

# From The Inside — Looking At You

by Beth Brant

*Ce texte est issu d'une conférence sur le racisme et l'écriture donnée lors du Gay Games Literary Festival à Vancouver en 1990. Les auteures discutent de la lente apparition des autochtones sur la scène littéraire. Faisant partie d'un peuple qui transmet oralement sa culture et son histoire, les écrivaines et écrivains autochtones se heurtent à un grand nombre d'obstacles, entre-autres, les difficultés d'écrire et de communiquer dans une langue qui n'est pas la leur et qui a été utilisée pour perpétuer le racisme et la haine.*

The title of this workshop, From the Outside Looking In, implies that those of us on this panel are somehow on the outside of the normal, the real, and the truth. I must protest this abrogation of our thoughts and words to fit a white-defined framework of what constitutes racism and writing. As a Mohawk, I am very much inside my own world-view, my own Nation, and I am looking at you—the descendents of the European fathers who colonized that world.

My people are an oral people. This means that our stories, our history, our value-systems, our spirituality have been given us by the spoken, not the written word. And because our words were spoken, it was important that we chose words carefully, and that we *listened* equally with care. I want you to know this because as a Native woman who writes, as well as speaks, I feel a great responsibility to share words that are truthful. I have heard non-Natives say that truth is a "relative thing." We do not believe in that philosophy. Indeed, that philosophy has been a force behind the onslaught of colonialism.

In the physical and cultural genocide that has been perpetrated upon my people, the Europeans came with a book, and that

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book was called the holy bible. Through the use and enforcement of that book, those written words, everything that we had known was shattered. Our world was splintered, and we are left with the excruciating task of finding the pieces of our world and making it right again, making it balanced again. For this is at the heart of our search—restoring balance within our communities in a dominant culture that has gone amok with greed, and worship of individualism. What does this have to do with racism and writing? Everything.

Literacy is a new concept to us, the indigenous peoples of North America. As of today, 50 per cent of my people are either illiterate or functional literate (by western standards). We do not have the seeming luxury of research. We cannot go to a book and find out who was gay or lesbian, who said this at what time, who said that at what time—for books, like the bible, are distortions of the truth—starting with the Jesuits and continuing with modern-day "priests" like Grey Owl, Lynne Andrews, and Tony Hillerman. We must rely on memory, our Elders, our collective dreams to find those pieces that

were cut from us. The written word, the bible book, almost destroyed our faith in who we are, and so we have come to view the written word with suspicion and apprehension. The lies about us in the form of letters, sentences, paragraphs proliferate like a virus. The disease of silence, negation, and invisibility. "Indian experts" are inevitably white men and women, who presume to do the talking for us as if we are a dead people<sup>1</sup>. You get the picture—poor, dead Indians, with no-one to speak on our behalf except for the liberal white man, though when it comes to "folktales" or "myths," they scour the continent for "genuine" Natives. But it also seems that we have had the last laugh in the circus of anthro-gladiators. Our Elders have told us that many so-called informants deliberately gave wrong information to the anthros. An Indian joke, folks!

Those of us who are Native and have *chosen* to write are a fast-growing community. This has not been an easy path to travel on. For myself, this entails being in a constant state of translation. Those of you for whom English is a second language will understand some of what I say. Not only am I translating from the spoken to the written, but also writing in a language that is not my own. When I sit in front of my typewriter, there are times I literally cannot find the words that will describe what I want to say. And that is because the words I want, the words I "hear," are Mohawk words. But you see, my Mohawk language was virtually destroyed in my family. My grandmother and grandfather were taught, in residential school, that Mohawk was a bad thing. To speak Mohawk, to be Mohawk. After hundreds of years of emotional and physical assault on us for using the language Creator gave us, we now find it in our best interests to communicate with the lan-

guage the enemy forced on us. Therefore, I bend and shape this unlovely language in a way that will make truth. Because the language of the enemy was a weapon used to perpetuate racism and hate, I want to forge it in a new way, a weapon of love. I also feel that a piece of writing is not finished until it is spoken. I read my work aloud as I write, after I write and often when I am sleeping. My stories are *meant* to be spoken. My work is *meant* to be said out loud. In sign or by voice, storytelling is a natural act. I also feel that I must say this—I do not write for you who are white. I write for my own. Another natural act.

