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## Abstract

Nothing is entirely separate, for we also participate in those events, you and I, standing or sitting and thinking of those specific individuals and actions, those particles and waves, interacting with my consciousness, as these words interact with yours, and you in your turn impinge on the quality and intensity of my experience, for my concern for you affects my care and approach to what I write. And in some similar fashion those others are constrained and influenced by our remote participation, their actions and attitudes touched [sic] and turned by my act of reiteration and your act of interpretation. Such loops are the links in a chain that binds the universe, even as it flies apart.

- Lionel Kearns, *Convergences*

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## Dialogue of Difference Speaking for the Other in Aboriginal Writing

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Over the past twenty years, globalization and technology have transformed the face of human society. Computers and the World Wide Web, as well as increasing migration, have brought millions of people into contact either in essence or in person. In the context of this increasingly complex global society, the question posed by literary theorists, “Who can speak for the Other?” becomes a tangled and thorny controversy. A particularly contentious area of this subject regards aboriginal writing, where the lines of Self and Other become problematic and vehemently contested. Who can write for the Other is complicated by the question of who can be deemed Other. Taking aboriginal writing issues in New Zealand as a representative focus, I will argue that the crucial importance of dissembling prejudiced and artificial boundaries and accepting cultural fluidity means allowing anyone to speak for the Other. Addressing the contentious issues of “authenticity,” “tradition” and “identification” requires that we face and embrace an ongoing dialogue across the racial and ethnic lines that can divide people so fiercely.

Aboriginal nations in Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand are separated by political borders and represent different cultures. Yet they have also shared quite similar experiences with Europeans and imparted similar impressions on the European imagination (King, 1987:10). Since the decolonization movement that followed the Second World War, minorities are no longer colonial subjects, and this has profoundly altered the methods and meaning of historical and anthropological studies of them (Geertz, 1988:34). Diasporas formal and informal have spread people across the globe, meaning that political boundaries no longer reflect cultural ones. For scholars fifty years ago, writes Clifford Geertz, subjects and audience were discrete entities, “not only separable but morally disconnected; [...] the first were to be described but not addressed, the second informed but not implicated [...] [This assumption] has [...] dissolved. The world has its compartments still, but the passages between them are much more numerous and much less well-secured” (Geertz, 1988:34). For the literary community, this change means that more and more writers today identify with multiple cultures (Fee, 1989:2). Identities are broad and inclusive; they may be contentious for individuals, but the very struggle involved often forges even stronger alliances and loyalty in the end. What emerges in the ideological framework of Self and Other, however, is a fractured and unstable division. Naming the Other is no longer a straightforward task, and consequently, deeming someone “qualified” to write as the Other is highly problematic.

Controversy surrounding New Zealand writer Keri Hulme’s novel *the bone people* (1983) offers an illuminating representation of the issues surrounding aboriginal writing and who can write for the Other. C.K. Stead has written a lucid critique of Hulme’s novel in which he objects to its selection as winner of the Pegasus Award for Maori Literature in 1984. Stead contests Hulme’s claim that she is Maori, arguing that only one of her eight grandparents was Maori and that she did not acquire any of the Maori language until adulthood. He remains unconvinced of the “authenticity” of her depiction of Maori characters in her novel, saying that elements of *the bone people* strike him as “willed, self-

conscious, not inevitable” (Stead, 1985:104). Stead is extremely cynical in his consideration of the merits of *the bone people*, commenting sardonically that Hulme’s professed connection with Maori is “not a disadvantageous identification at the present time” (Stead, 1985:103). His compulsion to draw lines and create boundaries is evident, and he is perfectly entitled to his own opinion. However, Stead himself mentions that others have met Hulme’s book with praise: in the *New Zealand Listener*, reviews by a Maori and a Pakeha (European) both commended Hulme for speaking for “us all,” “for all women” or “all Maoris” (Stead, 1985:101).

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Most significantly, this variety of responses to Hulme’s work highlights the subjectivity of the notion of “authenticity” itself. While Stead (though not Maori) takes offence at Hulme’s portrayal of New Zealand’s aboriginals, clearly other critics (Maori themselves) do not. Stead criticizes Hulme’s novel for the lack of “authenticity” he sees in it, but “authenticity” is a fraught and problematic term. There is no unequivocal indicator to say that any individual, however “purely” aboriginal his blood, is representative of his minority. Such an author’s voice is still only one voice and it is a subjective human voice shaped not just by race but by gender, class, culture, the media, education and experience. Fee suggests that Stead’s desire for greater “authenticity” from Hulme is really an expectation to be given the familiar images presented by White anthropologists and Pakeha writers, images that are taken from the subjects themselves (Fee, 1989:18).

