

TRADITIONAL VALUES AND MODERN CONCERNS: THE “COMMITTEE TO RE-ESTABLISH THE TRICKSTER”

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ABSTRACT

In 1986, a group of Native writers in the Toronto area founded the “Committee To Re-Establish the Trickster” (CRET); founding members are Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, Tomson Highway, and Daniel David Moses. Their political and cultural aim is to strengthen the position of First Nations people within the Canadian mainstream society and to change the public perception of their people. Activities of CRET include publication of *The Magazine To Re-Establish the Trickster*, workshops, seminars, readings and performances. CRET serves as an example for the joint efforts of First Nations writers in Canada; other strong groups exist in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and elsewhere.

1. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS: NATIVE LITERATURE IN CANADA

Over a long period of time, literature about Native people¹ has been written, with very few exceptions, by non-Native authors. One reason for that situation are the historical origins of Canadian Native literature: the First Nations of North America had an oral tradition based on stories, both sacred and profane, on myths, songs, prayers, political discourse, ritual performances, dances and ceremonies. On account of climatic and geographical differences and diverse cultural environments, each linguistic group had its own culturally specific set of oral narratives, these narratives being an expression of their respective world views and religious beliefs, of their communal history, customs and values. Storytelling and the dramatic performances of rituals and ceremonies were communal shared events, carried out with active participation of the audience. “By transmitting specific cultural knowl-

edge, with its specific meanings and messages,” Penny Petrone emphasizes, the oral literature of Canada’s native peoples “helped strengthen tribal identity and provided for its continuity.”² Exactly because they strengthened Native beliefs, a number of traditional ceremonies central to Native culture such as Sun Dance and Potlatch were declared illegal during the late 19th century, and this status was maintained until the 1950s. An accomplishment of the civil-rights movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and partly result of the following government multiculturalism policies in Canada, is the renaissance of traditional Native cultures as well as the political re-organization of the Native community in a joint effort to execute their constitutional special rights.

Due to the impact of colonization and the resulting economic, historical and political differences between the indigenous population and the power groups, the oral traditions were suppressed in a dominant white society relying on the written text rather than the spoken word, since historically the literate Western societies have regarded the oral literature of aboriginal peoples as inferior—not only because it was not fixed in writing, but also because it was misinterpreted by the white colonizers and not understood properly as a significant cultural manifestation. The ideology of the non-Native authors writing about Native people was mirrored in their works: the cultures of Canada’s indigenous population were merely represented as the bleak culture of a dying race, of a voiceless, powerless group.

Within the last few years a growing body of genuine, indigenous written literature has been published in Canada, mainly in anthologies and literary journals. Creative Native writing encompasses a wide range of literary genres (such as poetry, song, autobiography, short fiction, novels, drama, retold traditional narratives, essays, children’s literature) as well as non-fiction. These new authors refuse to accept the definition of themselves as the indigenous “Other” as put forward by the dominant culture, and they employ literature as creative expression of their self-definition, of their cultural identity as a Native person living in today’s world. By doing so, they often reflect on personal and communal experiences. Maori literature and Aboriginal Australian literature underwent a similar process from an oral tradition through a history of invasion, oppression, exploitation and racism to a (recent) revitalization of Native cultures and traditions in the modern society whereby the wealth of traditional oral literature frequently serves as inspiration. With reference to the 1980s in Canada, Penny Petrone gives an explanation for this recent development:

A younger generation of university-trained writers with a singular sense of purpose and commitment began producing exciting and original works. An amazing vitality emerged as all across the country writers came to the fore and often gathered together [...]—all of them generating enthusiasm and encouraging native writers, staging festivals to introduce new native plays and playwrights, forming aboriginal writing groups and conducting workshops to hone writing skills.³

In the summer of 1986, a group of Native writers living in the Toronto area founded a writers’ group called the “Committee To Re-Establish the Trickster” (CRET); among the founding members are writers like Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, Daniel David Moses, and Tomson Highway. It will be presented how the Committee and its members contributed to the establishment and promotion of Native literature in Canada.

2. THE “COMMITTEE TO RE-ESTABLISH THE TRICKSTER”: A NATIVE WRITERS’ GROUP

Writers’ groups act on the local or regional level as a more informal form of cooperation than in a writers’ union. The members of the group often have the same cultural and social background, are of the same age, have the same education and the like, or they are gathering around one dominant person such as an established artist or a cultural sponsor. They share common opinions about issues and agree on the principles upon which their work should be based. Their meetings serve the purpose of mutual stimulation and criticism, of an exchange of thoughts. The Committee To Re-Establish the Trickster is a Toronto-based Native writers’ group. As indicated in their magazine,⁴ Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, Tomson Highway and Daniel David Moses are founding members of CRET; no other names of members are mentioned in this publication.

