Echoing Voices. The Indigenization in Canadian Postmodern Arctic Literature

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Abstract

Postmodern Canadian writers challenge the classical image of the North, "the perspective […] southern; the landscape described in terms of what it lacks" (MOSS 1996: 85). Acknowledging that the English language is inadequate to describe Arctic landscapes, writers such as Rudy Wiebe, Robert Kroetsch, or John Moss turn to those who have been living there for millennia – the Inuit. By experiencing what Terry Goldie calls an "indigenization" (GOLDIE 1989: 234) of their works, those writers absorb the Inuit language and culture in their perception of the land, questioning the Occidental geography by the integration of Inuit spatial concepts and orientation. This indigenization raises problematic issues such as the appropriation of the Other's voice and the translation of orality into a written form.

Résumé

Les écrivains postmodernes canadiens remettent en question l'image classique du Nord, "la perspective […] sudiste; le paysage décrit en termes de manque" (Moss 1996: 85). Reconnaissant que la langue anglaise est inadéquate pour décrire les paysages arctiques, des écrivains tels que Rudy Wiebe, Robert Kroetsch ou John Moss se tournent vers ceux qui y vivent depuis des millénaires, les Inuit. En procédant à ce que Terry Goldie appelle une "indigénisation" (GOLDIE 1989: 234) de leurs oeuvres, ces écrivains absorbent le langage et la culture inuit dans leur perception du territoire, et remettent en question la géographie occidentale par l'intégration de la modalité spatiale et du système d'orientation inuit. Cette indigénisation soulève cependant des problèmes tels que l'appropriation de la voix de l'autre et la traduction/translation de l'oralité vers une forme écrite.

Keywords: Arctic landscape, Canada, postmodern literature, indigenization, Inuit spatial concepts, Trickster, orality, appropriation of voice.

If retelling the stories of earlier White visitors is a frequent device in Western northern narratives, according to Sherrill Grace it is much more rare to find narratives in which the author takes into consideration the perceptions of the First Nations. Here is what she writes about Rudy Wiebe and his *Playing Dead*:

> Unlike most kabloonak, however, he also *listens*, and re-presents some of the stories of those who have always been there (Joe Nasugaluaq, Mable Stefansson, Felix Nuyviak, Nellie Cournoyea, William Nerysoo, and others), and he concludes with a song/poem called 'My Breath' by Orpingalik of the Netsilik Inuit (recorded by Knud Rasmussen) (GRACE 2002: 39).

Canadian postmodern writers indeed turn to the culture of those who have been living there for millennia and proceed to integration their perspective within their narratives. But this acculturating process raises difficulties in terms of appropriation of voice and of incorporation of orality into literary works.

According to Terry Goldie (GOLDIE 1989: 234), this echoing of native voices reveals a "need to become 'native,' to belong here" as a result of a puzzling encounter: "[t]he white Canadian looks at the Indian. The Indian is Other and therefore alien. But the Indian is indigenous and therefore cannot be alien. So the Canadian must be alien. But how can the Canadian be alien within Canada?" Rejecting the idea of *tabula rasa* of the colonisers in order to facilitate the appropriation of the 'new' territories, these writers therefore "attempt to incorporate the Other" through what Goldie calls "indigenization." According to him, "the first felt need for indigenization came when a person moved to a new place and recognized an Other as having greater roots in that place" (GOLDIE 1989: 235). With the Canadian postmodern writers, the process of identification takes the form of a rehabilitation of the Native civilization as part of their own culture, a sort of heritage by the right of land alongside with the traditional heritage by the right of blood, or as Robert Kroetsch formulates about Margaret Laurence's and Rudy Wiebe's writings, "there is available to our imaginations a new set of ancestors" (KROETSCH 1989a: 7). In the Canadian context, where the sense of place is so strongly tied to the question of identity, the relation to Native peoples is particularly significant, as explained by Linda Hutcheon:

> American novels have tended to see in the meeting with the Indian a meeting with one's true self. Canadian novels, on the other hand, have related to the Indian and the Inuit to the wilderness in which they live: both Native and nature have come to embody some eternal spiritual essence. This is an image of the Native who has managed integration with nature, who can live in harmony with natural forces in a way admired and sought after by whites (HUTCHEON 1988: 194-195).

