

Book Review

Sophie McCall. 2011. *First Person Plural: Aboriginal Storytelling and the Ethics of Collaborative Authorship*. Vancouver: UBC Press. ISBN 978-0-7748-1980-0 (pbk). Pages: 254.

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Exploring the complexity, richness and depth of the collaborative process provides a way for me to articulate a different kind of politics that avoids reinscribing a sharply oppositional characterization of the relationship between Aboriginal storytellers and non-Aboriginal collectors, writers, and editors in contemporary told-to narratives. By focusing on the process of mediation and collaboration, I hope to challenge notions of "voice" that are singular, unmediated, and pure, thereby questioning the discourses of authenticity that continue to perpetuate static notions of Aboriginal identity.

Sophie McCall, 5.

It has taken me a long time to write this review. Because the substance of this book reached out to me so seductively, I found myself drawn deep

into a relationship with it. A relationship that would not allow me the distance I needed to write a review that could be anything other than emotive and then it became one so complex that I hardly knew where to start to unpack it. Perhaps I exaggerate a little. But I must begin by saying that this book has had more impact on me than any other scholarly text *written by a non-Aboriginal* person that I have read in years. My focus has been on the works of Margaret Kovach, Jo-Ann Archibald, Dale Turner, Susan Dion, Bonita Lawrence, Taiaiake Alfred, Gail Valaskakis, and Shawn Wilson among others. And herein lies the lovely, tension-laden, dialectical contradiction that permeates my reading: as a non-Aboriginal academic whose research and writing are conducted primarily with Aboriginal people, I start my readings of other non-Aboriginal authors with a slight distrust or even skepticism. This book challenges such simplicity. Certainly, I have relished works such as those of Margery Fee, Peter Kulchyski, and Julie Cruikshank. But I do find myself turning ever more frequently to reading fiction by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal authors as sources of insight that scholarly texts too often obscure. This scholarly text by Sophie McCall has successfully and fruitfully interrupted my inclinations and yet supports my attraction to fiction and recent forays into film as fertile grounds for exploring the complex dimensions of collaborative knowledge production.

My next confession: In keeping with my own commitments, I encourage my students to focus their reading on Indigenous authors if they want to get to any depth of understanding of the complex relationships that exist between non-Aboriginal people and Indigenous peoples in the context of the persisting, “old” colonialism we have not yet adequately dealt with in Canada and neo-colonialism that the global economy brings us. And yet, ironically I am one of those collectors of stories that McCall alludes to in the opening quote and when I have collected, I write, sometimes with others and sometimes on my own.

First Person Plural has forced me to re-think the categorical tendencies my advice to students reflects, to address the “sharply oppositional characterization” I perpetuate with such a blanket statement and to see in stark reality the contradiction this creates in terms of the work I am committed to doing. When it comes to *First Person Plural*, I now advise all my graduate students and any colleagues who will listen to READ THIS BOOK.

A deeply thoughtful, extensively researched text, *First Person Plural* brings new ways of thinking about collaborations between Aboriginal storytellers and their non-Aboriginal associates. McCall writes, “My intention is not to demonstrate the limits of the genre of told-to narrative but, rather, its scope.” (2) Never facile, never dismissive of the struggles involved, McCall engages with a series of complex situations teasing out respectful moments and projects and those of persisting Eurocentrism. Fearlessly tackling tensions where many fear to tread, McCall brings a generosity of spirit combined with an acute literary critique to bear on several ground-breaking works from academic texts to transcripts of hearings, from court reports to film. Placing herself firmly in the field of Canadian literary criticism, McCall deftly reveals lessons and insights for critics, ethnographers, interlocutors, and anyone who works across the differences that colonization and subsequent efforts at decolonizing have brought us all. By juxtaposing texts rarely seen as connected, such as the Reports of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples with a collective life narrative of the relocated Sayisi Dene or the transcripts of the land claims trial Delgamuukw versus British Columbia with two texts of negotiated story telling involving Aboriginal tellers and non-Aboriginal collaborators, the author complicates the meanings of each. She shows their interwoven interdependence creating a productive tension that informs all our relations to one another.