The founding members of CRET (some call us *cretins*) are first nation individuals resident in Toronto. As practising writers and through individual endeavour and workshop situations, we have become aware of the need to facilitate the creation and the promotion of literature by first nation writers.⁵

The establishment of CRET was preceded by a larger period of occasional gatherings where some people would get together to talk, to discuss some of their poetry, or just to share some time.⁶ This creative interaction is of crucial importance. Asked for the significance of any other writers for his creative development, Daniel David Moses points out, referring to Lenore Keeshig-Tobias and her influence on his work: “For this last decade, we have shared our thoughts, and our work, and our concerns.”⁷ The Native critic Janice Acoose describes the Indigenous writers’ collective need for the group formation, for mutual encouragement, and the group’s importance for a promotion of Native literature in Canada:

Keeshig-Tobias suggests that prior to the establishment of that Committee many of those writers were frustrated because they were unable to find issues, forms, symbols, or structures in their work they could understand. She also insists that the Committee was necessary for Indigenous writers to continue writing because it encouraged them to believe in their work and support one another.⁸

The three co-founders of the Committee mentioned above have become some of the most influential Native authors and cultural activists in Canada. Lenore Keeshig-Tobias (Ojibway) grew up as member of the Nawash Band from the Cape Croker Reserve on the Bruce Peninsula in Ontario. She is a poet and writer, filmmaker, cultural activist, and a feminist. Keeshig-Tobias is a former editor of the *Ontario Indian* (1981-82) and founding editor of *Sweetgrass —The Magazine of Canada’s Native Peoples* (1982-85). She has helped to develop curricular material for use in Native schools, has worked extensively on behalf of Native interests: “This is probably the only contribution I can make to my society: to be a storyteller, and to defend the authentic Native voice, to speak up for the Trickster.”⁹ Lenore Keeshig-Tobias is known as an influential speaker against the appropriation of Native culture; one example of

her political engagement for the Native cause is her famous statement in a panel discussion at the Writer's Union of Canada AGM in 1989. Her literary and critical work has appeared in several anthologies and literary journals.

Tomson Highway (Cree) was born in a remote area of northwest Manitoba. Originally trained as a concert pianist, Highway worked for Native organizations, networking between Native communities, before he turned to the theatre community. He has served as producer, actor, musician, stage manager and playwright, and he is the former Artistic Director of Native Earth Performing Arts (NEPA), a Toronto-based Native theatre. So far, two of his plays are published and received international praise.

Daniel David Moses (Delaware) is from the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ontario. Moses has worked as playwright-in-residence and as director for Native Earth Performing Arts. As playwright, poet, and editor he is one of very few Native full-time professional writers. Moses has published two volumes of poetry and two plays, and his works appeared in a number of anthologies and literary journals.

The three writers share common experiences: being about the same age, all experienced a rural, traditional Native upbringing in their early childhood; they are university-trained (Lenore Keeshig-Tobias has a B.F.A. from York University, Toronto; Tomson Highway undertook studies in Manitoba and England, holds a B.A. in Music and a B.A. in English from the University of Western Ontario; Daniel David Moses received a B.A. from York University, an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of British Columbia); they have been active at different levels within the Native community; now they all live in urban Toronto.

2.1. CRET'S AIMS AND INTENTIONS

The "Committee To Re-Establish the Trickster" has both a political and a cultural agenda. Their main aim is to strengthen the position of First Nations people within the Canadian mainstream society and its publishing industry, countering their colonial heritage of social and cultural disempowerment and changing the public perception of their people. Traditional customs, values, societal structures, languages and religions have almost disappeared. Colonial history and forced assimilation to Eurocentric hierarchical socio-cultural structures, the loss of their homeland, the destruction of the extended family structure, the loss of their Native language and of their cultural identity as First Nations people, resulted in the social and cultural disorientation of the individual, disintegration and dysfunctionality of family and community, generally in a low self-esteem of the Native population and either indifference or a feeling of cultural supremacy on the side of the dominant culture. The systematic destruction of the First Nations worldviews and ways of life has been going on since the first contacts between the "founding nations" and the Indigenous population of Turtle Island, and it is not a process of the past.

Through most of the sixties the brutal policy continued of removing Native children from their communities and educating them in residential schools. Amongst the results of this ethnocidal practice was the physical, linguistic, and spiritual alienation of three generations of Native people from their homes and families. After three generations of not having had the privilege to grow up in a family situation, many individuals today are reduced to a status of confusion and shame, the effects of which are felt daily in Indian urban ghettos and on skid row throughout North America.¹⁰

Despite the discontinuation of these policies of forced assimilation, racial discrimination is a daily experience for Native people in Canada, and systemic and institutional racism is carried on in different ways (e.g. hiring and renting practices, political and legal representation, public perception in the media and in the educational system). As a counter-action to the existing colonial thought and practice, the oppressed indigenous population embarks on a strategy of political and cultural re-empowerment. According to the Okanagan writer and orator Jeannette Armstrong, “healing can take place through cultural affirmation.”¹¹ One practice to achieve that aim is the presentation of one’s own culture and the preference of Native expertise knowledge over non-Native experts from the outside. Therefore

