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Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial

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I grew up in Northern California, and I grew up fast. I don't mean that I was raised in a tough part of town where you had to fight to survive. I was raised in a small town in the foothills, quite pastoral in fact. I mean I grew up all at once. By my first year of high school, I already had my full height, while most of my friends were just beginning to grow.

We had a basketball team at the high school and a basketball coach who considered himself somewhat of an authority on the subject of talent. He could spot it, he said. And he spotted me. He told me I had a talent for the game, and that I should come out for the team. With my size, he said, I would be a natural player. I was flattered.

I wish I could tell you that I excelled at basketball, that I was an all-star, that college coaches came to see me play. But the truth of the matter is, I wasn't even mediocre. Had I not been so very young and so very serious, I might have laughed at my attempts to run and bounce a ball at the same time. Certainly most everyone who saw me play did.

Now before you think that my embarrassment in basketball was the fault of an overzealous coach, you have to remember that we both made more or less the same assumption. The coach assumed that because I was tall, I would be a good player. And once the coach called my height to my attention and encouraged me, I assumed the same thing. We spent the rest of our time together trying to figure out why I was so bad.

Just before the first game of my second season, I tore my knee, mercifully ending my basketball career. My experience taught me little about basketball, but it did teach me a great deal about assumptions.

Assumptions are a dangerous thing. They are especially dangerous when we do not even see that the premise from which we start a discussion is not the hard fact that we thought it was, but one of the fancies we churn out of our imaginations to help us get from the beginning of an idea to the end.

Which brings me, albeit by a circuitous route, to post-colonial literature. I am not a theorist. It's not an apology, but it is a fact. So I can not talk to the internal structure of the theory itself, how it works, or what it tells us about the art of language and the art of literature. Nor can I participate to any great extent in what Linda Hutcheon calls "the de-doxifying project of postmodernism."

But having played basketball, I can talk about the assumptions that the

term post-colonial makes. It is, first of all, part of a triumvirate. In order to get to "post," we have to wend our way through no small amount of literary history, acknowledging the existence of its antecedents, pre-colonial and colonial. In the case of Native literature, we can say that pre-colonial literature was that literature, oral in nature, that was in existence prior to European contact, a literature that existed exclusively within specific cultural communities.

Post-colonial literature, then, must be the literature produced by Native people sometime after colonization, a literature that arises in large part out of the experience that is colonization. These particular terms allow us to talk about Native literature as a literature that can be counterpoint to Canadian literature, a new voice, if you will, a different voice in the literary amphitheatre. I rather like the idea of post-colonial literature, because it promises to set me apart from the masses and suggests that what I have to offer is new and exciting. But then again, I rather liked the idea of playing basketball, too.

I said at the beginning that I was not a theorist and was not going to concern myself with how post-colonialism operates as a critical method. But I am concerned with what the term says about Natives and Native literature and the initial assumptions it makes about us and our cultures.

When I made that rather simplistic comparison between pre-colonial and post-colonial, I left out one of the players, rather like talking about pre-pubesence and post-pubesence without mentioning puberty. My apologies. It was a trick to make you think I was going to say something profound, when, in fact, I was going to make the rather simple observation that in the case of pre- and post-pubesence and pre- and post-colonial, the pivot around which we move is puberty and colonialism. But here, I'm lying again. Another trick, I'm afraid, for in puberty's case, the precedent, the root, and the antecedent are, at least, all part of a whole, whereas in the case of colonialism – within a discussion of Native literature – the term has little to do with the literature itself. It is both separate from and antithetical to what came before and what came after.

Pre-colonial literature, as we use the term in North America, has no relationship whatsoever to colonial literature. The two are neither part of a biological or natural cycle nor does the one anticipate the other, while the full complement of terms – pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial – reeks of unabashed ethnocentrism and well-meaning dismissal, and they point to a deep-seated assumption that is at the heart of most well-intentioned studies of Native literatures.

While post-colonialism purports to be a method by which we can begin to look at those literatures which are formed out of the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressor, the colonized and the colonizer, the term itself assumes that the starting point for that discussion is the advent

of Europeans in North America. At the same time, the term organizes the literature progressively suggesting that there is both progress and improvement. No less distressing, it also assumes that the struggle between guardian and ward is the catalyst for contemporary Native literature, providing those of us who write with method and topic. And, worst of all, the idea of post-colonial writing effectively cuts us off from our traditions, traditions that were in place before colonialism ever became a question, traditions which have come down to us through our cultures in spite of colonization, and it supposes that contemporary Native writing is largely a construct of oppression. Ironically, while the term itself – post-colonial – strives to escape to find new centres, it remains, in the end, a hostage to nationalism.

As a contemporary Native writer, I am quite unwilling to make these assumptions, and I am quite unwilling to use these terms.

