

Introduction to About Indigenous Literatures

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**"Introduction to *About Indigenous Literatures*"**  
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**Contents of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 13.2 (2011)**  
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**Ed. Angeline O'Neill and Albert Braz**  
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## Introduction to *About Indigenous Literatures*

### Angeline O'NEILL and Albert BRAZ

At a time when some scholars and critics are calling into question the continuing value and relevance of comparative methodology, the thematic issue *About Indigenous Literature* in *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* focuses on the indisputable role the comparative paradigm plays now and will continue to play in the future. Such an approach offers priceless insights in many contexts, ranging from the sciences (for example, physiology and biology), across disciplines, cultures, and languages to the present discussion of Indigenous oral and written literatures. Authors of articles in this thematic issue examine the effectiveness of comparative methodology in meeting the challenge posed by crucial and complex questions such as what is Indigenous literature, what can be said about it, and by whom? How do Indigenous writers and scholars see non-Indigenous scholars, critics, writers, and readers relating to their work? Finally, and perhaps most germane from a literary perspective, how does one determine what is Indigenous literature without relying on the identity of the author — that is, without going outside the text and using paraliterary criteria to establish a literary category?

The reason comparative methodology seems especially suited to a study of Indigenous literatures is that, because of the brutal impact of the colonial encounter, Indigenous collective identities have been heavily shaped by external factors, notably the governments of the so-called settler societies in which most Indigenous peoples now live. For example, pan-Indigenous identities are often the result of governments bringing different Indigenous groups together and treating them as if they were a single entity. The Anishnaabe writer and ethnologist Basil Johnston relates that it was during his years at a residential school that he came in contact with all sorts of Indigenous people, including members of the Anishnaabe's traditional enemies, the Mohawks, who used to refer to his people as Adirondacks or "Bark-eaters" (11). Not surprisingly, Indigenous identity tends to be constructed in response to government discourse, not the least the way (non-Indigenous) politicians and bureaucrats construct Indigenous people. Given the pervasive influence of such discourses, it becomes imperative that one be familiar with them and how they vary from country to country. However, this seems an impossible task without the comparative paradigm. As the Creek-Cherokee writer and scholar Craig Womack observes, despite the obvious similarities between Indigenous peoples in countries like the United States and Canada, who sometimes belong to the same nations, they have "markedly different" vocabularies. Moreover, even among scholars "very few people speak both these languages," which makes it a major challenge to teach courses with a transnational focus ("Native American" 198). For Womack, it is the absence of a common language among Indigenous scholars across North America (note: with "North America" in this case we refer to the U.S. and Canada) that explains the dearth of material on "literary relations or, more important, lack of relations, across the Canada-U.S. border" and why "in both countries we know so little of one another's work" ("Native American" 197). Indeed, Womack's piece appears in a Canadian collection of critical essays and other writings by North American Indigenous writers. Tellingly, the editors confide that they were extremely resistant to their publisher's suggestion that "our book include works by Americans in addition to Canadian Aboriginal scholars and authors," since they see little reciprocity across the international line. As they elaborate, "we felt strongly opposed to this recommendation at first because it had seemed to the editors that scholars south of the border, even Native American literary scholars, rarely paid attention to Canadian Aboriginal issues, never mind literary subjects" (DePasquale, Eigenbrod, LaRocque 11). Or, as a Canadian contributor to the collection, the Dogrib writer Richard Van Camp, encapsulates the situation, Canadian Indigenous writers "don't know a lot of what happens in the United States because of that American border. It really might as well be the Berlin Wall for us" (Van Camp and Munro 308). Needless to say, much of this border is a discursive one.