Native artists have no choice but to apply pressure on the media to put Native authorities before non-Native authorities when dealing with projects that concern Natives. This is a legitimate demand. After all, we are dealing with the portrayal of a people and a lifestyle, a matter that demands accuracy and an understanding that can only come from within.¹²

The issue of self-definition forms an integral part of the healing process. Literary as well as critical writing and other avenues of artistic expression become an act of re-empowerment on behalf of the indigenous population, yet they may also have a positive effect for the whole population. Highway emphasizes the importance of Native ideas for all people:

Native culture is beautiful, Native language is beautiful, Native mythology is beautiful and powerful, [and these] are very relevant, increasingly so, as time goes on. At a time in our history, as a community of human beings, when the world is about to get quite literally destroyed, and all life forms have a very good chance of being completely obliterated—at a crucial time like this, Native people have a major statement to make about the kind of profound change that has to come about in order for the disaster to be averted. From that perspective alone I think it is important that we put out Native works of literature, Native works of theatre.¹³

Highway’s allusion to the philosophical direction of the Native worldview could be applied to several different aspects: the possible destruction of the world in the near future might be of a spiritual or of an ecological nature. Traditional Native beliefs put an emphasis on the people’s spiritual connection to the land, a spirituality that has nothing in common with the European concept of personal ownership. Rather, Indigenous people believe in an emotional sense of belonging, they are part of nature and don’t own it. These spiritual concerns are closely linked to current ecological concerns, to the task of taking care of the environment in the actual physical world surrounding us. Another possible interpretation of Highway’s statement concerns political decision-making processes: “[...] the dominating culture’s reality is that it seeks to affirm itself continuously and must be taught that *numbers* are not the basis of democracy, *people* are, *each one* being important.”¹⁴ Traditional Native communities, on the other hand, have a consensus-oriented political culture that could become a model for more cooperative relationships on the national level (e.g. concerning the social disparities in a multicultural society) as well as on the global level (e.g. treat-

ment of developing countries and small nations). In terms of an intercultural communication,

[i]t is important that Canadians find new ways to listen to each other, to learn each other's public discourse. The first step in this process is to realize that aboriginal peoples in this country have formulated varied and complex demands and responses to the agendas of various levels of government.¹⁵

At the same time as trying to change the public perception of the indigenous population, the members of CRET strive for a revitalization of Native traditions within their communities by writing about Native experiences from traditional times to now and, by doing so, representing the Native perspective of North American culture and history. Actually, there exists not a single Native perspective but as many Native perspectives as there are diverging Native backgrounds and tribal affiliations. However, having endured the same treatment by the dominant society throughout North America over a long period of time resulted in a pan-Indian experience:

While it is true that First Nations people across Canada, and around the world, share certain values which arise out of our connections to the land and out of our common histories and experiences with colonizing governments, in some ways pan-Indianism and other such simplistic generalizations become self-fulfilling prophecy: some of what we share is the result of having been treated in similar fashion, as if we were one people.¹⁶

However, after this warning Kateri Damm exposes the possibly positive consequences, i.e. the empowerment resulting from those shared experiences if First Nations people care to join their efforts. Lenore Keeshig-Tobias declares that

[t]he formation of the Committee To Re-Establish the Trickster (CRET) in 1986 arose out of awareness by a group of Native writers to consolidate and gain recognition for Native contributions to Canadian writing —to reclaim the Native voice in literature. [...] CRET encourages literacy on all levels and in all languages used by Native people. The production and appreciation of a literature of artistic excellence is our goal.¹⁷

Although First Nations authors predominately write in English, they make use of this language just as a medium of communication for a larger audience, but they employ different symbols and metaphors like coyote, masks, the elements and the circle, as well as techniques taken from their oral tradition. "For [...] modern Native writers such as Jeannette Armstrong, Lee Maracle, Tomson Highway, Daniel David Moses and many others, there seems no longer to be a contradiction between traditional identity and modern forms of expression on the written page or the stage."¹⁸ As a literary strategy, code-switching between English and the use of native languages stresses the cultural diversity between writers and potential readers. The linguistic differences hint at the existing cultural tensions and conflicts; on the other hand, these traces of a non-Western culture are symbols for cultural and linguistic survival. Even without these inclusions of non-English words and phrases, the language in the liter-

ary texts differs from standard English: “Writers today are carving a Native American renaissance from regional dialects of red English —its concise dictions, distinctive inflections, loping rhythms, iconic imagery, irregular grammar, reverse twists on standard English, and countless turns of coiling humor.”¹⁹ Beside those publications in Canada’s two official languages, English and French, publications in a few major Native languages and bilingual editions appear in very limited editions.