A friend of mine cautioned me about this stridency and pointed out that post-colonial is a perfectly good term to use for that literature which is, in fact, a reaction to the historical impositions of colonialization. She suggested I look at Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* and Beatrice Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree* as examples of works for which the term is appropriate. She further suggested that post-colonial was not such a simple thing, that much of what I was concerned with – centres, difference, totalizing, hegemony, margins – was being addressed by post-colonial methodology. If this is true, then it is unfortunate that the method has such an albatross – as the term – hanging around its neck. But I must admit that I remain sceptical that such a term could describe a non-centred, non-nationalistic method.

If we are to use terms to describe the various stages or changes in Native literature as it has become written, while at the same time remaining oral, and as it has expanded from a specific language base to a multiple language base, we need to find descriptors which do not invoke the cant of progress and which are not joined at the hip with nationalism. Post-colonial might be an excellent term to use to describe Canadian literature, but it will not do to describe Native literature.

As a Native writer, I lean towards terms such as tribal, interfusional, polemical, and associational to describe the range of Native writing. I prefer these terms for a variety of reasons: they tend to be less centred and do not, within the terms themselves, privilege one culture over another; they avoid the sense of progress in which primitivism gives way to sophistication, suggesting as it does that such movement is both natural and desirable; they identify points on a cultural and literary continuum for Native literature which do not depend on anomalies such as the arrival of Europeans in North America or the advent of non-Native literature in this hemisphere, what Marie Baker likes to call "settler litter." At the same

time, these terms are not "bags" into which we can collect and store the whole of Native literature. They are, more properly, vantage points from which we can see a particular literary landscape.

Two of these terms are self-apparent: tribal and polemical. Tribal refers to that literature which exists primarily within a tribe or a community, literature that is shared almost exclusively by members of that community, and literature that is presented and retained in a Native language. It is virtually invisible outside its community, partly because of the barrier of language and partly because it has little interest in making itself available to an outside audience. In some cases, tribes – the Hopi come to mind – take great pains in limiting access to parts of their literature only to members of their immediate community. Polemical refers to that literature either in a Native language or in English, French, etc. that concerns itself with the clash of Native and non-Native cultures or with the championing of Native values over non-Native values. Like Beatrice Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree*, Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed*, D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded* and *Wind from an Enemy Sky*, and Howard Adams' *Prison of Grass*, polemical literature chronicles the imposition of non-Native expectations and insistences (political, social, scientific) on Native communities and the methods of resistance employed by Native people in order to maintain both their communities and cultures.

The terms interfunctional and associational are not as readily apparent. I'm using interfunctional to describe that part of Native literature which is a blending of oral literature and written literature. While there are contemporary examples that suggest the nature of interfunctional literature – some of the translations of Dennis Tedlock and Dell Hymes work along with those of Howard Norman in *The Wishing Bone Cycle* – the only complete example we have of interfunctional literature is Harry Robinson's *Write It on Your Heart*.

The stories in Robinson's collection are told in English and written in English, but the patterns, metaphors, structures as well as the themes and characters come primarily from oral literature. More than this, Robinson, within the confines of written language, is successful in creating an oral voice. He does this in a rather ingenious way. He develops what we might want to call an oral syntax that defeats readers' efforts to read the stories silently to themselves, a syntax that encourages readers to read the stories out loud.

The common complaint that we make of oral literature that has been translated into English is that we lose the voice of the storyteller, the gestures, the music, and the interaction between storyteller and audience. But by forcing the reader to read aloud, Robinson's prose, to a large extent, avoids this loss, re-creating at once the storyteller and the performance.

Yeah, I'll tell you "Cat With the Boots On." Riding boots on.

That's the stories, the first stories.

There was a big ranch, not around here.

That's someplace in European.

Overseas.

That's a long time, shortly after the "imbellable" stories.

But this is part "imbellable" stories.

It's not Indian stories.

This is white people stories,

because I learned this from the white people.

Not the white man.

The white man tell his son,

that's Allison – John Fall Allison.

White man.

He is the one that tell the stories to his son.

His son, Bert Allison.

His son was a half Indian and a half white,

because his mother was an Indian.

And his father was a white man.

So his father told him these stories.

But he told me – Bert Allison.

So he told me,

"This is not Indian stories.

White man stories."

You understand that?

This metamorphosis – written to oral, reader to speaker – is no mean trick, one that Robinson accomplishes with relative ease. More important, his prose has become a source of inspiration and influence for other Native writers such as Jeannette Armstrong and myself.

Associational literature is the body of literature that has been created, for the most part, by contemporary Native writers. While no one set of criteria will do to describe it fully, it possesses a series of attributes that help to give it form.

Associational literature, most often, describes a Native community. While it may also describe a non-Native community, it avoids centring the story on the non-Native community or on a conflict between the two cultures, concentrating instead on the daily activities and intricacies of Native life and organizing the elements of plot along a rather flat narrative line that ignores the ubiquitous climaxes and resolutions that are so valued in non-Native literature. In addition to this flat narrative line, associational literature leans towards the group rather than the single, isolated

character, creating a fiction that de-values heroes and villains in favour of the members of a community, a fiction which eschews judgements and conclusions.

