

Aboriginal Literatures in Canada

A Teacher's Resource Guide

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Acknowledgments

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Preface

Renate Eigenbrod has been teaching Aboriginal literatures at the postsecondary level (mainly at Lakehead University, Thunder Bay) since 1986 and became increasingly concerned about the lack of knowledge of these literatures among her Native and non-Native students. With very few exceptions, English curricula in secondary schools in Ontario do not include First Nations literatures and although students may take course offerings in Native Studies, these works could also be part of the English courses so that students can learn about First Nations voices. When Eigenbrod's teaching brought her to the Sandy Lake Reserve in Northwest Ontario, she decided, together with two Anishnaabe teachers, to create a Resource Guide, which would encourage English high school teachers across the country to include Aboriginal literatures in their courses. The writing for this Resource Guide is sustained by Eigenbrod's work with Aboriginal students, writers, artists, and community workers over many years and, in particular, on the Sandy Lake Reserve with the high school teachers at the Thomas Fiddler Memorial High School, Georgina Kakegamic and Josias Fiddler. What appears to be an individual voice is a communal one. The authors do not consider themselves spokespersons "for all things Native." The compilation of resources together with the authors' commentary provides their views on the subject, not an authoritative text on Aboriginal literatures in Canada.

The narrative comments along with the annotated bibliographies and related reading lists, explanations, interpretations, and suggestions are meant to encourage teachers to find their own voice in teaching Aboriginal literatures, engage in a dialogue with these texts, and bring in their own background.

The commentary emphasizes necessary contexts for research ethics and protocol.

Note: "Aboriginal," "Indigenous," and "First Nations" are used interchangeably and also, but less extensively, "Native." As several Aboriginal scholars have explained in recent years, these descriptors should be capitalized in order to acknowledge that they characterize a nation. "Indian" has not been used (unless it is a citation by an Aboriginal author), and the culture-specific adjectives like Cree, Mohawk, etc. have been used as much as possible. It should also be mentioned that spellings of names like Nanabush or Anishnaabe, are just one of the many existing spellings as there has been no generally accepted standardization of (oral) Aboriginal languages; sometimes several variants of the same name have been used in the resource.

Teachers who want to introduce pre-contact and early post-contact times of an Aboriginal culture as an overall context for the literature should follow the methodology of Aboriginal scholars who always emphasize the point that post-contact dates do not delineate the "beginnings" of that group of people. There is a spiritual understanding of "beginnings" which is reflected in the so-called creation stories unique to each First Nation. Each one shows the interrelatedness between humans and non-humans. Often, a version of a creation story prefaces an Aboriginal history text as in the unpublished Course Readings for Mi'kmaq 100 by Mi'kmaw history professor Eleanor Johnson (Mi'kmaq College Institute at UCCB) or in the *The Mikmaw Concordat* by James (Sakej) Youngblood Henderson. Mi'kmaw scholar Marie Battiste, emphasizes that "knowledge of our past and present existence is enfolded in our oral traditions" (p. 13). The oral traditions also greatly influence Aboriginal literature written in English today and therefore, the oral stories should be included as part of the curriculum of First Nations' literature. Mohawk scholar Patricia Monture Angus explains the wider implications of storytelling in her article "Native America and the Literary Tradition."

Introduction

“But how is this country going to ever really know itself unless it knows the Aboriginal foundation to this land and how best to do this but through the school system.”

– Dr. Emma LaRocque, Department of Native Studies, University of Manitoba,
(Interview with R. Eigenbrod, June, 2001)

“... Indigenous literature, if you want to use that label for convenience’s sake, holds many if not all of the beliefs, philosophies, worldviews of Indigenous people; it holds a history. So I would think that Aboriginal literature really is the heart of Aboriginal being.”

– Neal McLeod, Assistant Professor, Department of Indian Studies at Saskatchewan Indian Federated College,
(Interview with R. Eigenbrod, June, 2001)

Aboriginal Literatures in Canada: A Teacher’s Resource Guide serves a double purpose: to encourage the teaching of Aboriginal literature in English high school curricula across the country because Aboriginal students deserve to be taught texts they can relate to and, because non-Aboriginal students should be educated about Aboriginal culture, history and contemporary life through the richness of Aboriginal writing with its innovative uses of the English language. The Ontario Curriculum, English states, “literature is a fundamental element of identity and culture.” Aboriginal literatures should be more visible in the curriculum in all its diversity. The use of the common denominator “Indian” for all Aboriginal peoples often overshadows the fact that the Aboriginal peoples of Canada are culturally diverse and that each cultural group produces its own literature. As Okanagan author and director of the First Nations Creative Writing School (the En’owkin Centre in Penticton, B.C.), Jeannette Armstrong, put it in an interview with Renate Eigenbrod on August 6, 2001: “I would stay away from the idea of “Native” literature, there is no such thing. There is Mohawk literature, there is Okanagan literature, but there is no generic Native in Canada.”

Writers move around — so do Aboriginal writers. For example, Anishnaabe author Armand Ruffo lives in Ottawa and no longer in northern Ontario, and Cree writer Tomson Highway lives in Toronto and in France and no longer in northern Manitoba. Native American scholar Paula Gunn Allen, in her latest book *Off the Reservation* suggests that Aboriginal writers shouldn’t be pigeonholed. At the same time, when one talks to Aboriginal people across the country, the question where one is from is most important in introductory identifications. Similarly, the literatures are culture-specific, i.e., region-, language-, history-specific, while also addressing themes, which are pertinent to *all* Aboriginal cultures in Canada and around the world, and even further, pertinent to all peoples universally. A recently published anthology edited by Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm and Josie Douglas, *skins: contemporary Indigenous writing*, emphasizes commonalities. Ojibway author Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm states in her Preface: “The writers come from diverse cultures and histories, from the far north of Canada to the South Pacific islands of Aotearoa. Despite these differences, what all of the writers share is our connections to our homelands, our histories of colonization, genocide, and displacement and our will to survive and pass the treasures of our cultures to future generations.”

An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English, edited by Daniel David Moses and Terry Goldie (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998) shows the connections among the above-mentioned themes, while at the same time indicating culture-specific contexts. The authors adopted this publication (referenced as the Moses/Goldie anthology) as the basis for this guide with many of the selections mentioned in the narratives found in this anthology. The poem “heritage” by Ojibway writer Wayne Keon, published in this anthology, generates interesting discussions about differences in sameness and may be suited for an introduction to First Nations’ literature in a class at the senior level.

With the help of a map from the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, a teacher may point out the location of some of the nations, emphasizing those that are close to the geographical area of the school.

In the main part of this Resource Guide, the contexts for teaching literature from six different Aboriginal cultures are outlined:

- Mi’kmaq
- Mohawk (Six Nations)
- Anishnabe (Ojibway)
- Cree
- Métis
- Okanagan

For background information, consult the history book by Métis scholar Olive Dickason and Steckley’s and Cummins’ book — see Works Cited.

There are many more Aboriginal cultures in Canada than listed above, but these groups in particular, are most prominent in readings of literature. By selecting Aboriginal literatures from the respective groups, the authors do not discuss in any detail widely known Aboriginal (Cherokee) author Thomas King or acclaimed fiction writers about adolescents like Eden Robinson from the West Coast (Haisla/Heiltsuk) and Richard Van Camp from the Dogrib nation.

Another exclusion is the literature by the Inuit people. Given their late contact with Europeans, their history, culture, and hence literature developed differently than among the southern First Nations. Included in the Works Cited are a few anthologies that may help a teacher get started.

On each of Eigenbrod’s travels through the country to different resource centres and Aboriginal communities, her question “How should an English teacher approach Aboriginal literature?” was answered with: ‘go and meet the people,’ or, in Jeannette Armstrong’s words: “Call on the person who does speak the language as the expert, work with the expert and create the curriculum around that” (Interview with R. Eigenbrod, August, 2001).

Teachers are encouraged to teach Aboriginal literature linked to communities close to their school so that contacts can be made more easily. The advice to meet the people is informed by the awareness that:

- books may reflect an assumed, but not a real expertise;
- while books simplify, conversations with people show complexities;
- published literature is only *one* medium of expression and communication, and oral communication exists side by side with the written.

Aboriginal writing is not simple, and it comes from living cultures that are subject to change like any other culture. To hear from Aboriginal authors and “experts” directly without meeting them personally, refer to published interviews or, conduct online discussions between the author and the students. Although these methods do not ensure contact with different community voices, they may help avoid misinterpretations of the literature that could perpetuate stereotypes.

It has not been that long ago that published Aboriginal literature in English became more noticeable, or that Aboriginal voices were finally listened to. “Here Are Our Voices - Who Will Hear?” is the telling title of a preface by Métis scholar and poet Emma LaRocque to an anthology of literature by Native women of Western Canada, entitled *Writing the Circle*. The autobiography *Halfbreed* by Métis author Maria Campbell, published in 1973, is usually quoted as the seminal text drawing attention to Aboriginal writing in Canada, in general. Although there had been earlier Aboriginal writers, like Emily Pauline Johnson from the Mohawk nation, contemporary Native authors frequently call Maria Campbell “the mother of us all.” To address some of the challenges on the road to Aboriginal literature published in English, teachers and students may discuss the well-known poem “I lost my talk” by Mi’kmaq poet Rita Joe. This text may be taught either in a specific Mi’kmaq context or as an introduction to Aboriginal writing, as the points about loss of language/culture/identity and voice in residential schools pertain to all Indigenous cultures in Canada.