2.2. TRICKSTER SYMBOLISM

The Committee To Re-Establish the Trickster wants to represent the Native perspective of North American culture and history. For that purpose, Trickster was chosen as the writers’ group’s spiritual guide, since Trickster is a very prominent mythological figure in North America, essential to the worldview of most indigenous peoples, and conveys their cultural understanding. Although known in oral cultures worldwide, the Trickster is of particular importance to most First Nations of North America, handed down in the oral tradition for hundreds of years. Here, Trickster is known under the names of Coyote, Raven, Nanabush, Glooscap, Weesageechak, Old Man and others. He possesses no fixed form, has the ability to change his shape, his size and gender or parts of his body at will, and can be animal or human. Trickster is made to have as many human attributes as possible, so people can identify with him. Essentially a carnivalesque sort of character, a fool, the trickster often rather accidentally functions as beneficent culture hero and creator, transformer and teacher; on the other hand, his ill-considered actions just as often have negative results, turning him into a destroyer. Most trickster heroes incorporate all these aspects more or less equally. The trickster is deceiving others, yet he is frequently tricked and ridiculed himself. There is no logic to his behaviour. He possesses no moral or social values and is at the mercy of his passions and appetites.

Stories about the various Trickster figures reflect Native cultures’ perceptions of nature, of social structures and religious beliefs, of their worldview in general. On the level of action and language, Trickster tales frequently exceed the bounds of both decorum and credibility. Besides having a high entertainment value, they offer warning or advice and reinforce the existent moral structure by dramatizing the value of proper behaviour with Trickster as a divine role figure. These stories serve the purpose of instruction, yet they also allow laughter about social misconduct and relieve social tensions, thereby enabling the reexamination of existing conditions and possibly leading to change.

A comparison between traditional Trickster figures and contemporary Native characters shows how much they have in common: constantly wounded anew, they always rise to begin again their fight for daily survival; they also share a particular sense of humour. Lenore Keeshig-Tobias refers to differences in cultural concepts, to Trickster’s meaning in the Native context, and to the Committee To Re-Establish the Trickster itself by stating: “You know, this is to learn from your mistakes. The Trickster, the Teacher, is a paradox: Christ-like in a way. Except that from our Teacher, we learn through the Teacher’s mistakes as well as the Teacher’s virtues.”²⁰ The writers organized in the Committee want to re-establish Trickster both in their texts —their poetry, stories, novels, plays, and essays— and in their lives by drawing on their traditional experience in Native culture and orature for the sake of a cultural survival in the modern society. Lenore Keeshig-Tobias reflects on the importance of Trickster

for her world view in both her critical works and poetry.²¹ In 1986, Native Earth Performing Arts (NEPA) turned professional, and Tomson Highway became its Artistic Director for almost a decade. As Preston points out, “[t]he Trickster character is a central figure from traditional Native Mythology and important in most of NEPA’s productions.”²² In NEPA’s early phase, already with the artistic involvement of Tomson Highway, *Clown Trickster’s Workshop* (1984) and *Trickster’s Cabaret* (1985) were produced. For the latter production, “each actor developed a trickster figure —different Native cultures have variations on the trickster.”²³ Representative examples of Trickster plays produced by Native Earth Performing Arts are Beatrice Culleton’s *Night of the Trickster* (1992), Drew Hayden Taylor’s *Toronto at Dreamer’s Rock* (1990)²⁴ which features Trickster in the guise of a crow, and Daniel David Moses’ *Coyote City* (1990)²⁵, a play based on the Nez Percée legend of Coyote following his dead wife to the underworld. Tomson Highway’s plays *The Rez Sisters*²⁶ and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (originally called *The Rez Brothers*)²⁷ are the first two of a proposed cycle of seven plays arranged around the Ojibway Trickster, Nanabush, the mythological culture hero and fool of the Ojibway People of Central Canada. A third play for the cycle, *The Large Tit*, was workshopped during the 1990-91 season.²⁸ Highway is working on part four, *Rose*, a musical about Emily Dictionary, merging influences as different as Cree mythology, Germanic mythology or Las Vegas. Another of Highway’s plays, *The Sage, the Dancer, and the Fool* (1989), features a different Trickster figure, Weesageechak. NEPA’s fundamental devotion to the Trickster goes further than the production of plays and encompasses all kinds of activities: for instance, in October 1989, their fundraiser dress ball was called “Weesageechak’s Gala”; their script festivals will be referred to later in this article.