Comparative methodology is also useful in identifying some of the inevitable contradictions that arise in a field dominated by engaged scholarship. For instance, one of the principal tropes in the discourse about Indigenous peoples is their ostensible oneness with the earth, their unique "regard of and for the natural world" (Momaday 55). Yet these claims about the innate ecologism of Indigenous peoples coexist with what the Spokane-Coeur d'Alene novelist and poet Sherman Alexie calls the advocacy by numerous Indigenous writers and scholars of a kind of "Native American sovereignty [that] is expressed in terms of casinos, cigarettes, fireworks ... the worst parts of capitalism" ("Humor" 41). Similarly, Indigenous people are supposed to be "people of specific

landscapes," whose "specific stories are told about our emergence from a specific place" (Howe 333). But the reality for most Indigenous people today is that they are migrating en masse to cities or are already born and raised in urban settings, often far from their traditional lands, a development dramatized by Alexie in his still controversial novel *Indian Killer*. In fact, the Cree-Métis scholar Deanna Reder predicts that the reason "the next generation of literary critics will return to pan-Indian approaches in the discussion of literature" is that this is the only way to adequately "theorize aspects of common experience and common aesthetics, especially given the growing presence of urban Native populations with little connection to home communities, languages or cultures" (Fagan, Justice, Martin, McKegney, Reder, Sinclair 35). In other words, while Indigenous peoples may be attached profoundly to their ancestral lands, they do not necessarily have the same relations to the spaces where most of them actually live.

The changing nature of Indigenous relationship with the land is an important point and one with which each contributor wrestles. Certainly, the issue pertains as much to Indigenous Australia as to Native North America, Canada's First Nations, or other Indigenous peoples. Aboriginal Australian activist, Roberta Sykes, makes this clear in an oral history interview where she discusses living conditions in The Block, a predominantly Aboriginal inner city suburb of Sydney characterized by poverty, police brutality, and a rampant drug culture: "The Block, like any other Aboriginal projects, was set up to fail. Because no sooner had the government bought it, than the newspapers were advertising all over Australia 'Housing for Aboriginals.' Thousands of people have come from as far away as Perth and North Queensland... and so people were sleeping on broken down floors and it was unhygienic, they were without toilets ... There must have been conflict about who would hang on the longest and get the houses ... It was never set up to be permanent. There was a transient quality about the quality of the housing" (Sykes qtd. in Ormersher <<http://redfernoralhistory.org/OralHistory/RobertaSykesonMumShirl/tabid/145/Default.aspx>>). Members of this community have a different relationship with the "transient spaces" in which they live than with their ancestral lands. Indeed, many have been born, raised, and continue to live in an urban environment and may have no knowledge of or experience with their ancestral lands. Tara June Winch describes the process of (re)discovery in her award winning 2006 novel *Swallow the Air*, which tells the problems encountered by a young Aboriginal woman seeking to reconcile her urban upbringing with the lands she has been denied.

Stereotypes persist, however. While non-Indigenous Australia has fortunately moved beyond the nineteenth-century "diffusionist conception" (Blaut 45) of Indigenous relationship to the land, according to which a lack of European agriculture signified a backward culture, in various sections of the Australian community it has been replaced by two popular stereotypes: either a static, romanticized pre-colonial image, which is still propagated in many primary and secondary schools, or alternatively Aboriginal people as drunk, disorderly, and criminal. Consequently, Indigenous communities are still not recognized officially as First Nations. It is in response to this context and these stereotypes that many Aboriginal Australian texts have emerged; evidenced in the works of Jack Davis, Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Lionel Fogarty, Mudrooroo, Archie Roach, Ruby Langford-Ginibi, Sally Morgan, Tara June Winch, Kim Scott, and Alexis Wright, to name but a few. The Australian contributors to the present collection also write with an awareness of such pervasive and damaging stereotypes.

In different ways, Kim Scott and Alexis Wright explore the relationship between language, land, and identity in their respective novels *Benang* (1999) and *Carpentaria* (2006). Scott explores the experiences of a "white skinned" Aboriginal man for whom language becomes an encounter with otherness which "radically transform[s] concepts of subjectivity and identity" (Slater 149). The novel asks who can speak, what they can say, and how? The project and power of naming must issue from memories and imaginaries denied by a colonial mindset. This is what Scott's protagonist realises and sets out to explore, noting in the opening pages of the novel that "it is far, far easier for me to sing than write, because this language troubles me, makes me feel as if I am walking across the earth which surrounds salt lakes, that thin-crust earth upon which it is best to tread warily, skim lightly" (8). Treading warily and skimming lightly is, however, far removed from Alexis Wright's approach in her ground-breaking novel *Carpentaria*. While Wright undoubtedly shares many of Scott's concerns, including language, land, and identity, she engages with contemporary Indigenous and non-Indigenous politics in a barbed, dark satire. Set in the euphemistically nicknamed town of Desperance, the novel is written from the confident perspective of an insider to Indigenous issues and knowledge, contrasting with the insecurity and awe which charac-