I Lost My Talk

I lost my talk
The talk you took away.
When I was a little girl
At Shubenacadie school.

You snatched it away:
I speak like you
I think like you
I create like you
The scrambled ballad, about my word.

Two ways I talk
Both ways I say,
Your way is more powerful.

So gently I offer my hand and ask,
Let me find my talk
So I can teach you about me.

This poem shows the disempowering effects of the residential schools, in this case the Shubenacadie school in Nova Scotia, which created a twofold tragedy as Ojibway scholar Armand Garnet Ruffo puts it in *Out of Silence*: they took away the Aboriginal language but they did not teach English well (as the children were also used as labourers). The mentioning of the spoken language (“talk”) should be read metonymically as referring to a way of life vastly different from that of a written culture. The oral traditions were “taken away,” silencing the medium of talking in their own language as well as the message. Together with isolation from family, physical and sexual abuse, and punishment for any other kind of cultural expression, this education created “a scrambled ballad.” So it took a while until writers emerged who had not only survived but who had also “found their talk.” It is worth noting that Rita Joe repeats the word “talk” at the end although she herself is not talking but writing. It seems that she wants to make a point about the continuation of talk in the written word and thereby a statement about the continuation of her culture despite major disruptions.

In teaching this poem, non-Aboriginal teachers need to be aware that, although loss seems to be emphasized, it should not be overly highlighted in the interpretation. This poem was composed in the 1970s; today, the humble gesture with which the speaker reclaims her voice at the end: “let me ...” will no longer be found in Aboriginal writing. The tone in today’s literature is self-assertive not emphasizing loss, disempowerment, and victimization, but survival and strength. This poem may also be taught cross-culturally in comparison with a speech/essay by Jeannette Armstrong (Okanagan), “The Disempowerment of First North American Native Peoples and Empowerment Through Their Writing.”

Works Cited

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Mi'kmaq Literature

"Nikmatut": All My Relations

Introduction

In the Mi'kmaq Resource Centre at the University College of Cape Breton, a visitor will notice a pamphlet titled "Mi'kmaq Timeline," put together by two Mi'kmaq scholars, Eleanor Bernard and Marie Battiste. The listing of dates starts with 1525 and ends in 1999 with the Marshall Decision. It is said that in 1525 the seven Mi'kmaq Districts flourished under one government. The eight-pointed star is a visual expression of those seven districts plus the British Crown or, as some Mi'kmaq people say, the Pope. In 1610, Chief Membertou and 140 Mi'kmaq adopted Catholicism; it is the most popular Christian religion today. Recently, Mi'kmaq spirituality was officially declared a religion, due to the efforts of Mi'kmaw elder Noel Knockwood. Catholicism did not replace Mi'kmaq spirituality; both beliefs co-exist.

About the Literature

Mi'kmaq contemporary literature is not extensive. This Guide focuses on Mi'kmaq literature in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, although there are also Mi'kmaq people in Quebec and Newfoundland.

Rita Joe, born in Whycocomogh, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, in 1932, is the best-known Mi'kmaw writer. She was honoured with the Order of Canada in 1990. In her poetry, she "teaches" about onslaughts against her culture, as well as about its strength and endurance, which she expresses partly through writing her poems in Mi'kmaw and English. "I lost my talk" and "Wen net ki'l - Who are you?" are examples. In the latter poem, answering a "question from a teacher feared," the speaker changes from feeling "dejected" to vowing to "be great in all learnings ... and relate wonders to my people." The fact that the poem is rendered in English and in Mi'kmaq clearly illustrates that the education the speaker vows to get respects both sides - Mi'kmaq and English. In addition to several collections of poetry, Joe wrote an autobiography entitled *Song of Rita Joe*, in which she gives insights into the turmoil of her personal life and of her people by interspersing the story of her life with poems about Mi'kmaq culture and history. There are several other poets, notably Lindsay Marshall, Chief at Chapel Island, Cape Breton; and women poets such as Shirley Bear and Teresa Marshall, whose work is featured in *Kelusultiek: original women's voices of Atlantic Canada*.

Baptist minister and missionary Silas Tertius Rand (1810-89) learned the Mi'kmaq language, wrote a Mi'kmaq dictionary, and collected Mi'kmaq stories. The posthumous publication of the stories in 1894 (now available on CD-ROM) contains many Gluscap stories, a few of them retold by Nova Scotian writer Aldan Nowlan. Anthropologist Ruth Holmes Whitehead collected and edited Mi'kmaq legends in the 20th century and produced a history text based on published and unpublished material: *The Old Man Told Us*.

Mi'kmaw sculptor Randy Simon, like the novelist Lorne Simon from Big Cove, New Brunswick, creates carvings influenced by Mi'kmaq legends. On one of his websites he published a version of the story "The Lobster and the Eel" which may be taught to all grades depending on the complexity of interpretation. It is one of the tales explaining how features in nature came to be, but at the same time it is also a story about the consequences of greed.

Suggestions for Teachers

Teachers of Mi'kmaq literature should emphasize the importance of the traditional Gluskeb character. Rita Joe in her poetry and Mi'kmaw writer Lorne Simon in his novel, *Stones and Switches* refer to Gluskeb. This character from the Mi'kmaq oral traditions plays a similar role to that of Nanabush, Raven, and Weesageechak who will be discussed for other First Nations. As stories collected and written down by Europeans were often demeaned, it is best to find out about this character from Mi'kmaq authors like Marie Battiste, who states in her preface to *The Mikmaq Concordat* that Kluskap "is often called the 'teacher-creator'" (p. 14). In Lorne Simon's novel, Gluskeb is compared to Christ, and stories about "the second coming" of each, both Gluskeb and Christ, form a central part of the novel. The returning of Gluskeb is seen as the revival of Mi'kmaq culture — the novel demonstrates this by interspersing the Mi'kmaq language throughout.

There is a definite emphasis on poetry. Besides the one novel by Lorne Simon, prose texts, fiction, and non-fiction can be found in *Kelusultiek* and in *The Mi'kmaq Anthology* edited by Rita Joe and Lesley Choyce, as well as in general anthologies of Native literatures, like *Voices: Being Native in Canada*, edited by Linda Jaine and Drew Taylor, and in the journal *Gatherings*. For other genres and media, there is the song by Mi'kmaw folk musician and filmmaker Willie Dunn "Son of the Sun" (sung by Kashtin).

If stories transmitted orally for centuries are recorded in print, teachers should consider how the stories were produced. Ralph Maud's work *A Guide to B.C. Indian Myth and Legend* provides helpful guidelines:

- Is credit given to the Aboriginal storyteller?
- In which language was the story recorded?
- Has (had) the storyteller status in his or her community?
- Does the preface of the book tell anything about the context of the storytelling situation and the community from which the story comes?

Teachers could have students compare several versions of so-called legends, ideally from the same First Nation. Remind them that the stories were transmitted orally for centuries and this communication is still going on in Aboriginal communities today. Stories were/are told in certain contexts, e.g., certain stories would only be told in the winter, and were adapted to the respective audience and situation.

The teacher should be aware that since contact, Aboriginal peoples have had their stories either stolen, as copyright laws of oral cultures were not honoured, or were misinterpreted, e.g., "demeaned" as pagan and primitive, so that they are often suspicious of outsiders requesting their stories (Basil Johnston, *One Generation from Extinction*, p. 103). Point out to students that the written word changed all of that, and emphasize that the print version is a fixation of a text that was meant to be malleable.

If possible, contact the band council and/or teachers at a reserve school to find an Elder who is willing to come to class for a storytelling performance.

Note: It may be difficult to get an elder to visit the classroom because of the legacy of the residential school experience and also because of the institutional framework operating by the clock rather than by “Indian time” (meaning: when the time is right).

In the Words of Elders (ed. by Peter Kulchyski, et al.) is a valuable resource to accompany contemporary Aboriginal literature. This book is based on interviews with sixteen Elders across the country and offers a culture-specific approach to providing insights into “aboriginal cultures in transition” from “the cultural ‘inside’” (p. xi). In the chapter on “East Canada Cultures,” we find an interview with Albert Ward from the Eel Ground First Nation in New Brunswick. This interview might complement the teaching of Lorne Simon’s novel, *Stones and Switches* (the only novel by a Mi’kmaq author so far), as Lorne Simon was also from the Mi’kmaq people from New Brunswick. While his work is about understanding the Mi’kmaq worldview within the context of political, personal, and spiritual disempowerment of a fictional character, Elder Albert Ward gives insights into the larger picture of Mi’kmaq society and history.

Aboriginal writers and scholars frequently point out that the best way to teach their oral traditions to non-Aboriginal students is to remind them of their own culture and traditions of storytelling.

Bibliography

Selected Literature by Mi’kmaq authors

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H.W. Gloade was born in 1920, his father was Mi’kmaw, his mother was of Scottish and German descent; he writes about the area of Truro, Nova Scotia and the Millbrook Reserve to which his family moved in 1927.

Joe, Rita. *Poems of Rita Joe*. Halifax, NS: Abanaki Press, 1978.