If there is a canon of collaborative works, McCall has engaged with most of those that would qualify. Examples include scholarly texts such

as those of ethnographer and filmmaker Hugh Brody's work with the Dunne-za; anthropologist Julie Cruikshank's classic work with Athapaskan elders Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith and Annie Ned; and Wendy Wickwire's work with Okanagan elder Harry Robinson. Former Chief of the Dene Bussidor and Turkish Canadian journalist Bilgen-Reinart's text of the Sayisi Dene people "suggests the possibility of developing a cross-cultural collaborative relationship in the context of demanding social and political change." (111) She covers new ground on a timely topic in her analyses of the interactions first between government people and Aboriginal people in relation to the origins and structuring of the Berger Commission's inquiry into the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline and then into the disrespect for oral tradition shown by the judge whose concern was "only with the content, not the context, of the testimony" presented by the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en in the Delgamuukw trial. Herein lie some lessons for those who take on the negotiations related to the current deliberations on the Northern Gateway Pipeline.

Not content to focus on scholarly and documentary text, McCall moves on to consider the creations of renowned Aboriginal artists such as author Lee Maracle (Coast Salish/Sto:lo) and filmmakers Alanis Obamsawin (Abenaki) and Zacharias Kunuk (Inuit). She shows how their abilities to negotiate and represent in respectful ways, i.e. ways acceptable to the people with whom they work, provide sharp points of consideration for anyone who would take on collaborative story telling. McCall again uses juxtaposition to complicate interpretations of events: this time, four of Obamsawin's films including *Kanehsatake* and *My Name is Kahentiiosta* with media reports from the time. Unpacking the constantly shifting, sharp intellectualism of Lee Maracle's work, she reminded me of a comment I heard Maracle make at a reading at the Toronto Women's Bookstore a few years ago. On the question of appropriation, she made it very clear that her voice was stronger than

any thief's desires. In her literary works, Maracle constantly probes the gaps and contradictions that permeate contemporary Aboriginal-non-Aboriginal relations as well as "those between Aboriginal people differently aligned in relation to the disparities of class, gender and levels of education." (105). McCall's final contribution is a penetrating examination of Inuit filmmaker, Zacharias Kunuk's works including *Atanarjuat*, within the context of the newly formed Nunavut. She uses an examination of the 1922 film *Nanook of the North* to focus particularly on the radically distinct approaches to community shaping of the two scripts. Her comparison of the two once again demonstrates the possibilities that lie with respectful and culturally-informed collaborations in story-telling as McCall shows the creative tensions that arise out of the relationship between the works.

In addition to engaging with the works and artists/scholars mentioned above, McCall demonstrates a wide-ranging familiarity with many of the texts which make up the ever-developing field of Aboriginal literary studies. She references poet Beth Cuthand, novelists Jeanette Armstrong, Joseph Boyden, Maria Campbell, Thomas King and Eden Robinson, and playwright Thomson Highway to name a few. Moving beyond purely literary or ethnographic texts, she includes reference to the beautifully structured and potent works of people like law professor John Borrows. Non-Aboriginal authors such as Dara Culhane, Margery Fee, Peter Kulchyski, and Leslie Hall Pinder provide further focal points for complicating and exemplifying ethical collaborative work and provide striking evidence for the arguments McCall takes up.

Drawing on the authors and artists above, McCall spins a wonderful web of literary criticism bathed in the sunlight of ethical and political acuity that refuses categories. Even as she shows the strengths and progressive work of a Thomas Berger, she also show the weakness of a persisting commitment to Eurocentric values and governance and follows with an acknowledgment of the shifting terrain created by those

who become informed by and committed to Indigenous thought. Even as she pokes fun at a *Nanook of the North*, she shows the points of inspiration it gave to Kunuk in his masterpiece. She argues that *Atanarjuat* is not an *antiethnographic* film but a *counterethnographic* film because of its way of “echoing, parodying, and critiquing colonial ethnographic traditions while...foregrounding Inuit perspectives.” (185) McCall shows the creative use of historical materials in contemporary cultural production: “Despite the original intent of the drawings – anthropological, scientific, religious, or political – in Obomsawin’s work they contribute to building a counter-ethnography of Mohawk presence in the area.” (79) Even as she focuses on the limits of conventional, particularly historic, salvage ethnographic work, she shows the ways the information they contain can be re-used, re-cycled, strategically for contemporary political projects.