terises Scott's *Benang*. *Carpentaria* seeks to expose the connections and interaction between politics, ecology, and Indigenous mythological order. In this way, it challenges the established colonial order, demanding to know who does speak as opposed to who should speak. Both texts resonate with the conviction that "Frontiers are everywhere and nowhere ... Reading, writing and texts are wrapped up in distinct ideologies, socio-political relations, languages, cultural institutions and material life-worlds" (van Toorn 224-25).

The matter of the relation between contemporary Indigenous peoples and their homelands is linked to the nature of Indigenous community. Particularly according to nationalists, such as the Cherokee writer Daniel Heath Justice, "Indigenous nationhood is a concept rooted in community values, histories, and traditions" (*Our Fire* 24). But the idea of the centrality of "community values" in Indigenous socio-political life must be problematized in light of actual Indigenous literary texts. For instance, in *Indian Killer*, Alexie explores the Indigenous experience in downtown Seattle toward the end of the twentieth century, which not surprisingly includes much racism and poverty. Yet these are not the only challenges facing Alexie's characters. As the text informs us, the reason "so many Indians" move to urban centres like Seattle is that they are "outcasts from their tribes" and, consequently, they are "forced to create their own urban tribe" (38). In short, whatever "community values" may be embraced by their home reservations, those values obviously do not extend to a significant portion of the populace, notably those individuals who for whatever reason do not accept the status quo. Alexie himself seems to be one of those people. According to him, "There's an anti-intellectualism on Indian reservations, inside Indian communities. That didn't use to be the case. I know Sarah Palin, you know. My tribe is run by Sarah Palins" (Alexie, "Humor" 41). He is especially critical of some literary nationalists, such as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, whom he accuses of being "utterly incapable of irony, of understanding irony, of even seeing the ironic nature of her own existence. So, the stances she has are a kind of fundamentalism that actually drove me off my reservation. I think it's a kind of fundamentalism about Indian identity, and what 'Indian' can be and mean, that damages Indians" (Alexie, "Humor" 40). That is, the desirability of the communal clearly depends on who is included in the community.

Both Alexie's novel and his comments, of course, also illustrate that there is considerable ambivalence toward literature, comparative or otherwise, in many Indigenous circles. Like many other cultural activists today, Indigenous nationalists embrace a view of literature that seems to be restricted to ideas of therapy and community. However, it is not easily apparent that this is how literature functions. After all, while literary texts can create community, they can as easily exclude people from the group. To be fair, Justice acknowledges some limitations in Indigenous literary nationalism, from the "dominance of male perspectives," through a lack of "substantive engagement with the nationhood and peoplehood specificities of urban, pan-Native, or multiracial literary traditions," to their "failing to challenge dehumanizing community politics in the misguided cause of an intellectually and morally vacuous version of 'sovereignty'" (Fagan, Justice, Martin, McKegney, Reder, Sinclair 26). As he underscores, "bad medicine and witchery are very much traditional knowledges in Indigenous communities" (Fagan, Justice, Martin, McKegney, Reder, Sinclair 27). Nevertheless, the movement's main shortcoming remains its inability to provide literary or stylistic markers of Indigeneity. Womack, in particular, is self-conscious about the accusations that American Indian literary nationalism is irredeemably, if not naively, "essentialist" ("Theorizing" 355). In fact, his long-running dispute with Elvira Pulitano, which ironically has drawn considerable attention to her work, revolves mainly around her claims that Womack and his confederates Jace Weaver and Robert Warrior are essentialists (Weaver, Womack, Warrior 96-130). Still, the fact remains that Womack and his colleagues have put much more emphasis on "epistemic markers, such as race, gender, and class" ("Theorizing" 275) than on literary ones. Until that emphasis changes, the movement will remain vulnerable to charges of essentialism and that the movement is more interested in reading writers than texts. Or, to phrase it differently, that it does not really focus on what it purports to be its main interest, Indigenous literature or literatures.