_____. *Song of Eskasoni: More Poems of Rita Joe*. Charlottetown, PEI: Ragweed Press, 1988.

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_____. With the assistance of Lynn Henry. *Song of Rita Joe: Autobiography of a Mi’kmaq Poet*. Charlottetown, PEI: Ragweed Press, 1996.

_____. *Interview with Rita Joe in Words out there: Women Poets in Atlantic Canada*, ed. Jeanette Lynes. Lockeport, NS: Roseway Publishing, 1999.

_____ and Lesley Choyce. *The Mi’kmaq Anthology*. Lawrencetown Beach, NS: Pottersfield Press, 1997. (out of print)

In her poetry of cultural affirmation, Rita Joe often inserts words in the Mi’kmaq language which are translated into English in footnotes. The poem “Who are you? - Wen net ki!” (in *We are the Dreamers*) is bilingual.

Kelusultiek: original women’s voices of Atlantic Canada. Halifax, NS: Mount Saint Vincent University, Institute for the Study of Women, 1994.

Knockwood, Isabella. *Out of the Depth – the Experiences of Mi'kmaw Children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie*. Nova Scotia. Lockeport, NS: Roseway Publishing, (1992) 2001.

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Isabella Knockwood's work provides important context for contemporary Mi'kmaq literature because of the impact of the Shubenacadie Residential School on Mi'kmaq people.

Marshall, Lindsay, Chief. *Clay Pots and Bones - Pka'wo'qq aq Waqntal*. Sydney, NS: City Printers, 1997.

Simon, Lorne. *Stones and Switches*. Penticton BC Theytus Books, 1994.

This novel is about Megwadesk, a young man about to get married and become a father, who used to be a successful fisherman but at the novel's opening finds himself out of luck. The plot is about his struggle to regain his capability as a fisherman. The theme is his spiritual search for meaning in his life and for sources of power on a political, cultural, and spiritual level. Who is more powerful: Gluskeb or Christ, the Mi'kmaq traditional beliefs or different Christian denominations, an aggressive white society or the Mi'kmaq community? These conflicts are depicted in connection with the relational image of the spider's web (important for all Aboriginal cultures) thus de-emphasizing antagonisms. Simon inserts Mi'kmaq phrases that are translated in a glossary.

Simon, Randy. "*The Lobster and the Eel*."

<http://radio.cbc.ca/programs/artspots/html/artists/rsimon/notes.html>

<http://www.nativeamericainc.com/Artists/randysimon/Simonprofile.html>

Native anthologies that include additional Mi'kmaq texts:

Fox Roman, Trish, ed. *Voices Under One Sky: Contemporary Native Literature. Reflections in Fiction and Non-Fiction*. Scarborough Ontario, Nelson Canada, 1994.

An anthology suitable for use in high schools that includes "Son of the Sun" (available with Teacher's Guide).

Jaine, Linda and Drew Taylor. *Voices: Being Native in Canada*. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan: University Extension Press, 1995.

Related Readings

Angus, Patricia Monture. "Native America and the Literary Tradition." *Native North America: Critical and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Renée Hulan. Toronto: ECW Press, 1999: pp. 20-46.

Brand, Johanna. *The Life and Death of Anna Mae Aquash*. Toronto: James Lorimer, 1993.

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Nowlan, Alden. *Nine Micmac Legends*. Illustrated by Shirley Bear. Hantsport, NS: Lancelot Press, 1986.

Swift, Wayne. CD-ROM of Silas T. Rand. *Legends of the Micmacs* (1894). Available from: The Odd Book, 8 Front Street, P.O. Box 863, Wolfville, NS B0P 1X0

Youngblood Henderson, James (Sakej). *The Mikmaw Concordat*. Halifax, Fernwood Publishing, 1997.

Other Resources

Gatherings (an annual journal) Theytus Books

Mi'kmaq-Maliseet Nations News.

Managing Editor: Tim Bernard

E-mail: news@cmmns.com

Mi'kmaq College Institute.

University College of Cape Breton.

<http://mrc.uccb.ns.ca/mci/default.htm>

(with link to "Mi'kmaq Research Principles and Protocols")

Mi'kmaq Resource Centre (a part of *Mi'kmaq College Institute*)

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E-mail: pjohnson@uccb.ns.ca

On Rita Joe: <http://www.ipl.org/cgi/ref/native/browse.pl/A156>

Daniel N. Paul, Mi'kmaq human rights activist, historian, and author, frequently writes in *Mi'kmaq-Maliseet Nations News* (and other newspapers)

E-mail: Daniel.paul@ns.sympatico.ca

Website: <http://www.danielnpaul.com>

Suggested Readings on Mi'kmaq History, Culture and Language*

Coates, Ken. *The Marshall Decision and Native Rights: The Marshall Decision and Mi'kmaq Rights in the Maritimes*. Mc Gill – Queen's Press, 2000. 216 pages.

Davis, Stephen A. *Mi'kmaq: People of the Maritimes*.

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Inglis, Stephanie, Joy Manette, and Stacey Sulewski, eds. *Paqtatek - vol. 1 Policy and Consciousness in Mi'kmaq Life*. Garamond Press Halifax, 1991.

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Prins, Harald. *The Mi'kmaq: Resistance, Accommodation and Cultural Survival*. Toronto: Harcourt Brace & Co. Ltd., 1996. 268 pages.

Reid, Jennifer. *Myth, Symbol, and Colonial Encounter - British and Mi'kmaq in Acadia 1700-1867*. University of Ottawa Press, 1995.

Robertson, Marion. *Red Earth: Tales of the Micmac*. Roseway Publishing, 1999. 84 pages.

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Tantallon, Nova Scotia: Four East Publications, 1992.

York, Geoffrey. *The Dispossessed*. Mac Arthur & Co., 1992. 291 pages

Whitehead, Ruth Holmes. *Elitekey - Micmac Material Culture from 1600 A.D. to the Present*. Nova Scotia Museum, 1980.

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* Compiled by the Mi'kmaq Resource Centre at the University College of Cape Breton.

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Mi'kmaq Talking Dictionary – <http://www.mikmaqonline.org/>

Mi'kmaw Kina'matnewey – <http://kinu.ns.ca>

Native Languages of the Americas – <http://www.geocities.com/bigorin/mikm.htm>

New Brunswick Aboriginal Affairs – <http://www.gnb.ca/0016/Default.htm>

Mi'kmaq - Genealogy Page – <http://www.auracom.com/~photolaw/puoin/#INTRO>

Union of Nova Scotia Indians – <http://www.unsi.ns.ca/>

Mohawk Literature

Haudesodaunee: People of the Longhouse

Introduction

The wampum belt, introduced by the Mi'kmaq nations on the east coast, connected the Mi'kmaq and the Six Nations people. Linguistically, there is a great difference between the Algonquian language group to which the Mi'kmaq language belongs and the languages of the Iroquoian Confederacy.

The six nations of the Iroquois Confederacy, which was probably founded in the middle of the 15th century, are the Mohawk, the Oneida, the Onondaga, the Cayuga, the Seneca, and the Tuscarora (who joined in 1722). Today, on the Six Nations Reserve (a community of about 14,000 people near Brantford) Cayuga is the principle language, followed by Mohawk, and then the other languages. There are Cayuga people who get together for creative writing workshops and performances; there are also many artists on the Six Nations Reserve; however, in terms of published literature written in English, there is no Cayuga literature, rather only Mohawk literature.

As explained in the autobiographical book *Back On The Rez: finding the way home*, by Mohawk author Brian Maracle, there are two forms of government on the Six Nations Reserve: the elected band council imposed by the Indian Act in 1924 and the Rotinonhsyonni, the traditional Longhouse. While Catholicism became the dominant Christian religion for the Mi'kmaq, the Anglican Church played a major role on the Six Nations Reserve. "The Mohawk Institute" — a residential school — was run by Anglicans (see *The Mush Hole*). Today, the building is close to The Woodland Cultural Centre, a major museum, and resource centre. The geographical closeness of both buildings tells the story of survival in spite of oppression.

Two texts: "The Great Law" or "The Great Tree of Peace" and the creation story relate the five (later six) nations, spiritual/cultural, as well as their political history. "The Great Law" (Moses/Gold Anthology) outlines the constitution of the Confederacy and was emulated by the founders of the United States. In this Resource Guide on *literature*, the focus is on the creation story with a comparison of two literary versions re-told by Mohawk authors Beth Brant and Peter Blue Cloud. Neither writer lives on the Six Nations Reserve because "the Mohawks today are a dispersed people," as Maracle explains (*Back on the Rez*, p. 37). While Beth Brant is a Bay of Quinte Mohawk from Tyendinaga Mohawk territory in Ontario, Peter Blue Cloud is from Kahnawake, Quebec.