For Canadian writers involved in landscape writing, the point of view of native populations so strongly linked to the land is therefore very appealing. Yet the process of incorporating Native voices is problematic because the Native peoples hardly *describe* their land.

The concept of landscape is indeed a "vision" of the land, seen by Westerners as separate from them. It requires the necessary exteriority of the viewer in order to embrace the land. The editors of *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin define "the idea of 'landscape'" as "predicated upon a particular philosophic tradition in which the objective world is separated from the viewing subject" (ASHCROFT *et al*. 1989: 391).

It is widely acknowledged that the notion of landscape requires the attribution of a human dimension to the land. Scholars such as Susan Glickman (GLICKMAN 1998: IX-X) and Simon Schama (SCHAMA 1995: 7) define landscape as the projection of the viewer's culture over the land. Béatrice Collignon explains:

> Le paysage n'est pas un donné, il s'apprécie différemment selon les individus et les cultures, chacun le décrypte suivant une grille de lecture dont il n'a le plus souvent pas conscience, où se trouvent associées valeurs culturelles, connaissances et expériences acquises et transmises, et affectivité propre à chacun (COLLIGNON 1999: 37).

In contrast to the Western dominating vision of the land, Aboriginal legends show a startling fusion between human beings, animals and physical elements. Traditional stories tell us of women turning into wolves (NUNGAK & ARIMA 2000: 60-63) or giving birth to bears (VICTOR & ROBERT-LAMBLIN 1993: 157-160), or describe human beings emerging from chitons (REID & BRINGHURST 1984: 31-37). Indeed the Native peoples of North America consider themselves to be part of a great circle of life. In this circle, no difference is made between men, animals, and the land. Asked to explain the relation of the Inuit with their land, Béatrice Collignon states:

> Dans la pensée inuit, les hommes, la terre au sens large du terme – toundra, collines et montagnes, marais, lacs, rivières et mer salée – et les animaux appartiennent à la même catégorie d'êtres vivants, entre lesquels il est possible à leur composante invisible de circuler. Les grands mythes racontent cette circulation entre les différents états du vivant et décrivent ces réseaux immatériels qui donnent au territoire sa densité (COLLIGNON 1999: 39).

This conception of the world excludes any kind of ranking between its elements, let alone a physical domination over the land, which contrasts profoundly with the Judeo-Christian superiority of mankind over all other living beings and the mineral order. Moreover, in the Inuit world an appropriation of the land is impossible insofar as it is open to the use of all those who need it, mainly to hunt and find shelter. Collignon explains the radical difference of perception between the Whites and the Inuit:

> [L]es Inuit construisent leur relation avec un territoire qu'ils ne peuvent s'approprier puisqu'il les contient. […] Cette position ne [leur] permet pas de procéder à l'objectivisation nécessaire à une prise de possession au sens où nous l'entendons dans nos sociétés. [….]

> L'appropriation ne peut être réalisée que s'il y a extériorité du sujet par rapport à l'objet, or ce n'est pas dans cette position que les Inuit se placent par rapport à leur territoire. De plus, lorsqu'il y a appropriation, celui qui se proclame propriétaire s'octroie un pouvoir sur sa possession et instaure un rapport de domination. Dans la pensée inuit, c'est impossible car ce n'est pas l'homme qui est au cœur du système mais *nuna*, la terre, au sens large du terme (qui inclut *tariuq*, la mer). […]
> Les termes de l'appropriation se trouvent de la sorte inversés: on est du territoire bien plus que celui-ci est à quelqu'un (COLLIGNON 1999: 39-40).