“Authenticity” can come under fire when it does not conform to familiar and comfortable stereotypes. Fee astutely argues that:

The demand for “authenticity” denies Fourth World writers a living, changing culture. Their culture is deemed to be Other and must avoid crossing those fictionally but ideologically essential boundaries between Them and Us, the Exotic and the Familiar, the Past and the Future, the “Dying” and “the Living.” (Fee, 1989:17)

Arguments like Stead’s discourage fluidity and futurity, exhorting us to resist and deny the active, reactive nature of culture. The stronghold of boundaries constructed out of prejudice, fear or ignorance may be “ideologically essential,” but it is also “fictional.” As writers like Hulme challenge safe notions of the homogeneity and unchangingness of cultures, they demand an opening of passages between cultures, exposing the necessity of open negotiation and an acceptance of adaptability.

The issue of the “purity” of the Other is a difficult one. Instinctively, we want the Other to be pure, but this can never be so. There can never be a “pure” Other, as no minority is ever completely isolated from the influence of the dominant ideology (Fee, 1989:19). The notion of a “pure” subject is an idealistic fallacy:

The object of knowledge supposedly speaks authentically and unproblematically as a unified subject on behalf of the groups she or he represents. The question of irony, for example, does not arise. In the drive towards universalism one cannot afford to admit that those oppressed others whom we hear as speaking authentic experience might be playing textual games (Gunew, 1987:262).

Today, aboriginal writing is often an ironic presentation of “authenticity” which is in fact, as Snetja Gunew posits, a tactical and textual subversion of the majority’s authority. Aboriginal writing can be “radical” when it “is struggling [...] to reunite the dominant ideology from within, to produce a different version of reality” (Fee, 1989:19). Aboriginals’ use of the novel (a literary form of Whites) can be an assertive act of claiming something of the dominant culture and using it to their own ends. If such efforts are restricted because an author is not deemed “qualified” to speak for the Other, the result is a restriction of creativity itself. In our need for clarity and simplicity, we find ourselves in the constraints of essentialism. Aboriginal writing, whether it appropriates or resists the title of Oth-

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er, forces us to examine these instinctive needs. Works like *the bone people* impel us to look at the issue of identity and indigenous peoples, which is important considering the history of exploitation and appropriation that indigenous cultures have undergone (Fee, 1989:12). Airing, facing and discussing the question of the Other, who can speak for him and what constitutes aboriginal writing are crucial processes because they raise consciousness and sensitivity to these complex and often emotion-laden issues.

Nostalgic yearning for “tradition” and the expectation that aboriginal writers depict the “traditional” life of their minorities is being challenged by modern aboriginal writers. “Tradition” in itself is a word whose meaning must now be questioned. There can be no conclusive definition of “tradition” when it is lost with every generation; in another fifty years, “tradition” as it is seen today will have faded. Or perhaps a nation’s “traditional” life always denotes its pre-colonial past; in that case, it is unrecoverable. Expectations of “tradition” turn aboriginal writers into keepers of the “dying” cultures named by Fee; such demands place on them the burden of dwelling on the past and inhibit them from being politically conscious in the present and trying to change the future. I believe that anyone who has the desire to write about the experience of a culture should be encouraged, if only in the name of preserving tradition; more ideally, every such literary undertaking should aim to foster openness to new voices and novel experiences. If such a writer’s account is inaccurate, then his or her book will not be successful, will not win awards, will not attain longevity and will not be canonized. Other writers may contest it and counter it with their own views. If such a book is not even published, however, we enchain creativity and deny the right to personal expression, a much more dire consequence. By offering only a “selection” of what is written or allowing only certain “kinds” of books to be published, we are presenting a picture of what a certain culture *is*; in so doing, we impose a rigidly static identity on that culture that prohibits the fluidity, contest and internal discord inevitable in cultures today.

Closely connected to the themes of “authenticity” and “tradition” in aboriginal writing is that of identification. Critical literature on the Other continues to address the dimension of biological essentialism versus individual identification. In concrete terms, a person’s identity is often assigned on the basis of physical appearance. Problems arise when someone does not “look” like they belong to the group in which they claim membership. This is the challenge confronting Hulme and her autobiographical protagonist in *the bone people*: “the brown faces stare at her with bright unfriendly eyes [...]”. As always, she wants to whip out a certified copy of her whakapapa, preferably with illustrative photographs,” since her relatives “are much more Maori looking than she is” (Hulme, 112; quoted in Fee, 1989:14). The marks of identity must be on someone’s skin, their hair or eyes, to be valid; this is the injustice and difficulty addressed by mixed-race writers like Hulme. Reducing everything to racial terms reinforces biological essentialism (Fee, 1989:14). Under slavery, you were black if you had one drop of black blood in you; now, that historically racial standard is reversed so that to be Maori you must have *purely* Maori blood. Membership in the minority group becomes a badge it is *difficult* to obtain rather than an oppressive racist label one strives to avoid.