The Mohawks of Kahnawake are members of the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy, or as is common in their Kanienke'haka language, members of the Haudenosaunee "People of the Longhouse." They have existed as a sovereign nation long before the arrival of Columbus and the European settlers (approximately 1300 years). The Mohawks taught the European settlers how to survive the northern climate, how to live off the land, and new ways of governing themselves democratically. As the Mohawks influenced the European way of life, European practices and beliefs also affected them. By signing a peace treaty with the Haudenosaunee, first in 1667 and again in 1700, the French were secured in fulfilling their two main objectives: securing a military and political alliance and establishing Christian missions in Mohawk territory. Reduced tensions led many French settlers to move onto Mohawk territory, with the Mohawks acting as a buffer between the French and the other five members of the Iroquois Confederacy: the Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, and Tuscarora nations. Jesuit missionaries, determined to "civilize" the Mohawks, established Christian missions with the sole intent to convert the natives. The Francis Xavier mission is an example and testimony to this process. Many forms of spirituality now exist on the reserve – Traditional Beliefs, Catholics, Protestants, and some Jehovah's Witness. The Iroquois People are unique because of their social and political structure. They are governed by the Great Law, an accord among the Six Nations of the Confederacy that bans bloodshed and ensures peace as a way of life. The Iroquois social system is both matrilineal and a matriarchy, the bulk of the political power lies with the women of the society. Family names and clans are passed down through the mother to the daughter and any children belong to the mother's clan. It should be noted that in this social structure, both men and women were considered equal, neither being superior to the next. The political system also relies heavily on the clan structure. The decisions are made through consensus of the people, making the Iroquois Confederacy one of the world's first true democracies. Thomas Jefferson studied and later presented the political structure of the Iroquois Confederacy to the thirteen colonies. The American democratic system as we know it today is based upon the values and beliefs of the Iroquois people.

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– <http://www.kahnawake.com/history>

Not only are the Mohawk people dispersed within Canada, but they are also divided by the Canada-United States border. For example, Beth Brant's nationality is published by the Biography Resource Centre website as "American." Sometimes Aboriginal people refuse to call themselves either "American" or "Canadian" and instead name themselves according to their Aboriginal ancestry. Cherokee author Thomas King, who now resides in Canada, wrote a well-known story titled "Borders," in which he shows the irrelevance of the post-contact border for Aboriginal peoples (see Related Readings). In Beth Brant's case, she was born in Detroit but often traveled to the Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory near Deseronto, Ontario, which is home to her ancestors from the Bay of Quinte Turtle Clan. Most of her books are published in Canada; she also received an Ontario Arts Council Award and a Canada Council Grant. Today, she resides in both places, Michigan and Ontario. Her most recent book, a non-fiction text of conversations with Tyendinaga Elders, titled *I'll Sing 'Till the Day I Die*, provides the cultural and historical context for her writing as a Mohawk of the Bay of Quinte.

About the Literature

The literature of Mohawk authors must be seen in the context of the history of the Iroquois Confederacy of which the Mohawks are one of the six nations. A long history of nation building and alliances, as well as colonial territorial disruptions, and their matrilineal and matriarchal social system influence their literature. In interpreting literature by authors from any of the Six Nations Confederacy, the clan system, with its emphasis on intimate links between humans and animals, is also important (see *Clanology: Clan System of the Iroquois* by Tom Porter). The clan animals are turtle, bear, wolf, deer, snipe. The turtle is one of the main Mohawk clans.

In her short stories and essays, Beth Brant is particularly known for writing with the self-awareness of a Mohawk. Beth Brant's collection of short stories, *Food and Spirits*, starts off with a narrative, "This is History," a version of the Mohawk creation story. It has some of the "typical" elements of an Indigenous creation story, including earth being formed on the turtle's back made possible by the collaboration of animals (eagle, turtle, muskrat). Animals and all other living things provide further guidance when Sky Woman gives birth to First Woman. Different from the Mi'kmaq creation stories with the teacher-creator Gluscap, this version merely emphasizes the important role of nature for all of creation from its very beginning, as well as the importance of women. There is no character comparable to Gluscap or Nanabush in the Mohawk oral tradition, but "the little people" are important. (See *Legends of the Longhouse*.) Brant's title for the narrative "This is History" is significant. By referring to it as *history*, she makes it clear that the story cannot be dismissed as myth or as a children's story, but should be understood as creating the foundations for Mohawk society. Implicitly, it also creates the spiritual foundation for her collection of short stories. "Swimming Upstream," (See *Food and Spirits*) is a story about the disempowerment of humans by humans and the empowerment through non-humans. Reminiscent of the ways first humans learn from animals in the creation story, the character in the contemporary setting of the short story regains her will to live by watching the salmon swim upstream. The connection between a so-called traditional and a contemporary narrative also illuminates the continuity of Aboriginal beliefs instead of emphasizing loss through colonization.

Mohawk (Arionwenrate) writer Peter Blue Cloud, from Kahnawake, Quebec is also a member of the Turtle clan. In his creation story, "Weaver's Spider's Web," he utilizes an important symbol of Aboriginal thought, the spider's web to reflect on creation as formed out of relationships overriding conflicts and antagonisms. He uses details from traditional Coyote stories from other nations in which Coyote is not only the trickster but is also being tricked and shows the creation of a powerful woman, so important in the Longhouse cultures, as a necessary consequence. In a self-reflexive, metafictional manner, the story also looks upon itself as creation, making the point that this is just *one* way of telling it; this corresponds with the infinite number of versions of stories told orally. Blue Cloud's story not only provides an interesting contrast between two different Mohawk creation stories, but can also be compared cross-culturally with the spider stories in *Stones and Switches*, by Mi'kmaq writer Lorne Simon.

Another member of the Turtle clan is Mohawk author Richard G. Green, who resides today on the Six Nations Reserve. Like Beth Brant, he has links to both Canada and the United States. He was born on Six Nations territory but grew up in Hamilton, Ontario, and Niagara Falls, New York. Published in Canada and the United States, he sees himself as an Onkwehonwe (Indigenous, Native American) author. From his publication *The Last Raven: A Collection of Short Stories by a Mohawk author*, the title story “The Last Raven” lends itself well to be used at the secondary school level, although it is not an easy story. The senseless shooting of crows (links may be made to Raven in West Coast stories) is related to culture loss which, in turn, is seen to be affected by the impact of Christianity, racism (stereotyping), and the loss of language. The whole collection entitled *The Last Raven* is well suited for senior high school grades as these narratives present Mohawk culture and worldviews. They are invaluable in an intercultural classroom because of their “shifting points of intersection between the Indian and non-Indian worlds” (Brian Maracle on the back cover of the book). By featuring young characters, secondary school students will be able to relate to many of the themes around love and marriage, peer acceptance, and relationship with elders.

Daniel David Moses, a Delaware who grew up on the Six Nations Reserve, is the most highly acclaimed Six Nations author. He is recognized for his poetry, but even more so for his plays. He addresses complex and important events of Canadian history like the Jesuits’ relations with the Mohawks (*Brébeuf’s Ghost*) or the consequences of the so-called Riel Rebellion (*Almighty Voice and His Wife*). He has also written plays for young people (*The Dreaming Beauty*).

The most widely known Mohawk author from the Six Nations Reserve may be the 19th century poet Emily Pauline Johnson (1861-1913), who is usually included in anthologies of Canadian literature. Her father was a Mohawk Chief and her mother was from England. The house where she grew up, Chiefswood, is now a museum. Her poem “The Song My Paddle Sings” is the trademark of her poetry sometimes at the expense of her political and “more daring” feminine voice. Much has been written about the duality of her upbringing and the duality of her role-playing performances as a Native and as a white woman, but for Beth Brant she is foremost “a spiritual grandmother to those of us who are women writers of the First Nations” (*Writing as Witness*, p. 7). Brant feels that it is time to re-evaluate her “for the revolutionary she was” (p. 6). Métis author Joan Crate re-imagines her in her own poems: *Pale as Real Ladies: Poems for Pauline Johnson*, 1991. Representative of her work are poems and a short story, expressing her different voices (Moses/Goldie Anthology).

Suggestions for Teachers

Students could compare the role of animals in the stories by Beth Brant and Peter Blue Cloud with their role in European fables or fairy tales to help them understand different worldviews and that animals in Mohawk and other Aboriginal narratives are not only morally but also spiritually significant. There is a rich variety of short stories, poems, plays, and non-fiction texts to choose from and to compare.

For media studies, selections from the highly acclaimed documentary on the Oka crisis (which gives detailed historical background) *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (NFB, 1993), by Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin, could be compared with other media coverage of the event.

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This website features links to biographies of lesser known Six Nations authors as well as to *Young Voices*, writings by young people from the reserve along with their email contacts.

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<http://www.poets.ca/linktext/direct/moses.htm>

Moses visits secondary schools to read from his own works and/or discuss his writing process, the work of his Native contemporaries or related Native cultural topics or leads a creative writing workshop with an emphasis on dramatic ideas, on the oral tradition, or on the student's work.

The Centre for Indigenous Theatre in Toronto: E-mail: cit@interlog.com

A contact for Daniel David Moses and Aboriginal theatre

Related Readings

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Other Resources

History Television Video on Pauline Johnson (30 minutes)
<http://www.viewerservices.com>

Newspapers published on the Six Nations Reserve:

Tekawennake. E-mail: teka@tekanews.com Phone: (519) 753-0077

Turtle Island News E-mail: advertise@theturtleislandnews.com
Phone:(519) 445-0868

Woodland Cultural Centre, Brantford: <http://www.museumat.woodland-centre.on.ca>
Phone: (519) 759-2445

Anishnaabe (Anishinaubae) Literature

The people of good intent

Introduction

Anishnaabe (Anishinaabe, Anishnawbe - there is no standardized spelling in this still mostly oral language) stands for what is more commonly known as Ojibway (Ojibwa, Ojibwe). Today, *Anishnaabe* is the officially accepted name although *Ojibway* is still used. According to Basil Johnston, Anishnaubae was the word by which members of the nation – the Chippewa in the U.S. and the Ojibway in Canada – used to identify themselves. The Ojibway language is part of the Algonquian language group and is one of the most frequently spoken Aboriginal languages in Canada besides Cree and the Inuit languages. It is expressed in writing either in syllabics or in the Roman orthography.