For the non-Native reader, this literature provides a limited and particular access to a Native world, allowing the reader to associate with that world without being encouraged to feel a part of it. It does not pander to non-Native expectations concerning the glamour and/or horror of Native life, and it especially avoids those media phantasms – glitzy ceremonies, yuppie shamanism, diet philosophies (literary tourism as one critic called them) – that writers such as Carlos Castaneda and Lynn Andrews have conjured up for the current generation of gullible readers.

For the Native reader, associational literature helps to remind us of the continuing values of our cultures, and it reinforces the notion that, in addition to the usable past that the concurrence of oral literature and traditional history provides us with, we also have an active present marked by cultural tenacity and a viable future which may well organize itself around major revivals of language, philosophy, and spiritualism.

Two of the better examples of associational literature are Basil H. Johnston's *Indian School Days* and Ruby Slipperjack's *Honour the Sun*. Each creates an Indian community, Johnston at a Jesuit boarding school, Slipperjack in northern Ontario. The novels themselves describe daily activities and the interaction of the community itself, and, aside from the first-person narrator, no one character is given preference over another.

Because *Indian School Days* is about a boarding school, we might well expect to see a sustained attack on this particularly colonial institution, and, while Johnston does on occasion criticize the expectations that the Jesuits have for their Native wards, he defuses most of the conflicts by refusing to make easy judgements and by granting responsibility and choice to both the Jesuits and the Native boys. The boys are not portrayed as hapless victims, and the Jesuits are not cast as uncaring jailers. Particularly telling are the concerted efforts made by the clerics and the students to care for the very young students, "babies" as Johnston calls them, who "seldom laughed or smiled and often cried and whimpered during the day and at night." While the older boys tried to act "as guardians or as big brothers," the burden of care "fell on the young scholastics, who had a much more fatherly air than the senior boys in Grades 7 and 8."

Ruby Slipperjack concerns herself with an isolated Native community in northern Ontario. Written in the form of a diary, the book follows the everyday life of an extended family. The book has no pretense at plot nor is there a desire to glorify traditional Native life. The story is told in simple and unassuming prose that focuses on relationships:

There are seven of us in the family, four girls and three boys. My oldest brother got married and went away a long time ago. My other brother, Wess, spends most of his time at the cabin on our old trapline. The rest of us girls are all here. We live in a one-room cabin our father built before he died. Mom got someone to make a small addition at the back a couple of years ago. That's where she sleeps with our little brother, Brian. Brian was just a little baby when my father died and he's about six years old now. The rest of us sleep in the main room on two double beds and a bunk bed.

Three other kids live with us. Mom looks after them because their parents left their home. I guess three more doesn't make much difference aside from the fact the food and clothes have to stretch a little further. The father came to see them once. I heard Mom say that she has never gotten a penny for their keep. Their mother has never come. Actually, I am closer to them than to my own sisters, since mine are gone all winter. Maggie and Jane have become my regular sisters and Vera and Annie are my special sisters when they are home in the summer.

Within the novel, the narrator neither posits the superiority of Native culture over non-Native culture nor suggests that the ills that beset the community come from outside it. Her brother's tuberculosis, John Bull's violent rampages, and the mother's eventual alcoholism are mentioned and lamented, but they are presented in a non-judgemental fashion and do not provide an occasion for accusation and blame either of non-Native culture at large or the Native community itself.

Both books provide access to a Native world, but the access is not unlimited. It is, in fact, remarkably limited access. While Johnston hints at some of the reasons why Indian parents allow their children to be placed at St. Peter Claver's, he does not elaborate on the complex cultural dynamics that have helped to maintain these schools. Much of this is hidden, as are the Native communities outside the school from which the students come. While Slipperjack appears more forthright in her description of the family and the community, she refuses to share with us the reasons for the narrator's mother's alcoholism, the cause of John Bull's violent behaviour, and the reasons for the narrator's leaving the community. In the end, what is most apparent in these two books is not the information received but the silences that each writer maintains. Non-Natives may, as readers, come to an association with these communities, but they remain, always, outsiders.

Now it goes without saying that creating terms simply to replace other terms is, in most instances, a solipsistic exercise, and I do not offer these terms as replacements for the term post-colonial so much as to demon-

strate the difficulties that the people and the literature for which the term was, in part, created have with the assumptions that the term embodies.

Unlike post-colonial, the terms tribal, interfusional, polemical, and associational do not establish a chronological order nor do they open and close literary frontiers. They avoid a nationalistic centre, and they do not depend on the arrival of Europeans for their *raison d'être*.

At the same time, for all the range they cover, they do not comfortably contain the work of such Native writers as Gerald Vizenor and Craig Kee Strete. Vizenor's postmodern novels *Darkness in St. Louis Bearheart* and *Griever: An American Monkey King in China* and Strete's short story collections of surreal and speculative fiction *The Bleeding Man* and *If All Else Fails* cross the lines that definitions – no matter how loose – create.

And it may be that these terms will not do in the end at all. Yet I cannot let post-colonial stand – particularly as a term – for, at its heart, it is an act of imagination and an act of imperialism that demands that I imagine myself as something I did not choose to be, as something I would not choose to become.