The revival of the Trickster figure and the concurrent Native beliefs encompass adaptations and transformations deemed necessary by First Nations people to reflect on their changed life situations. According to Penny Petrone,

Indian life in Canada is changing rapidly. More and more Indians are moving from the reserves to the cities and this change is reflected in the literature. Native writers continue to be concerned with their social, political, and economic history, attempting to distinguish once and for all right from wrong, truth from fiction —to set the record straight. But now the problems that cities engender, because of skin colour and self-fulfilling stereotypes, have become the new subject of their literature. Understanding themselves in this challenging social context is their task.²⁹

This emphasis on the basic daily realities does not imply that mythological and spiritual contents are excluded from the texts. Highway stresses the necessity of recreating and reworking traditional mythology for Native people who have made the transition to urban life: “Today, as an adult, I am urban by choice. So in order for these myths to be relevant to my life, to my own system of spiritual beliefs, I have to apply these myths, this mythology to the realities of city living.”³⁰ The result for many urban, modern Natives is a re-emergence of the Trickster in new guises, nowadays very often perceived as a female figure. In Highway’s own plays, the traditional Trickster figure has partly undergone these transformations: in *The Rez Sisters*, one of the Nanabush Trickster figures is a modern Bingo Master, and in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, all personifications of Nanabush have turned female. This reinter-

pretation of the mythological character does not run contrary to traditional beliefs: Native, orally transmitted mythologies and Native cultures have never been static but were constantly adapting to new life situations.

2.3. THE MAGAZINE TO RE-ESTABLISH THE TRICKSTER. NEW NATIVE WRITING

One outlet of the group's joint work is the publication of *The Magazine To Re-Establish the Trickster: New Native Writing* which invites Native writers to submit unpublished texts (poetry, short fiction, short plays or works-in-progress) and publishes literary writing and criticism.³¹ Keeshig-Tobias is the founding editor of *The Magazine To Re-Establish the Trickster*. The premiere issue was published in fall, 1988; the second issue followed in spring, 1989. Each magazine offers an editorial introduction, seventeen contributions by ten writers from different Native backgrounds as described in the list of contributors, author instructions in "Submit to the Trickster", subscription and order forms, in the second issue added to by the rubric "Letters". The contributions mainly consist of poetry, supplemented by some stories and an excerpt from a play. The literary journal features the work of indigenous writers from across Turtle Island, from tribal rural as well as urban backgrounds. The texts cover a variety of topics. Tales of daily survival in contemporary settings (reserves, rural communities, urban centres) provide a depiction of the basic socio-political reality of Native peoples in North America; some of these texts are based on autobiographical material. Unlike most non-Native writers portraying Native daily life, First Nations writers balance the predominant poor social conditions with the humour and the good times just as essential to their life. A central topic of indigenous writing is nature as an expression of environmental concerns or as a symbol for spiritual experiences. Another important issue to the writers is their cultural heritage which is expressed in traditional references to the respective indigenous cultures that can be identified by keywords such as "pictographs", "drums", "sweat lodge", "dance" and "song". Two authors, Tomson Highway and William Merasty, are hinting much more explicitly at their traditional background by employing words and phrases of their mother tongue, Cree, in their writing. Some of the texts in *The Magazine To Re-Establish the Trickster* allude to Trickster as guardian spirit: Edna H. King's poem "Guardian" (1.1: 11) and William Merasty's account "Matcha-Is or You Little Devil" (1.2: 20), the latter presenting a comparison between Native beliefs and Christianity. Gilbert Oskaboose's "Nanabush and the Turkey Vulture" (1.1: 23) is the recreation of a traditional story whereas John McLeod's Sun Dog-stories ("Sun Dog —The Name of the Game", 1.2: 22-23, and "Sun Dog— Puttin' on the Style", 1.2: 25-29) feature a trickster-like character, a mischievous fool in a modern context. The other texts in the *Magazine* do not display any direct references to traditional Trickster mythologies or their modern equivalents. Lenore Keeshig-Tobias' editorial "Let's Be Our Own Tricksters, Eh" advocates the need for more active participation of Native people in Canadian culture to present their own perspective and to overcome their colonial heritage of being rendered voiceless. The author takes a strong position on the work of non-Native professionals with their biased perspective and their "romantic clichés".³² She then outlines the core elements of oral culture and Trickster mythology as well as the basically different perceptions of the world (e.g. concepts of space and time) as reflected in works by Native writers. Also, CRET's history and aims are pointed out. The editor's introduction to the second issue carries more or less the same message.

Of the letters published in the second issue of the magazine, two letters were written by non-Native readers of the first issue who wanted to state their openness to listen to the Native voice and to learn from that experience; one letter referred to a particular Trickster figure, Raven, and to reading experiences with fictional texts featuring Raven and other Trickster figures; the last letter was an official acknowledgement of the publication of the premiere issue by the Ministry of Citizenship, Native Community Branch, indicating the attempt of networking among Native communities.