On the website <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/ojibwa.htm> it is stated that James Evans, a Wesleyan missionary working at Norway House in Hudson's Bay, "invented" the syllabics for the Ojibway in 1840 and later adapted it to Cree. When one talks to the Anishnaabe people, they say that this script was not invented by Evans but that he only put into a writing system the symbols which had been there all along. In the bilingual newspaper, *Wawatay* (Northern Lights), which is widely circulated in Anishnaabe communities in Northern Ontario, the texts in the Anishnaabe language are written in syllabics. In other contexts, Roman orthography is used, for example, in the bilingual children's book by Ojibway storyteller and writer Lenore Keeshig-Tobias: *Bird Talk - Bineshiinh Dibaajmowin*. This book is comparable to the bilingual Mi'kmaq children's book by Patsy Paul-Martin: *Ke Kinu'tmui Ta'n Teli Lnui'sik, Kiju – Please Teach Me How to Speak Mi'kmaw, Grandma*.

About the Literature

Co-existing with an increasingly pronounced revival of Anishnaabe dialects in the education system, in the media, and, to some degree, in literary works, is a whole range of literature in English by authors of Anishnaabe ancestry. Two collections of narratives passed down orally for centuries are widely used in Northwest Ontario, which has a large population of Anishnaabe people. These are Basil Johnstons' *Ojibway Heritage*, together with his other collections such as *Tales the Elders Told* and a more locally defined, yet widely used collection entitled in its most recent edition *Sacred Legends*. It used to be called *Sacred Legends of the Sandy Lake Cree* as it was the Oji-Cree speaking community of Sandy Lake where these stories were collected by artist Carl Ray. While the teacher-creator in Johnston's versions of the stories is called Nanabush, it is Weesa-kay-jac for the Sacred Legends from Sandy Lake, a community close to the Cree people. Each collection contains a creation story with the 'earth diver motif' — after the great flood a number of animals dive deep down into the ocean to retrieve some soil so that the earth can be re-created.

The important role of animals in creating life on earth distinguishes Aboriginal stories from Biblical stories. However, Aboriginal beliefs in ecological relationships among all living things were considered superstitious and primitive by the missionaries. In the 19th century church-run schools that provided the only European education for Aboriginal people, students did not just learn the English language but also the European way of thinking. Hence, the first Aboriginal people educated well enough in English so that they could write and publish in this language reflected the views of their teachers and their readers. This can be clearly seen in an excerpt from the autobiography of the Ojibway George Copway (1818-69) (Moses/Goldie Anthology). Although his autobiography, titled *The Life, History, and Travels of Kah-ge-gah-bowh* (1847), is a milestone publication in so far as it was the first book in English written by a Canadian Aboriginal person, it clearly reflects the attitude of the converted. He praises his people for their excellent knowledge of plants and animals, but having become a Methodist minister himself, he considers Ojibway spirituality as inferior to Christianity and welcomes the conversion of his parents. His attitude contrasts sharply with contemporary Ojibway writer Richard Wagamese, who, in his autobiographical novel *Keeper 'N Me* validates the beliefs and values of his Ojibway community, White Dog, to which his main character comes home as a 20-year-old man after having been abducted as a three-year-old. The importance of traditional Ojibway beliefs is highlighted in his use of the Anishnabe language in most of the chapter headings. Similarly, the poetry selections by Ojibway author and scholar Armand Ruffo born in Chapleau, in northern Ontario, revise history in "Poem for Duncan Campbell Scott" and "Creating a Country." Different from Wagamese and Ruffo, Ojibway novelist Ruby Slipperjack from Whitewater Lake, Ontario creates her fictional plots and characters *within* an Ojibway community outside of the contact zone with non-Native culture. In *Honour the Sun*, she shows through the perception of a young female character life in an Ojibway community in the 1960s. In *Silent Words*, she teaches readers by teaching a young male character about Anishnaabe values. In each case, the presence of non-Native society is marginalized although implied through certain "markers," like the school, the church, the store, and the impact of alcoholism. Her third novel, *Weesquachak and the Lost Ones* has a female protagonist and includes, to some degree, the theme of "culture clash." It emphasizes complex relationships among genders and different generations within a decidedly Anishnaabe context – highlighted by the role of the trickster character, Weesquachak.

Widely known, performed, and published playwright Drew Hayden Taylor from the Curve Lake Reserve near Peterborough, Ontario, addresses (always humorously) a wide variety of topics in the many plays he wrote since 1989, when *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock* was premiered. Besides his plays, he also published essays and short stories. His often quoted essay, "Pretty Like a White Boy: The Adventures of a Blue Eyed Ojibway," originally formed the introduction to his collection of essays *Funny, You Don't Look Like One* (Moses/Goldie Anthology). It addresses the topic of preconceived notions about Native identity, which is emphasized as a theme in the section on Métis literature. His 2001 online essay "Seeing red over myths" also exposes stereotypes about Aboriginal peoples and cultures, in particular about their assumed sameness. (See <http://www.operation-dialogue.com/lafontaine-baldwin/e/2001articlegmtaylor.html>)

Sacred Legends should be seen as part of a trilogy. James Stevens also edited *Legends from the Forest*, a collection of stories from various storytellers in Sandy Lake and he collaborated with Chief Thomas Fiddler on the book *Killing the Shaman* – the story behind the court case about a shaman whose alleged crime was the killing of a possessed woman. These texts are not accepted by all as they have been written down by an outsider changed from an oral to a written; fixed and authoritative version; changed from Oji-Cree to English; and, in the case of the *Sacred Legends* collection, adapted to the short story style of the European tradition.

An interesting re-working of an oral story in the format of a written short story is McLeod's "The Shivering Tree." Drawing in his audience ("everyone knows that"), McLeod re-tells the etiological tale of how the poplar (the shivering tree) came to be. He includes many allusions to the oral traditions about the character of Nanabush, the significance of his grandmother, and Nanabush's role in creation. It is shown that although "a trickster," he has a purpose beyond the satisfaction of his own needs and desires. Besides writing about Ojibway traditions and recording stories, Basil Johnston also wrote autobiographical and historical fiction. In his novel *Crazy Dave*, he creates a parallel between the central character born with Down's Syndrome and "Indian" people who were "wards of the state." In *Indian Schooldays*, he wrote an autobiography about his residential school experience in Spanish, Ontario. There are several other Ojibway novels, notably *Keeper 'N Me*. This novel is told from two different perspectives, as the narrative of the young man returning "home" to a place he hardly remembers and as a commentary by the Elder, called Keeper, who becomes his teacher. By utilizing a conversational, "oral" voice, the novel not only teaches the character, but the readers will feel "spoken to" as well. Students will like this novel, as it is in parts very funny. It could be compared with Slipperjack's novel, *Honour the Sun*, about a female character. Her stories in a Native community, together with her family, may be seen as the stories Wagamese's character does *not* experience, as those were the years he had been removed from his family.

The abduction of Native children in its many forms is a dominant theme in many Aboriginal texts. In the Métis literature section, the short play *Moonlodge* by Margo Kane is mentioned. Drew Hayden Taylor, Anishnabe, wrote the play *Someday* about a mother-daughter reunion at Christmas after 35 years of separation – it was first published as a short story on the front page of *The Globe and Mail*, Christmas Eve, 1990.

Suggestions for Teachers

A full unit on Ojibway/Anishnaabe literature would cover a range of writing from written versions of the oral traditions to literature (novels, short stories, poems and plays) about historical and contemporary themes. For the oral traditions, a comparison between southern and northern Ontario Ojibway versions of creation and "trickster" stories illustrate regional variations. For teaching any of those orally transmitted stories published in print, recommended are the reading of two essays by Basil Johnston titled "One Generation from Extinction" and "Is That All There Is? – Tribal Literature." They provide a critical perspective on non-Aboriginal labels like "folklore," "myth," "trickster," and "primitive."

For a genre study, two different versions could be compared – either *Someday or Girl Who Loved Her Horses*, another play by Taylor preceded by a short story with the same title published in *Fearless Warriors*. Featuring adolescent characters, it is a touching story about the power of art and imagination.

Both Drew Hayden Taylor and Richard Wagamese are not only fiction writers but also work(ed) as journalists. Drew Hayden Taylor contributes regularly to the national Aboriginal newspaper *Windspeaker* and Wagamese's columns in the *Calgary Herald* from 1989 to 1991 are collected in *The Terrible Summer*. For Media Studies, students could compare the journalistic work of the authors with their fiction. Armand Garnet Ruffo also works in different genres; besides his scholarly work, he writes poetry and biographies in poetry form. His two "historical" works, *at Geronimo's GRAVE* and *Grey Owl* could be discussed against the background of other biographical material about the respective men. The latter may prove to be particularly interesting for secondary school students because of the revived interest in Grey Owl in the Hollywood movie about him and because of his perceived importance in the environmentalist movement.

