uniformity. As well, reference is made to Europeans, Euro-Canadians (or Euro-American), Euroamericans (or Euro-canadian), or white people. Again, we left these choices to the writer's discretion. It is enough to note that *Critical Visions: Contemporary North American Native Writing* asserts a range of affirmations and resistances. It positions anti-racist literature and literary and cultural critics alongside one another. It affirms a coalition of forces and groupings: Native and non-Native, male and female, lesbian, gay and straight; European, Canadian, and American; literary critics, cultural analysts, artists, students, activists, poets. These forces (powerful in their blendings) are taking on the material world and its representations, showing how we take on their imprints whether we like it or not and how we can take them on for our own purposes and reshape both world and representation. *Critical Visions* blurs the easy division between the real and the represented—and in that messy interstice we can find ways to participate in changing our world.

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