These were the two magazine issues available to me; to my knowledge, no further issues have been published so far. Evidently, the reasons for the cessation of publication are the economical situation of small publishers and of the potential readership. As Petrone points out, “[s]everal publishing outlets for new native writers [...] have published the poetry, short stories, and essays of writers who have written in the 1980s. [...] Native periodicals and newspapers are continually in flux. Lack of funds causes irregular publication and often demise.”³³ A successful exception to that pattern is *Gatherings: The En’Owkin Journal of First North American Peoples*, published annually since 1990. Greg Young-Ing, managing editor of Theytus Books and of *Gatherings*, states:

Aboriginal literature has had to struggle through a number of impeding factors including cultural and language barriers, residential schools, ethnocentrism in the academic establishment, competition from non-Aboriginal authors, estrangement in the publishing industry, and a lack of Aboriginal controlled publishing. Under these conditions it is not surprising that in the Canadian publishing industry Aboriginal literature has gone from being virtually non-existent to currently being delegated a low profile marginal position.³⁴

Two factors add to the marginal position of Native authors: publishing houses found their decision for or against publication on the size of the potential readership within the general society, for economic reasons they don’t acknowledge minorities; Native publications are hardly ever reviewed or criticized, therefore omitted from the academic discourse by not publicly giving them any recognition. In order for Native literature to gain its rightful place in the Canadian culture, market and society, in the same article Young-Ing goes on to demand that

[e]very effort should be made within Canadian arts and industry funding agencies to support existing Aboriginal publishing ventures and encourage the establishment of others. This can be partly achieved by providing additional funding sources for existing Aboriginal publishers to help them grow and to offset the inequity they face competing with the larger Canadian publishing industry. Further, additional programs should be available for Aboriginal groups to begin publishing ventures.³⁵

Public funding in this particular case could help to compensate for social disadvantages of ethnic minorities and to support the cultural survival of the First Nations of Canada. Another avenue for the advancement of Native causes could be specific job training programs provided in the publishing industry, in the arts and in the media, to make existing and future Native publishing ventures or other initiatives independent of non-Native involvement.

2.4. CRET'S STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

Activities of the Committee To Re-Establish the Trickster for the promotion of Canadian Native literature include the support of each other within the group as well as networking with other Native writers' groups respectively individual writers of First Nations ancestry. There is an expressed need for contact and intellectual exchange with other Native writers throughout North America, even worldwide, for a network of Native writers. However, "since we're all sort of working artists, we don't keep regular contact, but we do meet every so often, here and there."³⁶

CRET acts on behalf of Canadian Native literature not only by publication of their journal and by establishment of writers' networks, but also by instruction of young authors and by addressing the public audience. As Lenore Keeshig-Tobias declares in her editorial to the second *Magazine To Re-Establish the Trickster*, "CRET offers a series of workshops and seminars dealing with relevant themes and related topics, readings and performances by CRET members, critiquing and consultation services, and publications."³⁷ These workshops and seminars are particularly catering for the needs of Native authors who may have difficulties to find their own unique voice, their personal style and form, in a bicultural and often even bilingual context. Readings and performances by members of the Committee To Re-Establish the Trickster are undertaken for the entertainment and instruction of the general public; these public events also strengthen the unity and cooperation within and among Native communities. Last but not least, CRET offers moral and practical support for emerging indigenous authors such as publication possibilities and constructive criticism.

Toronto's Native Earth Performing Arts Theatre organizes script festivals called "Weesageechak Begins To Dance" for new Native plays and playwrights; the first one has taken place in 1989. The festivals provide Native writers with an opportunity to present their works (or works-in-progress) to the theatre community. The workshops and public readings are a chance for emerging authors to gain experience. As a result of the festivals, several of the scripts received full productions.³⁸ In her survey of NEPA's history, Jennifer Preston does not point out any affiliation of CRET with the festivals; however, the personal involvement of Tomson Highway and Daniel David Moses, both founding members of CRET, as well as the title of the festival (i.e. the reference to the Weesageechak Trickster figure) invites such an interpretation.

3. RESURGENCE OF A NATIVE VOICE

From a position of cultural marginality within the Canadian mainstream society, the Committee To Re-Establish the Trickster fights for the establishment and promotion of Native literature and contributes to the appearance of promising and strong new Native voices on the literary scene. For First Nations authors, writing becomes an act of re-empowerment. CRET and its very active members in the last decade had a considerable influence on the Native writing community as well as the Canadian public, and together with other new and established Native writers all across the country they provided the creative impulse for a new development in Canadian literature and theatre and their respective critical reception. For instance, Tomson Highway has gained critical acclaim as one of the most important, award-winning dramatists in Canadian theatre today, and Lenore Keeshig-Tobias is known as a Native spokesperson in the appropria-

tion-discussion (“Stop Stealing Native Stories”) of Canada’s literary community. Established and emerging First Nations authors provide positive role models for Native youth, both in their own person as successful creative artists of indigenous origin, and by presenting authentic Native images in the contents and characters of their texts. More public awareness of Native issues such as land claims and cultural appropriation, and of Canada as a multicultural and multilingual country, raised the cultural sensitivity of many mainstream Canadians who undertake an effort to understand minority perspectives, yet after such a long period of cultural ignorance comprehension takes time and patience on both sides and can only be achieved by co-operation and sharing. Cross-cultural awareness, the acceptance of cultural differences, and reciprocal teaching and learning are the prerequisites of an effective intercultural communication.