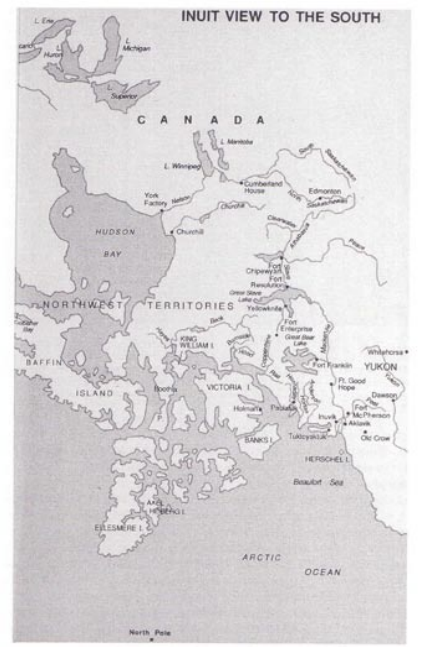
This "objectification" of the land, so foreign to the Inuit, is well anchored in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Literary works set in the Arctic reflect this difference of perception. Western literature gives much way to the description of the land, when Inuit writings focus on the action of living beings. Compare for example *Sanaaq* by Mitiarjuk Nappaaluk and *Roughing It in the Bush* by Susanna Moodie, two autobiographical works by novice writers. And when it comes to visualising their environment, while the Inuit resort to carving objects, the Europeans compose paintings "representing a view or natural inland scenery[1]," that is to say landscapes.

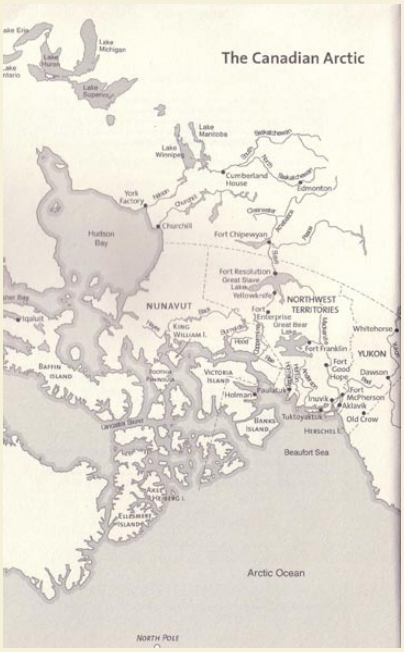
Therefore postmodern writers have resorted to imaginative devices that integrate a Native dimension in their Arctic narratives. Referring to Robert Service's verse "There are strange things done in the midnight sun / By the men who moil for gold" (SERVICE 1987: 95), Robert Kroetsch confides: "I have a suspicion at times it was that one verb, *moil*, that tricked me into wanting to write and into beginning to write by going North. I should have checked a dictionary instead of applying for a job; to moil: to work hard, to toil, to slave" (KROETSCH 1995: 14). Related to Kroetsch's writing process which is deeply connected to local folk tradition (WIEBE & KROETSCH 1981: 227), the use of the verb "tricked" is not without implications. The Trickster is indeed a very important feature in Aboriginal mythology. In North America, it is an animal, often a raven or a coyote, endowed with supernatural powers, who existed at a time when no clear distinction was made between men, animals and natural elements. Neither good nor evil, the character of the Trickster is defined by his flaws – he is greedy, selfish, cowardly, childish, careless, impulsive – these flaws making him both loathsome and endearing. The Trickster is often at the origin of the birth of the world in many Creation myths, typically as a result of a blunder. The trickster model embodies the idea of shifts – shifts between the world of spirits and that of the living, between human beings and animals, between good and evil.

Analyzing Rudy Wiebe's *Playing Dead*, Sherrill Grace comments that the map displayed at the beginning "challenge[s] the supposed hegemonic, stable authority of the map" (GRACE 2002: 79). The reader opening Wiebe's book is confronted with a map entitled "Inuit View to the South" in its 1989 edition, "The Canadian Arctic" in its 2003

[1] Definition of the word *landscape* in *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*.

edition, displaying a view of the Canadian Arctic oriented with the south at the top:





The evolution of the title is interesting. The removal of the reference to the "South" increases the disorientation for the reader who will need several seconds to adjust to what he is looking at, even more so as the most populated areas of Canada – and therefore most likely to be familiar to the reader – are blank, devoid of toponyms. More subtly, the removal of the reference to the "Inuit" and the new title "The Canadian Arctic" acknowledge a value of truth and absoluteness to the displayed orientation: "[t]his, it insists, is how the world really looks" (GRACE 2002: 87), cleared of meridians, latitudes or international borders (hence the presence of Greenland, which is not part of Canada), south-oriented as the Inuit see the world (BAILLARGEON *et al*. 1977: 104). It is ironically placing the Western viewer, so tied to the Mercator projection in the position of the trickster figure, the *arroseur arrosé* of the Lumière Brothers caught at his own trick, his colonial scientific universalism turned against him.