Counter to the argument promoting the primacy of biological essentialism is the notion of personal identification, a much more liberal definition that recognizes the significance of language and heritage. Hulme “feels by heart, spirit and inclination [...] all Maori” (Fee, 1989:16), a fact that reinforces her claim to Otherness. Her identification as a Maori, Fee argues, earns her the right to speak as a Maori. However, it can be argued that a person can be deluded in the belief of his or her representativeness; here it becomes useful to consider additional factors of identification. Geary Hobson, a Native American anthropologist and writer, includes writers of mixed blood in his anthology of native writings (Fee, 1989:16). He declares it is essential to consider not only the individual’s judgement of his identity, but also the judgement of his nation or community, that of the neighbouring non-native community, and that of the government (Fee, 1989:8).

Geary intelligently points out that if you isolate any of these identifications your judgement is limited. Considering the reception of Hulme's novel, it seems reasonable to identify her as Maori, Stead's criticism notwithstanding. Hulme feels Maori, she has Maori ancestry and is accepted as Maori by the Maori literary community and readers and by many Pakeha (Fee, 1989:16). Under these circumstances, it would be absurd to deny her the identification she claims. If there is objection to her writing, let it be voiced, let her depiction be countered by others. An ongoing dialectic between majority and minority and between disparate communities within the minority, is key. Refusing mixed-race writers like Hulme the title of Other and the opportunity to voice their experience denies them the space of marginality and the multiple subjectivities their position encompasses. Insistence on the homogeneity of culture is fallacious and backward.

Recognizing mixed-race writers as aboriginal can bestow on them a powerful political and cultural voice. In the case of Hulme, she did not even aim to write a "Maori" novel, but the expression of her individual experience has been embraced and praised by Maoris and Pakehas as an insightful and realistic portrayal. Hulme sees herself as Maori, and "to label her as Pakeha [because she is not "purely" Maori] discredits her vision, marginalizes her message, and buries her in a *tradition that can safely handle her*" (Fee, 1989:12; emphasis added). It is the human tendency to concretize difference that creates the constructs of Self and Other. Enclosing literature within the boundaries of these constructs attempts to create areas of *safety*, uncontested boxes of identities into which people can be slotted. Ultimately these divisions are too simplistic and oppressive. Issues of "authenticity," "tradition" and identification become increasingly debated because the identity of the Other is being seized and its voices, multitudinous and increasingly demanding, are being raised. This dialogue is noisy, but salutary, because it brings to light "the dubiousness of most commonplaces about indigenous identity" (Fee, 1989:11). It is these simplistic notions which must be challenged by a flexible and inclusive notion of the Other and who can speak for him.

Aboriginal writing, and mixed race writing in particular, addresses merely a fraction of the immense question of who can write for the Other. An expansion of this essay could not fail to address the issue of White people writing as the Other, an area of active and intense criticism in literary circles today. Confronting this situation raises disputable questions concerning the motivation, attitude and methods of such writers, and necessitates a consciousness of the power differentials between dominant and minority cultures. Even so, though the line between White and non-White may be sharper than that of part-White and part aboriginal, I would hold fast to my argument even in such circumstances. The vital importance of dissolving false and prejudiced boundaries and accepting the reality of cultural fluidity means agreeing that anyone can write as Other. If we deny writers this freedom of creation, if we say a White cannot write as a Black, then we must also declare that a woman cannot write as a man, a heterosexual as a homosexual, or an intellectual as a worker. The prospect of such censorship, in my opinion, makes worthwhile the risks inherent in granting all writers freedom of subject.

No one aboriginal author will ever be able to voice "the total truth" of his people, "because there is no such monolithic presence to deliver" (Fee, 1989:26). While acknowledging the variables of individual difference, it is likewise important to remember the ties that connect us all as human beings in "the links in a chain/that binds the universe" (Kearns n.p.; quoted in Mandel, 1987:36). Even as this chain naturally "flies apart," perpetual discussion of the concept of writing the Other can help bond its links together. Writing as the Other, writes Clifford Geertz, is "a task at which no one ever does more than not utterly fail" (Geertz, 1988:36), but it is the effort, the willingness to make the attempt, to clash and to question, that is important. Opening the consciousness of one group to the experiences of another, introducing unfamiliar or subversive narratives of minority experience, and agreeing to disagree about writers' representations of Otherness, is a challenge to which we must commit ourselves.

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