CRET serves as one example for the joint efforts of First Nations writers all over Canada; other strong Native writers’ groups exist in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and elsewhere. Hartmut Lutz mentions the recent foundation of the Indigenous Writers Association of Manitoba (co-founder the Cree author Jordan Wheeler); initiatives like that exist in Saskatchewan (in Regina and Saskatoon).³⁹ The formation of these writers’ groups often takes place in connection with a Native centre or an academic institution offering Native Studies programs, meeting places for Native groups. A stronghold of Native art and literature, both traditional and modern, is the En’Owkin Centre in Penticton, British Columbia. Beside basic community-oriented work, this Native centre under the direction of Jeannette Armstrong includes the En’Owkin International School of Writing for students of North American First Nations Ancestry that offers a two year credit program leading to a certificate in First Nations Creative Writing in co-operation with the University of Victoria. Established Native writers, dramatists, and visual artists work there as teachers and writers-in-residence. En’Owkin also includes Theytus Books, the only First Nations owned and operated publishing house in Canada publishing exclusively texts by Native authors. To mention just one initiative by Native dramatists and actors, the De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig Theatre group in West Bay on Manitoulin Island, Ontario, organizes community-based workshops and, as a touring company, has taken plays by emerging Native dramatists to schools and reserves in Ontario and Quebec.

A major achievement of the Native community in Canada is the recognition of continued oral tradition and of indigenous written literature. Canadian Native literature is gaining national and international acceptance —not only out of an anthropological interest, but as a valid contribution to world literature. What we can do as readers and audience in such a cross-cultural context to further the cause of indigenous literatures worldwide is to listen to their unique voices with an open mind and an open heart.

And may the Trickster be with you ...

Notes

1. I am aware of the problem of terminology. Drew Hayden Taylor has approached this problematic topic in his essay “An Indian by Any Other Name” (*Funny, You Don’t Look Like One: Observations from a Blue-Eyed Ojibway*. Penticton: Theytus, 1996, 53-55), where he lists different names and categories currently in use as well as some of their cultural and political implications, and finds a pragmatic solution to the problem in a self-defini-

- tion. Since apparently no general agreement on the political correctness of the different terms can be achieved at the time being, in this article, the terms "Native people", "Indigenous" and "First Nations" will be used synonymously.
2. Penny Petrone, *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present* (Toronto: Oxford University Press 1990) 3-4.
 3. Penny Petrone, *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990) 138.
 4. See *The Magazine To Re-Establish the Trickster: New Native Writing* 1.1 (Fall 1988): 33. See also *The Magazine To Re-Establish the Trickster: New Native Writing* 1.2 (Spring 1989): 33.
 5. "Introduction," *The Magazine To Re-Establish the Trickster: New Native Writing* 1.2 (Spring 1989): 2.
 6. See Lenore Keeshig-Tobias in a conversation with Hartmut Lutz (1989). Hartmut Lutz, "Lenore Keeshig-Tobias (interview)," *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1991) 86-87.
 7. Daniel David Moses in a conversation with Hartmut Lutz (1990). Hartmut Lutz, "Daniel David Moses (interview)," *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1991) 167.
 8. Janice Acoose, "Post Halfbreed. Indigenous Writers as Authors of Their Own Realities," *Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*, ed. Jeannette Armstrong (Penticton: Theytus, 1993) 39.
 9. Statement by Lenore Keeshig-Tobias in a conversation with Hartmut Lutz (1989). Hartmut Lutz, "Lenore Keeshig-Tobias (interview)," *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1991) 84.
 10. Hartmut Lutz, "Canadian Native Literature and the Sixties. A Historical and Bibliographical Survey," *Canadian Literature*, 152/153 (Spring/Summer 1997): 169.
 11. Jeannette C. Armstrong, "The Disempowerment of First North American Native Peoples and Empowerment Through Their Writing," *Gatherings: The En'Owkin Journal of First North American Peoples* 1.1 (Fall 1990): 144.
 12. Lorne Simon, "Freedom of Expression? Are Native Voices Being Silenced in the Name of Artistic Freedom?" *Canadian Forum* (July/August 1993): 47.
 13. Statement by Tomson Highway in an interview by Jennifer Preston (1989). Jennifer Preston, "Weesageechak Begins To Dance. Native Earth Performing Arts Inc.," *The Drama Review* 36.1 (T 133) (Spring 1992): 157.
 14. Jeannette C. Armstrong, "The Disempowerment of First North American Native Peoples and Empowerment Through Their Writing," *Gatherings: The En'Owkin Journal of First North American Peoples* 1.1 (Fall 1990): 144.
 15. Douglas A. West, "The Place of Indigenous Knowledge in the Discussion of Canadian Political Ideas," *Alternative Frontiers: Voices from the Mountain West*, eds. Allen Seager, Leonard Evenden, Rowland Lorimer, and Robin Mathews (Montréal: Association for Canadian Studies, 1997) 106.
 16. Kateri Damm, "Says Who. Colonialism, Identity and Defining Indigenous Literature," *Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*, ed. Jeannette Armstrong (Penticton: Theytus, 1993) 14.
 17. Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, "Let's Be Our Own Tricksters, Eh," *The Magazine To Re-Establish the Trickster: New Native Writing* 1.1 (Fall 1988): 3. See also "Introduction," *The Magazine To Re-Establish the Trickster: New Native Writing* 1.2 (Spring 1989): 2.
 18. Hartmut Lutz, "Canadian Native Literature and the Sixties. A Historical and Bibliographical Survey," *Canadian Literature* 152/153 (Spring/Summer 1997): 186.
 19. Kenneth Lincoln, *Indi'n Humor: Bicultural Play in Native America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 15.
 20. Lenore Keeshig-Tobias in a conversation with Hartmut Lutz (1989). Hartmut Lutz, "Lenore Keeshig-Tobias (interview)," *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1991) 85.