With Rudy Wiebe, the integration of Inuit culture also takes an original form. Consider the first words of his novel *A Discovery of Strangers*: "The land is so long, and the people travelling in it so few, the curious animals barely notice them from one lifetime to the next" (WIEBE 1994: 1). There is no doubt that Wiebe masters the English language and knows that in English a land should not be described as 'long' but as 'wide.' As a matter of fact, Wiebe is transposing to the English language the Inuit two-dimensional spatial modality (WIEBE 1989: 15). According to linguist Raymond Gagné, the Inuit conceive the space around them as either areal or linear. Areal are "[a]ll visible phenomena […] whose visible limits are in fact, or appear to the speaker to be, of roughly equal dimensions, such

as a ball, an igloo […] or an ice surface." Linear are "[a]ll visible phenomena […] that are or appear to be of unequal dimensions (that is, things that are distinctly longer than they are wide), such as a harpoon, […] a rope, […] or a river" (GAGNÉ 1968: 33-34, cited in WIEBE 1989: 15). Moreover, an areal element becomes linear "when in motion," and "'[a]ny area without easily definable limits, such as a wide expanse of land or sea, is automatically classified as of unequal dimension,' that is, as being long and narrow" (WIEBE 1989: 19). The Canadian Arctic abounds with flat expanses of land, and therefore to the Inuit, the land is a linear notion. Combining it with the linear dimension of the Inuit nomadic lifestyle – elements in motion are linear –, Wiebe indeed adopts an Inuit point of view when he asserts that in the Arctic, the land is "long." It is therefore not surprising to him that the third Franklin expedition of 1845 should have failed so spectacularly, as its two ships *Terror* and *Erebus* disappeared with their entire crew after they were caught in pack ice in the Canadian Arctic. The first two Franklin expeditions used linear means (with canoes along rivers) and, if not great successes, they were not great disasters either. On the contrary, when the big ships of the third expedition were caught in ice, linear motion turned into areal stillness. "That is a dimension which sailors, experienced only in the endless, unbounded motion of the sea, cannot understand. Stillness destroys them" (WIEBE 1989: 15-16).

Alongside with the incorporation of Native concepts within their own language, Canadian postmodern writers also integrate Native narratives, either by retelling stories through transcripts, or more controversially by recreating speech in the mouth of Native characters.

The process of indigenization of Western literature has raised several problematic questions. Who is allowed to speak/write from a Native point of view? What causes Westerners to do so? What are the consequences for the Native culture?

The most extreme position regarding what is known as "the appropriation debate" is to deny the right to any non-Native person to write as a Native one or even about Native issues. Joseph Pivato points out the absurdity of such a radical position, which would imply that "only people of Italian blood could write about Italians. This would eliminate half the plays in Shakespeare's canon" (PIVATO 1996). Moreover, excluding non-Native writers from the field of Native issues implies *a contrario* that Native writers would not be allowed in non-Native fields. This is a position which does not hold against the creative, imaginative function of art. Yet the art for art's sake argument does not hold either, because there is an important difference between Pivato's hypothetical situation and the issue of Native voice: the sensitive postcolonial context of the latter. "There was no unequal power relationship between the languages and cultures of England and Italy at the time," Pivato underlines, explaining:

> When power is involved there is no real freedom of the imagination for the artist. Appropriation of voice, by definition is not a dialogue among equals, but an exercise of power by the appropriator over the minority object, who is thus made an object and not a subject (PIVATO 1996).