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Website on Drew Hayden Taylor with annotated bibliography:

<http://www.whetung.com/taylor.html>

Video (One-Hour Documentary): *The Legend of Grey Owl and the story of Archie*.

<http://www.greatnorth.ab.ca>

Other Resources

Wawatay News.

E-mail: editor@wawatay.on.ca

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Cree Literature

Nêhiyawak: Cree-Speaking Peoples

Introduction

“Now that the buffalo is gone” is a line from one of the songs by well-known Cree songwriter Buffy Sainte-Marie (Moses/Goldie Anthology). The vanishing of the buffalo symbolizes the vanishing of a lifestyle centred on the movements of the buffalo. In contemporary Cree literature, the notion of being confined and “fenced in” on reserves is a recurring theme, e.g., in the famous play “Rez Sisters” by Tomson Highway and in his children’s book, *Caribou Song: atíhko níkamon* in which he (bilingually) recreates a life of following the caribou. In the 1880s, Plains Cree leader, Big Bear, who had refused to accept the Treaty with its “promise” of life on small parcels of land, eventually had to give in as the large buffalo herds which had secured his people’s survival were no more.

The Cree people are spread out from Alberta to Northern Quebec. Along the Ontario-Manitoba border migrating Ojibway or Anishnaabe people had contact with Cree people. Sandy Lake in northwest Ontario is an Oji-Cree speaking community because of its closeness to Manitoba where Cree is spoken. The closeness between these Aboriginal cultures is illustrated in the similarities of their creation stories and in the names for the teacher-creator, also called “trickster,” Nanabush, or Weesageechak.

Tomson Highway, Cree playwright, novelist, and musician from northern Manitoba, who spent the first years of his life speaking Woods Cree, emphasizes the role of this character in the preface to both his plays, *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. In “A Note on Nanabush” in the second play he states the following:

“The dream world of North American Indian mythology is inhabited by the most fantastic creatures, beings, and events. Foremost among these beings is the ‘Trickster,’ as pivotal and important a figure in our world as Christ is in the realm of Christian mythology. ‘Weesageechak’ in Cree, ‘Nanabush’ in Ojibway, ‘Raven’ in others, ‘Coyote’ in still others; this trickster goes by many names and many guises.”

Although Highway is Cree, in his work he talks about Nanabush and not Weesageechak, probably because he lived in Toronto when he produced the plays and worked together with Ojibway artists like Lenore Keeshig-Tobias for whom “the trickster” is Nanabush. On the other hand, in a book of legends widely circulated in Ojibway communities in northern Ontario, *Sacred Legends*, “the trickster” is called Wee-sa-kay-jac, and it is said that the legends are from the Sandy Lake Cree. The stories about these two characters are similar yet differ in detail. In each case “the culture hero,” as s/he is also called, blunders along teaching through mistakes and imperfections, at the same time illustrating that all our actions have consequences, thus creating the world in which we live. Different from the Mi’kmaq character Gluscap, Nanabush or Weesageechak can be male or female. In Highway’s first play *The Rez Sisters* with seven women characters, he is male. In the second one, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, which features seven male characters, Nanabush is female.

About the Literature

Both plays by Tomson Highway have been highly acclaimed but are challenging to teach because of the issues they evoke, in particular *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* in which the destructive impact of Christianity on Aboriginal peoples is symbolized by a rape with the cross. *The Rez Sisters* keeps a lighter tone and is quite humorous besides being highly symbolic, although everybody may not enjoy Highway's kind of humour. Nancy Wigston in her article in *Books in Canada* in March 1989 quotes Tomson Highway as saying, "European mythology says we are here to suffer; our mythology says we are here to have a good time. The language that grew out of that mythology is hilarious. ... And secondly, it's very visceral. You talk quite openly about the functions of the body, which in English are taboo." Highway "translates" the characteristics of the Cree language into English with Cree words interspersed.

Highway's autobiographical novel, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is beautifully written but includes some scenes which may be too disturbing for young people, as Highway goes into graphic images of sexual abuse at a residential school. Easier to discuss in high school, although as disturbing in terms of the reality behind the text, is an autobiographical play by Cree artist Shirley Cheechoo entitled *Path With No Moccasins*. It is a brief, four-act, one-actress play, one of many which Cheechoo wrote but one of the few which were published. Gary Farmer ends his preface to the book with the observation: "The ability to bare ones[sic] life in written word is how far we will go to help each other." His statement gives one of the reasons for the widespread genre of autobiography in Aboriginal writing. In this play, abuse at a residential school and healing from the abuse is the main theme. Excerpts from this play performed by Cheechoo herself at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario, have been combined with documentaries on residential schools and made into the video *Sleeping Children Awake*.

The most favoured genre in Aboriginal literature in Canada is poetry. David Groulx, a poet of Ojibway and French background (often wrongly classified as Métis), explained:

"I think it has to do with the freedom of poetry. A novel has certain templates that you use ... western structure, but poetry seems to be a continuation of songs, chants, and prayers, and there's that spiritual aspect too of Aboriginal writers. Poetry has an aspect of truthfulness in it, [it is] not as fictional, but carries more proof ... your truth. Poetry is more resistant and rebellious than others" (Interview with R. Eigenbrod, July, 2001.)

Suggestions for Teachers

One way of approaching the teaching of Aboriginal literature is to think of the written text as a continuation of the oral traditions or as "an extension of oral traditions" (interview with Cree scholar Neal McLeod), as also suggested in Rita Joe's poem "I Lost My Talk." The poem "Four Songs for the Fifth Generation" by Cree writer Beth Cuthand from Saskatchewan illustrates this point. The poem begins with (and repeats three times)

Drums, chants, and rattles
Pounded earth and
heartbeats
heartbeats

The “pounded earth” image relates to the pounding of buffalo hoofs, a signifier of cultural identification linked with the heartbeats of the earth as re-enacted by the drumming. The poem takes the reader through four generations of Cree people who lose their freedom of following the buffalo, survive when the Europeans do not, meet with racism, and when their space becomes more and more defined and confined, wonder if the fifth generation will “have to fight for a place in the neighbourhood.”

Teachers of Cree literature will notice that many writers work with the Cree language even in texts predominantly written in English. Although Neal McLeod makes the point that “even writers who only use English still have ... an Indigenous sensibility,” he also explains that the use of an Indigenous language further emphasizes the importance of the oral traditions and also “preserves the dynamics of the Indigenous language.” It also educates a non-Cree speaking audience, teaching them a few words. For this reason alone, a teacher may want to choose a selection of poetry by Cree poet Louise Halfe from northern Alberta, taken from her collection *Bear Bones & Feathers*, which features a glossary with a translation of the Cree words at the end of the book. Students may have to use a Cree dictionary or find Cree-speaking people to translate the poems. Louise Halfe’s poetry is also quite humorous, especially when she utilizes a vernacular, as in the poem “My Ledders.” In this “letter to the pope” she irreverently “writes back” to one of the authorities who used to control her and her people’s lives. The resistance writing of her non-standard English is interspersed with Cree words. These words epitomize the important theme of the poem that it is not right to steal Cree ceremonies: *isistawina*: rituals, teachings; *matotsan*: sweatlodge; *kimoti*: to steal. She points out the irony that after decades of being forbidden to practise her own culture, “whitemen” may now build a sweatlodge without understanding what that means. As the pope seems to have “some kind of bower,” he should “dell them to go back to dere own deachings.” This poem could be taught together with information about the outlawing of a ceremony such as the Sun Dance among the Cree and related nations like the Blood and the Blackfoot.

“Can things go well in a land where freedom of worship is a lie, a hollow boast? ... If a nation does not do what is right according to its own understanding, its power is worthless” (Ahenakew p. 69).

The Sun Dance and the topic of appropriation are also themes in the short story “Compatriots” by Emma Lee Warrior, who grew up on the Peigan (Blackfoot) Reserve in Southern Alberta. This short story, well suited for senior secondary school classes, is about the visit of a German anthropology student on a Blackfoot Reserve. The third-person narrator exposes stereotypical preconceptions about Aboriginal cultures and the superficiality of outsider perceptions. The story also problematizes the Grey Owl syndrome of “turning Indian.”

The teacher may want to work mainly with the Cree poetry published in the Moses/Goldie anthology. Including the Cree language, it expresses changes throughout the generations while it emphasizes continuity at the same time. For genre variation and comparison, Louise Halfe’s poem “My Ledders” could be discussed together with Emma Lee Warrior’s short story “Compatriots” as both authors write about the issue of appropriation. Discussion could be extended by including non-fiction media, e.g., the seminal article by Ojibway artist Lenore Keeshig-Tobias “Stop Stealing Native Stories.” The poetry may also be compared with works of visual art, e.g., by Cree artist George Littlechild. The play, *Path With No Moccasins* by Shirley Cheechoo, together with the video *Sleeping Children Awake*, could be linked to discussions on residential schools.