Contributors to *About Indigenous Literature* approach the subject of indigeneity in penetrating yet refreshing ways, ranging from a discussion of Australia's Aboriginal Peoples to Canada's First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples to the New Zealand Maori. Each author also explores the role comparative methodology might play in investigating the interaction between oral and written traditions and authors consider such issues as the need for non-Aboriginal acknowledgment of Aboriginal philosophies; the role of collaborative authorship; and the problem of a simplistic two-world approach to Métis literature. They discuss a narrative reactivation of the significance of Maori on-

tology, as well as the process and problems faced by Indigenous children's writers as they create a new literary space where oral and written traditions meet.

The articles start with a theoretical discussion of the concept of the "comparative": despite the trend in comparative literature and comparative cultural studies toward the freedom to compare virtually anything, Katherine Durnin analyzes in "Indigenous Literature and Comparability" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss2/2>> the constraints against using comparative approaches to Indigenous literature. Durnin shows how terminological distinctions help us understand those constraints. As we know, Indigenous writers and literary critics are adamant about the need for an Indigenous critical approach capable of doing justice to Indigenous texts. Yet, the demand that Indigenous scholars determine the critical approaches taken to their work seems to make a comparative approach virtually impossible, given the distinctions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous world views. The two-world view of Indigenous/White relations persists and is sometimes even reinforced in discussions about Canada's Métis people. Durnin examines the "two-world" interpretation of Indigenous/white Canada as a barrier to comparative approaches to Indigenous literature.

Stephen Muecke traces in his article "Australian Indigenous Philosophy" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss2/3>> the recent direction of his ideas following the 2004 publication of his book *Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy*. Muecke refines some of his arguments about philosophical practice and the damaging periodization into "ancient" and "modern" cultures in colonial societies like Australia. Neither Australian philosophy nor Indigenous Australian philosophy, he posits, exists as a field of study. Settler Australians have imported their philosophical traditions and have left it up to other disciplines to undertake the translation work of knowledge in the long-lived Indigenous traditions. Here, anthropology, history and cultural studies have taken up the challenge.

Drawing on Indigenous and non-Indigenous children's picture books, Angeline O'Neill postulates in her article "Aboriginal Australian and First Nations Canadian Children's Literature" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss2/4>> that the process of writing in standard English severely limits what can be said and who can speak. As we know, the use of language mirrors the nature and development of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations in Canada and Australia. The article contends that this is nowhere better seen than in the development of a genre supposedly for those potentially powerful yet still developing readers, children. As a site for cross-cultural and textual exploration and experimentation, children's literature also plays an increasingly important role in changing perceptions of "literariness" and literary value; the picture book, in particular, serves as a fascinating space where oral and written traditions meet and even meld. O'Neill explores the formation of this space and the contribution of Indigenous and non-Indigenous storytellers, illustrators and readers, both children and adults, to a dynamic yet frequently overlooked genre.

Albert Braz focuses in his article "Collaborative Authorship and Indigenous Literature" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss2/5>> on the duality of the writer in Indigenous literatures. At least since the advent of poststructuralism, the distinction between writer and author — the first being the historical person behind the text and the second a figure in the text — has been a paradigm of contemporary critical analysis. Braz argues that this new emphasis is not as germane when it comes to Indigenous literatures, a field in which one often cannot determine who are the material producers of texts and/or their writers. Braz postulates that one of the defining characteristics of Indigenous literatures is their high incidence of writer indeterminacy. From the *Popol Vuh* through *Cogewea* to *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, canonical Indigenous texts are the result of collaboration, usually (but not always) involving both Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals. Since by definition Indigenous texts are supposed to be the work of Indigenous people, writer indeterminacy forces us to reconsider what really constitutes Indigenous literature.

Hsinya Huang explores in her article "Towards Transnational Native American Literary Studies" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss2/6>> how Native American literature can be adapted, translated, articulated, and interpreted in a transnational/trans-Pacific context, using the recently emerging Native American scholarship in Taiwan as a point of departure. Through collaboration across institutional lines, exploration of the community production of local knowledge, and our obligation and desire to participate meaningfully as intellectuals in the international initiatives in Native Studies, can we conceive of an expansive indigenous region across the Pacific? How can indigeneity be both rooted in and routed through particular places and articulated? Through envision-

ing an expanding network of indigenous coalition, Huang's objective is to formulate notions of a transnational indigeneity, which in turn feed back into local Native traditions.