21. See for instance Lenore Keeshig-Tobias' poem "Running on the March Wind," *First People, First Voices*, ed. Penny Petrone (Toronto/Buffalo/London: University of Toronto Press, 1983) 201-203.
22. Jennifer Preston, "Weesageechak Begins to Dance. Native Earth Performing Arts Inc.," *The Drama Review* 36.1 (T 133) (Spring 1992): 141.
23. Jennifer Preston, "Weesageechak Begins to Dance. Native Earth Performing Arts Inc.," *The Drama Review* 36.1 (T 133) (Spring 1992): 139.
24. Drew Hayden Taylor, *Toronto at Dreamer's Rock/Education Is Our Right. Two One-Act Plays* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1990).
25. Daniel David Moses, *Coyote City* (Stratford, Ont.: Williams-Wallace, 1990). Moses also incorporates Trickster mythology in his poetry.
26. Tomson Highway, *The Rez Sisters* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1988).
27. Tomson Highway, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (Saskatoon: Fifth House 1989).
28. See Jennifer Preston, "Weesageechak Begins To Dance. Native Earth Performing Arts Inc.," *The Drama Review* 36.1 (T 133) (Spring 1992): 154. See also Sheila Rabillard, "Absorption, Elimination, and the Hybrid: Some Impure Questions of Gender and Culture in the Trickster Drama of Tomson Highway", *Essays in Theatre/Études théâtrales*, 12.1 (Nov. 1993): 24, note 9.
29. Penny Petrone, *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990) 138-139.
30. Tomson Highway, "On Native Mythology," *Theatrum* 6 (Spring 1987): 29.
31. See e.g. "Submit to the Trickster," *The Magazine To Re-Establish the Trickster: New Native Writing* 1.1 (Fall 1988): 34.
32. Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, "Let's Be Our Own Tricksters, Eh," *The Magazine To Re-Establish the Trickster: New Native Writing* 1.1 (Fall 1988): 2-3.
33. Penny Petrone, *Native Literature in Canada. From the Oral Tradition to the Present* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990) 168.
34. Greg Young-Ing, "Aboriginal Peoples' Estrangement. Marginalization in the Publishing Industry," *Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*, ed. Jeannette Armstrong (Penticton: Theytus, 1993) 182.
35. Greg Young-Ing, "Aboriginal Peoples' Estrangement. Marginalization in the Publishing Industry," *Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*, ed. Jeannette Armstrong (Penticton: Theytus, 1993) 187.
36. Lenore Keeshig-Tobias in a conversation with Hartmut Lutz (1989). Hartmut Lutz, "Lenore Keeshig-Tobias (interview)," *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1991) 86.
37. "Introduction," *The Magazine To Re-Establish the Trickster: New Native Writing* 1.2 (Spring 1989): 2. See also Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, "Let's Be Our Own Tricksters, Eh," *The Magazine To Re-Establish the Trickster: New Native Writing* 1.1 (Fall 1988): 3.
38. See Jennifer Preston, "Weesageechak Begins To Dance. Native Earth Performing Arts Inc.," *The Drama Review* 36.1 (T 133) (Spring 1992): 156.
39. Hartmut Lutz in a conversation with Lenore Keeshig-Tobias in 1989. See Hartmut Lutz, "Lenore Keeshig-Tobias (interview)," *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors* (Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1991) 87. See Penny Petrone, *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1990) 138.

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