For novel study, there is the autobiographical novel by Tomson Highway *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and the novel *Medicine River* by Thomas King. Although Thomas King is Cherokee, he lived for many years in Lethbridge, Alberta, and wrote this novel based on his contacts with the Blackfoot people. Raised “outside Cherokee culture,” he thinks that he probably knows “as much about Blackfoot culture ... as about Cherokee.” (Interview with J. Weaver) It is a humorously told “homecoming novel” that echoes an oral storytelling style, yet at the same time, debunks any kind of stereotypical “cultural voice.” Although the protagonist is a middle-aged man, the novel is appropriate for young people, simply because of the way it is written, drawing in any audience.

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Métis Literature

Introduction

Quotations from four different “Métis”/Métis scholars and writers show that social, cultural, and political contexts for Métis literature are complex, even more complex than for the other Aboriginal literatures. Each interviewee emphasizes the impossibility and the inappropriateness of clear definitions of Métis identity or Métis culture, especially by an outsider (such as a publisher):

Can you think of things that are specifically Métis?

“The sash, now used for ceremonial purposes ... we give one to each of our graduates. The fiddle, the fiddle music, and the dance ... there’s a dance class that’s worth a credit. We have an elder come in who teaches the stories by way of the dance. The language ... Cree/French/English. ...
I don’t think there is one single Métis tradition, but on a *continuum*”

Joanne Pelletier, Gabriel Dumont Institute, Saskatchewan Indian Federated College:
(Interview with R. Eigenbrod, June, 2001, emphasis added)

How do you identify yourself?

“Well, I am half Swedish too. I was raised by my father who’s very fluent in Cree and grew up on the reserve until I was fifteen. I still go back often of course. I would say that ... from a Cree speaking family ... I feel a sense of something that touches my heart with Cree speaking people - a connection I don’t feel with Swedish speaking people. People have been so dominated by colonialism - *the artificial construction of identity* - but it’s much more ambiguous. Be located in a tradition, *all the layers* of that tradition instead. Acknowledge *diversity*”

Neal McLeod, Department of Indian Studies, Saskatchewan Indian Federated College:
(Interview with R. Eigenbrod, June, 2001, emphasis added)

But you said, ‘I am a half-breed.’

“I use it because I don’t believe that I’m Métis ... to me, they were always on the prairies and there are certainly some in northern Ontario. More politically correct to call Métis. Since I was a kid, it was always half-breed ... part of me identifies with that, of being half of two things. Métis ... I don’t even know what that means. But I know what half-breed means; my father was French and my mother was Ojibwa. I am part of two nations, two cultures.” Publishers are more comfortable with that (me listed as Metis), like on my latest book [*The Long Dance*]; I’m not. We’re from northern Ontario and I want to identify with both sides of my culture - French and Ojibwa - it’s important to me.”

David Groulx, poet from Elliot Lake, now in Thunder Bay:
(Interview with R. Eigenbrod, July, 2001)

How do you describe your own cultural background? Yourself?

"I've started to hyphenate it a while ago because I used to just say Métis, well that's funny 'cause I used to first say Cree back in the 1970's. Then I realized that I wasn't just Cree, that I was Métis and so I started to use that. Then I realized that Métis became such a universalised term and that it truly obscures my particular cultural and historical background...so I've gone back to hyphenated Plains Cree-Métis... I am Métis because I come from a cohesive culture that blended Cree and French in my case, but it became a culture all its own. ... I grew up Cree, I grew up on or near or around a trap line, on the land, off the land. I grew up with Cree stories, legends, ethos, foods, and my whole world was Cree-Métis.... Identity is funny, you try not to tell people who they can or cannot be and yet there are some distinct historical and cultural markers who tell us who we are. I'm not insinuating one is superior or inferior to another but we all have specific backgrounds to be true to, especially when we are in the role of scholars."

Emma LaRocque, Department of Native Studies, University of Manitoba:
(Interview with R. Eigenbrod, June, 2001, emphasis added)

About the Literature

Within the category of Métis literature there is diversity, as McLeod says; the texts range from the inclusion of historical "markers" of Métis culture, to works written from the consciousness of living in two cultures with many shades in between, "a continuum."

Métis literature may be defined as such by writers who identify themselves as Métis, although it is not always clear whether the identifications only *seem* to be self-identifications but are imposed by literary critics and scholars. Sometimes, as in the case of poet and professor of English, Randy Lundy, who is of Cree, Irish, and Norwegian background, writers refuse to identify themselves any more specifically than that they are "Aboriginal." Among the main authors classified as Métis because of ancestral connections with the Riel Resistance is Maria Campbell, whose autobiography *Halfbreed* (1973) was groundbreaking, as it encouraged other Aboriginal people to speak out through writing. In this book, she shows her connections with Métis political history (Gabriel Dumont and Louis Riel) as well as with the culture of the sash, fiddle, and dance.

Campbell's *Stories of the Road Allowance People* also speaks to the importance of the choice of language. The language of the Métis - a mixture of Cree and French - is called Mitchif, but instead of writing in this language, Campbell chooses to use a dialect which reflects the storytelling voice but at the same time can be understood by her English-speaking readers. Some writers of mixed background, like Neal McLeod, Gregory Scofield, and Marilyn Dumont, emphasize the importance of Cree rather than of Mitchif because Cree was the language with which they grew up. Another Métis text that has become a classic and is sometimes found in high school curricula, is *In Search of April Raintree*, by Beatrice Culleton Mosionier, published 10 years after *Halfbreed*. Classified as Métis literature, this novel provides an interesting contrast to *Halfbreed* because Métis history and culture is only inserted as the letters, speeches, and diaries of a young person, ironically the character who commits suicide. The novel emphasizes another reality of an Aboriginal person of mixed heritage: the importance of physical appearance. The narrative features two sisters, one "more Native" looking, the other "more white," and therefore "able to pass." Métis author Jordan Wheeler constructs his three short stories in *Brothers in Arms* around a similar theme of sibling characters choosing

different routes in their lives. The challenges of a Native person who “does not look it” are humorously depicted by Drew Hayden Taylor (Ojibway) in his essay “Pretty Like a White Boy: The Adventures of a Blue Eyed Ojibway” (Moses/Goldie Anthology). Taylor opts for neither Ojibway, nor European, nor Métis, but for his own nation. Métis poet Gregory Scofield opens his autobiography *Thunder Through My Veins* on a similar note with his poem “Between Sides.”

Suggestions for Teachers

A teacher could start with Campbell's *Halfbreed*, as Maria Campbell has become one of the Aboriginal writers of Canada and the beginning of her autobiography grounds the text in the Métis history of events around Riel and Dumont and teaches the cultural markers Dr. Emma LaRocque talks about in the Introduction. Young people may relate to a more recent Métis biography by the highly acclaimed Métis poet Gregory Scofield (born in 1966) which could be taught in comparison. The beginning of his narrative echoes Campbell's text and he refers to *Halfbreed* throughout, acknowledging its importance and his “Memories of a Métis Childhood” makes a good point about the different generations of Aboriginal writers and how they build on each other. Towards the end of the narrative, Scofield calls the historical place Batoche “home,” finally acknowledging his Métis rather than his Cree identity.

Teachers who discuss the Anishnaabe novel *Keeper'N Me* by Richard Wagamese (see Anishnaabe section) may also want to point out that the Cree title of Chapter 20 about Batoche, *Pekewe, Pekewe*, is similar to the Anishnaabe title of the first chapter in *Keeper'N Me: Bih'kee-yan*, both meaning “come home.” Since Scofield refers to his readings of Aboriginal and other literature throughout his autobiography, assume that his chapter title is an allusion to a novel he read. Teachers should be aware that the term *halfbreed* is derogatory. If Aboriginal writers like Campbell, Groulx, and Scofield use this term, they want to make a point that would be lost if it came from the perspective of a non-Aboriginal person.

Métis literature highlights a common literary theme, the search for identity and ways of identity formation; often, the quest is put in motion or complicated by outside forces like foster homes, as in Culleton-Mosionier's novel and in Margo Kane's play “Moonlodge.” Although *In Search of April Raintree* has been re-written by the author for secondary school use, it is a novel for a mature audience and teachers may prefer Kane's short one-act play instead. The protagonist, a victim of “the 60's scoop,” also growing up in foster homes, forms her identity against the preconceptions about “Nativity” all around her. In a humorous way, it addresses the important issue of the stereotyping of Native peoples, which can be compared with Marilyn Dumont's prose poem “Circle the Wagons.” Kane's text also lends itself well to oral presentations by students illustrating the performance aspect of storytelling.

Besides autobiography/novel, play and poetry, a short story may be chosen. Jordan Wheeler's “A Mountain Legend” with a young character as a protagonist addresses the theme of quest for identity through connections with ancestors, while Maria Campbell's stories written in the vernacular cross boundaries of narrative/poem/performance and address historical events either related to residential school traumas (“Jacob”) or to the time of the Riel Resistance (“Joseph's Justice”). For media studies, Christine Welsh's film *Women in the Shadows* explores the denial of Native heritage of her ancestors — a silencing that is also discussed in Scofield's autobiography.

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Other Resources

Gabriel Dumont Institute.

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Okanagan Literature

Introduction

Although links with the land are important for all Aboriginal cultures and therefore form a major theme in all their literatures, they are particularly emphasized in the Okanagan literature.