A position shared by many Native writers is that "non-Natives – whether writers or anthropologists – should not retell Native myths and legends without understanding them" (ATWOOD 1995: 36). This is the point of view which John Moss expresses, rather abruptly, regarding Yves Thériault's *Agaguk*:

> It would be absurd to legislate the imagination. But if misappropriation occurs in the course of writing another's life, if the lines running through the text between writer and reader, between textual reality and actuality, limit or distort that other's world, then such a work should be treated with the same contempt in which we hold the mindless tracts of misogynists, racists, and religious fanatics. When another's world is turned into metaphor, to give meaning to the writer's own, its metamorphosis denies the original of intrinsic worth. Such denial, as in *Agaguk*, is authoritarian aggression more than impropriety (MOSS 1996: 86).

Native origins therefore seem to be less important than the equality and respect which the writer shows in his, or her, use of Native material. This would avoid the difficult question of "who qualifies as a Native?" (ATWOOD 1995: 37). A biological approach does not bring a satisfactory answer, firstly because, as Margaret Atwood points out, "after four centuries of intermingling […] many Natives are more white, genetically, than they are Native" (ATWOOD 1995: 37) but also because the sense of belonging is not always linked to genes. As a matter of fact, in the Inuit culture "to become an Inuk, 'a real person,' one only has to act and think like one – thereby giving the concept of Inuit a traditional implication which goes well beyond racial, territorial or ethnic considerations" (JEANROY 2005).

But the use of Native oral accounts as a source of valuable knowledge by non-Native writers is not just a question of legitimacy. Its orality is also problematic, considering the almost hegemonic position of the written over the oral as a source of knowledge in Western thought. It reflects a feeling of inadequacy of the Western culture, "in which little knowledge is to be gained from the popular beliefs of its own traditions" (GOLDIE 1989: 236). Turning to Native orality therefore operates as a substitute, but as Goldie explains, both cultures nevertheless remain on different levels because of an impervious opposition between orality and literacy:

> The writers' sense of indigenes as having completely different systems of understanding different epistemes, is based on an often undefined belief that cultures without writing operate within a different dimension of consciousness. This different dimension suggests […] mysticism, in which the indigene becomes a sign of oracular power, either malevolent, in most nineteenth-century texts, or beneficent, in most contemporary ones (GOLDIE 1989: 236).

Canadian postmodern writers value their oral tradition as much as, if not more than, written documents. As much as any other archaeological deposit, the integration of Aboriginal orature in their Arctic narratives inscribes itself in an attempt to connect with a land which is foreign to their traditions, as Wiebe does extensively in *Playing Dead*. But what could be mistaken for a reverence to an "oracular power" of Inuit narratives is, in fact, an awareness of the power of words, whether written or uttered, to shape our perceptions: "[l]anguage *is* really our way of looking at the world" (WIEBE 1981: 236). And it is precisely the Native peoples' vision of their Arctic land which Canadian postmodern writers seek in their orature.

Another problematic issue is raised by the use of Native orature in Western literature – its transliteration. Rudy Wiebe, who cites Native stories to a large extent in *Playing Dead*, is aware of the difficulty:

> As Robin McGrath has pointed out, Inuit "oral poetry has the reputation of being the best primitive literature known to man." At the same time she notes that in English we are three removes from its true genius: "we read it rather than hear it, we read it in translation, and it must be read without the benefit of [its traditional] musical accompaniment" (MCGRATH 1984, cited in WIEBE 1989: 82).

Shelagh Grant mentions an additional impediment: "[a]lso complicating early translations was a tendency for Inuit to defer to the Qallunaat and tell them only what they wanted to hear" (GRANT 1997: 199). If the knowledge which Westerners have of Native orature is indeed partial, the real issue lies in the altering which the writing down of an oral story implies. As Rudy Wiebe points it,

> the storyteller and the poet/singer presuppose a community of listeners, otherwise nothing can be told. One may read a book alone (in fact most of us prefer that) but one cannot tell a story alone, which is why any language changes so drastically when it moves from oral to written form (WIEBE 1989: 67).

An oral story evolves every time it is told. It is living with the storyteller and the audience. Once it is written on paper, it is fixed and ceases to live. "We silence words by writing them down," Robert Kroetsch observes (KROETSCH 1989b: 47).

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