Eva Rask Knudsen's point of departure in her article "On Reading Grace's *Potiki*" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss2/7>> is the critical impasse of postcolonial analyses of Indigenous literatures and the claim made by some Indigenous commentators that non-Indigenous scholars and critics often re-colonize the texts they deem to be "postcolonial" because — in their theoretical concern with issues of marginalization and resistance — they overlook (and so overwrite) the specific indigenous knowledges and ontologies that the literatures draw on. Through an analysis of the 1986 novel *Potiki* by Māori writer Patricia Grace, Rask Knudsen looks in other directions than those catalogued by postcolonial convention. With attention to Māori storytelling procedures and Māori notions of textuality, Rask Knudsen postulates that the non-Indigenous scholar/critic may venture legitimately and purposefully into indigenous territory if the cultural signposts of that territory are acknowledged. As *Potiki* is structured as a narrative told within the context of a Māori meeting house (*whare nui*), a ceremonial site that encourages dialogue and public debate, the novel offers, by extension, a venue also for the scholar's/critic's encounter with indigenous "difference."

Sean Gorman discusses in his article "Politics of Indigeneity in Fogarty's Poetry" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss2/8>> Indigenous themes and issues with regards to the work of Aboriginal Australian poet Lionel Fogarty. As Fogarty is seen as a poet who writes complex prose, his material challenges non-Indigenous readerships by subverting Standard English and conventional reading practices. What Gorman offers are strategies by which to engage with Fogarty's material and, employing the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, namely heteroglossia and dialogism, to arrive at a better understanding of the rich and complex nature of Fogarty's texts. This analysis is done in relation to the political debates that have arisen since the *Little Children are Sacred* report was made public and the intervention in the Northern Territory occurred in 2007.

*About Indigenous Literature* includes texts by Aboriginal Australian Nyoongar writer Kim Scott and Canadian First Nations Haisla/Heiltsuk novelist and short story writer Eden Robinson <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss2/9>>. Scott suggests in "I Come from Here" by means of "yarning" that the authority of Indigenous people and language is primary to an authentic "sense of place." Scott uses an accumulative, episodic, and personal narrative style to argue that the return "to," and consolidation of cultural material "in," a "community of descendants of the informants" must be founded upon principles of community development. Collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people by sharing of ancestral material with ever widening, concentric circles is how this process results in respect and partnership that empowers community life. And Robinson explores in "99.99% True & Authentic Tales" with humor how the past and present coexist in contemporary Haisla life. In the process, Robinson also depicts some of the challenges faced by Canada's First Nations writers, whose readers can become so determined to experience the culture represented to them that they wish to live not only in an author's hometown but in her very home. In this way Robinson explores issues of voice, authenticity, and the process of making meaning: to whom does a story belong and who has the right to tell it? How can a story be told?

Angeline O'Neill's book review article "Textual Fantasies and Culturality in Native American Fiction: A Review Article of New Books by Heath and Justice" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss2/10>> incorporates problematics discussed by contributors in their articles. O'Neill discusses *Our Fire Survives the Storm* (2007) by Cherokee novelist and scholar Daniel Heath Justice and Ojibwe novelist and scholar David Treuer's 2006 *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual* (2006). In O'Neill's view, while Justice postulates a history of Cherokee literature as both cultural process and product and emphasizes the importance of nationhood and what he describes as "communitism," Treuer's concern is with interpretation. Treuer divorces Native literature from context and questions its very existence, basing his analysis on Western literary history and critical theory. Readers are thus presented with two very different notions of "Native literature," each informed by a contrasting idea of what literary scholarship is and should be. Consequently, the relevance of conversive scholarly strategies is foregrounded.

Compiled by Angeline O'Neill and Albert Braz, *About Indigenous Literature* includes a selected "Bibliography of Scholarship on Indigenous Literatures and Cultures" <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol13/iss2/11>>.

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