Captive in an English Circus

This is about George Jim.
He belongs to Ashnola Band, George Jim.
Those days, I had it written down - 1886.
No, I mean 1887.
That's one year I'm out there.
That's supposed to be in the 1886
Instead of 1887.
That time, 1886,
 The people, Indians from Penticton,
 all the Okanagan Indians,
 they were some from Similkameen,
 and they all move to where Oroville is now
 in the month of August,
 about the last week in the month of August.
And they all get together in Oronville.
And that's when the salmon coming up.
The salmon comes up, you know, from way down.
They come up on the Columbia River
 and they come up on the Okanogan, some.

(Moses/Goldie Anthology p. 54)

The above is the beginning of "Captive in an English Circus," a story told by Okanagan Elder and rancher Harry Robinson and written down by Wendy Wickwire in a collection titled, *Write It On Your Heart*. It is the true story about a man from the Okanagan First Nation in the interior of British Columbia who killed a "white man," was put into prison, and was then taken to England as a circus showpiece. In the beginning of the story, the storyteller establishes the accuracy and veracity of the story, the exact time and location, and shows that the salmon is most important in this place (a little bit later he mentions the dam stopping the salmon). The beginning of the story establishes setting as the basis for the narrative and was chosen as an introduction into Okanagan literature which, in the works of the two main authors, Harry Robinson and Jeannette Armstrong, is characterized by many references to the land. As is explained in *We Get Our Living Like Milk From the Land* by Jeannette Armstrong, the Okanagan territory lies "on both sides of the Okanagan River, east to the Selkirk range, west to the Cascades summit, south into Washington bounded by the Columbia River and Lake Chelan and north up to Salmon River" (p.4). Armstrong repeatedly states the importance of the land: the

language, called the syilx language, “arose from our learning about the land” (p. 4) and the travels of the teacher-creator Coyote across the land “are a record of the natural laws our people learned in order to survive” (p. 1). The creation story “Earth Diver” as told by Okanagan Elder Harry Robinson, in *Write It On Your Heart* emphasizes the intimate, spiritual link between “the Indian” and the earth when he describes the earth as growing in the palm of the Indian, the older of the “White and Indian” twin siblings referred to in the story “Twins: White and Indian.”

About the Literature

Basically, Okanagan literature features two authors who are known to a wider public: a “traditional” storyteller, Harry Robinson and a writer of contemporary literature, Jeannette Armstrong. Renowned author Jeannette Armstrong combines in her work a spiritual understanding of the land with artistic sensibility, her talents as a writer, awareness of community, and (environmental) activism. As the director of the En’owkin Centre, an International School of Writing, she co-hosted together with the Penticton Indian Band the *Protecting Mother Earth Conference* in August 2001, organized by the Indigenous Environmental Network. Among the many testimonials of ecocide were the destruction of Aboriginal peoples’ lives through mining, nuclear waste management, hydro-electric power plants, and clear-cutting. A celebration of life and respect for all of creation was emphasized in the ceremonies, which accompanied the conference presentations, and through the traditional foods of salmon and the Okanagan berries. Thus, a balance was created between destructive and healing powers, a balance for which the literature strives as well. The En’owkin Centre is closely linked with one of the few Aboriginal publishing houses in Canada, Theytus Books (publishing Aboriginal Authors since 1980). Armstrong envisions future developments of Aboriginal literatures in Canada as culture- and First Nation-specific as she asserted in the first book of critical writing on Canadian Aboriginal literature by Aboriginal scholars *Looking at the Words of Our People* (1993). With this vision in mind, she promotes non-fiction books which put Okanagan literature into a cultural, social, and historical context as in *We Get Our Living Like Milk From the Land*. Her land-based philosophy is shown as being tied in with the Okanagan language. In her poetry published in *Breath Tracks*, she evokes the beauty and spiritual power of nature and humans’ interaction with it. In her prose, she crosses conventional boundaries of fiction and documentary in order to articulate her warnings about destructive forces in our society. Whereas her first novel, *Slash*, features a male protagonist searching for a way of de-colonizing himself and his Okanagan people, her second novel *Whispering in Shadows* revolves around a female artist/environmentalist who searches for ways of being a responsible human who finds answers in her culture.

Okanagan oral literature has become important because of the storyteller Harry Robinson. His collection *Write It On Your Heart* (followed by a second volume entitled *Nature Power*) has been praised by Aboriginal author Thomas King, as successful “translation” from the oral into the written. Although Robinson was fluent in his Okanagan language, he felt it necessary to tell the stories in English so that more people would hear them. Wickwire assures the reader in her introduction to *Write It On Your Heart* that she left the stories largely untouched although she tried to re-create the rhythm of the telling in the fragmented lines of poetry. The narrative about Jim who became a circus piece in England is a true story about lies and broken promises, which Robinson finds characteristic of “the white man” in his creation stories. Other tales in the Robinson/Wickwire collection tell about the teacher-creator, Coyote, and about the

animals of the region. Author Jeannette Armstrong, who grew up listening to Robinson's stories, has her own version of a Coyote story in Thomas King's anthology *All My Relations*. It is titled "This is a story" and describes Coyote as the saviour of his people trying to bring back the salmon by destroying the dam constructed by "monstrous" people. It becomes clear in the story that, like the buffalo for the Aboriginal people of the prairies, salmon is not only a food source but also at the centre of a way of life.

Suggestions for Teachers

The boundary between traditional and contemporary is not clear-cut if one considers Armstrong's retelling of a Coyote story, "This is a story" and if one teaches not only Robinson's creation stories but also his "Captive in an English Circus" which is a narrative about post-contact times. Students could be assigned to research other cases of Aboriginal people becoming exhibition pieces in Europe.

Although the Okanagan characters are not idealized, the story emphasizes their confusion because they were continuously lied to; the "small" incident told in the story could be linked to the larger picture of a history of broken promises and lies in relations between the Okanagan people and the Canadian government (as outlined in *We Get Our Living Like Milk From the Land*). Jeannette Armstrong very clearly criticizes colonialism with all its implications for Native people, but she also refers to the danger of hierarchical, non-ecological thinking for *all* people. In her poem "History Lesson," she turns from an evocation of the destruction of Native peoples through colonization to the destruction of the earth if the "unholy search" for power over nature does not end. In her speech/essay "The Disempowerment of First North American Native Peoples and Empowerment Through Their Writing," she explains to her audience: "Do not make the commonly made error that it is a people that we abhor, be clear that it is systems and processors which we must attack" (p. 241) (Moses/Goldie Anthology). The ending of this essay with her belief that "the principles of co-operation are a sacred trust" (p. 242) may be linked with her poem, "Indian Woman." Again evoking the theme of lying, she very powerfully depicts the lies, e.g., racist stereotypes, about Native women, and in the second half of the poem, starting with "Some one is lying," reverses the negative images so that "Indian woman" becomes "a sacred trust." This poem could be taught together with Margo Kane's short play, *Moonlodge*, discussed in the Métis section.

Whispering in Shadows may be an easier novel to teach than Armstrong's first novel, *Slash*, as it does not demand as much background information. Another choice of a novel in the context of British Columbia is *Ravensong* by Lee Maracle (Métis/Stoh:lo). This text centred around a high school student in a Native community in the 50's will provoke discussions about different cultural sets of values, since this student crosses a (symbolic) bridge every day to get from her community to "white town," where she is the only Native student at the high school. The novel also sees the coming together of Native and non-Native people as a necessity if an environmental disaster is to be prevented.

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This book provides informative contexts for Okanagan literature as it outlines Okanagan history from the perspective of the Okanagan people, colonial history, the present day situation, and visions for the future.
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Related Readings

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- Sterling, Shirley. *My Name is Seepeetza*. 1992. Toronto, ON: Douglas & McIntyre, 2000.
Sterling from the Interior Salish writes about the Kalamak Indian Residential School, a short piece of autobiographical fiction suitable for senior high school grades.
- Williamson, Janice. *Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women Writers*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993.
Contains an interview with Jeannette Armstrong
- Cardinal, Douglas and Jeannette Armstrong. *The Native Creative Process: A Collaborative Discourse between Douglas Cardinal and Jeannette Armstrong, with Photographs by Greg Young-Ing*. Penticton: Theytus Books, 1991.
Meditations and reflections in which Armstrong uses words from the Okanagan language in order to describe her worldview.

Other Okanagan texts published by Theytus Books:

Cohen, Bill, ed. *Stories and Images of What the Horse Has Done for Us: An Illustrated History of Okanagan Ranching and Rodeo*. 1998.

Jack, Agnes, ed. *Behind closed doors: Stories from the Kamloops Indian Residential School*. 2001.

Kou-Skelowh/We Are The People. A Trilogy of Okanagan Legends. 1999.
A children's book

Other Resources

Raven's Eye. The Aboriginal Newspaper of British Columbia.
E-mail: edraven@ammsa.com Phone: 1-800-661-5469

Theytus Books Ltd. (also contact for En'Owkin Writing School)

E-mail: theytusbooks@vip.net

Phone: (250) 493-7181

Indigenous Environmental Network:

<http://www.ienearth.org>

Jeannette Armstrong websites:

<http://www.ipl.org/cgi/ref/native/browse.pl/A9>

<http://voices.cla.umn.edu/authors/jeannettearmstrong.html>

Includes critical articles about her work