In order to give the reader a sense of the intricate fabric of this text, let me return to the difficulty I had writing this review and at least part of the source of the problem. Whenever I open the book, I find myself totally engaged, often entranced, with a point the author is making. Sometimes I want to argue with her and then, as I keep reading, I see how she has nuanced each claim she makes, twisting herself to see from varied perspectives while constantly seeking an ethical stance. An example may convince you. I open the book randomly: I am on p. 73. McCall is in the middle of analyzing Hugh Brody’s re-presentation of the Dunne-za people’s presentations to the pipeline inquiry. In a subtle shift in his transcription of the testimonies, Brody chooses to place the translator in the flow of the transcript. Each paragraph of reported speech begins with “He is saying...” or “He says...” as the translator slowly moves informant Joseph Patsah’s words from his language into English. In this way, the reader never loses sight of the fact, that regardless of the care with which the words are translated into English, they are always already transformed from Patsah’s original articulation by the interpreter who is ever present in the report. As McCall points

out, this form of reporting shows how statements given in a “consultation” pass “through a labyrinth of ventriloquists.” (p. 73) Over all, her investigation of “strategies of representation – juxtaposition, self-reflexivity, the failure of cultural translation, genre-switching, and reported speech – show how Brody creates a dynamic text in which points of view, antagonistically arranged, generate productive sites of collision and dispute.” (p. 61)

Second example: I continue flipping through pages. I stop abruptly, p. 30, Chapter 1: I read about and am reminded of my own tension-filled reading of *The Book of Jessica*. McCall ties the “dissolution of a relationship” between Maria Campbell and Linda Griffiths to the long pause between “the time of narration, when the collaborators are speaking together in dialogue, and the time of writing and publication.” I am thrown back to a research moment, or was it a lifetime, when the hiatus between my gathering stories and the eventual publication of the resulting text forced an introduction of the work to an entirely new cast of characters who had understandable suspicions and demands. My heart still sinks when I remember the anger that greeted what had originally been seen as a carefully executed, ethically conducted, project. I can repeat this process of opening the text and finding resonating truths and strong responses as many times as there are pages in the book. Each time, I am caught up in deepening understandings of what I have long known to be complex processes fraught with joys and pitfalls, limits and possibilities. This book speaks to me.

While the primary intended audience for the book is “readers of Aboriginal literary studies in Canadian contexts,” (3), the author also hopes it will be of use to scholars of Native Studies, Canadian literary studies, and postcolonial theory. I will use it in my graduate course (de)Colonizing Research Methodologies particularly for those students who are struggling (still) with questions of appropriation of voice, those who are investigating respectful ways to have Indigenous Thought

inform their work in the academy, in particular the translation/transformation of orality to text, and those who are seeking ways to approach research respectfully and thoughtfully in contexts that cross differences. I see this text crossing disciplinary borders and, with its blurred genres, informing varied discourses.

Quibbles, if I have any, are so minor as to be barely worth mentioning. The author seems enamoured of the word/idea Manichean which pops up here and there in the text. While useful, it did leap out at me particularly as it was used on p. 87 for both the dominant media and Alanis Obomsawin. I am not at all convinced of the wisdom of collapsing listener and reader in a sentence about storytelling on p. 180. I leave my fussiness at that.

In conclusion, this book has captured a fascinating time in the development of Aboriginal literary studies. Focused on the 1990s, the questions it raises are still very much with us. What better way to leave this review than to complete the circle with the author's own final words:

Collaborative authorship remains an uneasy and volatile process....Collaboration may also give rise to a new model of understanding and honouring Indigenous sovereignty, as well as conveying a sense of historical accountability that, as a non-Indigenous person of the 'Second Nations,' I am implicated within. A diversity of forms of affiliation is possible and indeed necessary to recognize the struggle of writing and of telling a more just story of Indigenous presence in North America, through the mode of cross-cultural collaboration. (213)