This leads me to ask you who are white to listen to us—the Aboriginal peoples whose land you reside on. What you will hear from us is the truth of how it is with us. The truth does not lie in the realm of colonial supremacy, nor in the kingdom of imperialistic propaganda. No-one can speak for us but us. There may be those of European descent who want to be our allies in the elimination of racism. I welcome you. My people welcome you.

Dionne Brand has said that if a white writer introduces a character of colour into their writings, that writer must be accountable for his or her place in that writing.<sup>2</sup> Why do you write about that person of colour? This is an important question, but the answer is even more so, since *our* history of the last five hundred years is so entangled with yours. I do not say that only Natives can write about Natives. I will never say that. I do say that you can't steal my story and call it your own. You can't steal my spirit and call it yours. This has been the North American Dream—stolen land, stolen children, stolen lives, stolen dreams—and now we are all living the nightmare of this thievery. If your history is one of cultural dominance, you must be aware of and *own* that history before you can write about me and mine. This can be liberating for you. I'm sure there are many in this audience who are recovering from alcohol, drug, and food addictions. Racism is also an addiction, one that it is possible to recover from. There are no Twelve-Step programs for this one, however. This recovery is a solitary one, even with support.

Those of us who are Native have internalized the racism that covered our lands, like a biological warfare. For some, this is reason enough why we don't or can't

write. For centuries we have heard the words used to describe us—dumb Indian, lazy Indian, ugly Indian, drunk Indian, crazy Indian. It has been near impossible to not have these messages encoded on our brains. Messages that play back in our heads whenever we step outside “our place.” Messages that still proliferate from the media, from the institutions, from the christian church. To write or not to write is a painful struggle for us. For everything

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we write can be used against us. *For everything we write will be used against us.* And I'm not talking about bad reviews. I'm talking about the flak we receive from our own communities as well as the smug liberalism from the white, “literary” enclave. Writing is an act of courage for most. For us, it is an act that requires opening up our wounded communities, our families, to eyes and ears that do not love us. Is this madness? In a way it is—the madness of a Louis Riel, a Maria Campbell, a Pauline Johnson, a Crazy Horse—a revolutionary madness. A love that is greater than fear. A love that is as tender as it is fierce. Writing is also a gift. For me, it is a precious gift given me in my fortieth year of life on this earth. Along with the gift came instruction to use this gift on behalf of love. I feel a personal responsibility and a strong desire to tell the truth. Sometimes that desire is a physical craving as I sit in front of my machine, sweating, hurting, struggling with a *contra* language to conceive new words. I desire to make rage a living testament. I desire to heal. I desire to make a beauty out of circumstances that are not

beautiful. I desire truth.

I also want to share this desire. I want allies and lovers in this war against racism. I want honesty from allies and lovers. I want acts of love to be committed in all our languages.

It is said that the Mohawk language was first spoken by a woman, and it became her responsibility to teach all who came from her womb. Racism and homophobia were unknown words to her and her descendants. I have also heard and dreamed that her first words were those of thanks—thanks for the paradise that was entrusted to her care and respect—a trust that has been handed down story after story after story. The carriers of the bible book brought a new kind of story to us—a story that resounds with cacophony and cruelty. We are holding on to what is still intact—our spirit, our strength. And when I use the enemy's language to hold onto my strength as a Mohawk lesbian writer, I use it as my own instrument of power in this long, long battle against racism.

Nai: wen.

*From a panel titled “From the Outside Looking In—Racism and Writing,” given at the Gay Games Literary Festival—Crossing Borders, Vancouver, B.C., 1990.*

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<sup>1</sup>A notable exception is Richard Drinnon's book, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian Hating and Empire Building* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, 1980), an excellent analysis of racism from the “wild west” to the jungles of Vietnam. This book has been sadly neglected in favor of more palatable books on the “plight” of the Indian.

<sup>2</sup>Yet another panel on “Racism and Writing,” this one took place at West Words, a writing workshop for women held every year in Vancouver, B.C. Dionne spoke eloquently to the subject.