Margery Fee
The Social Work of Stories
in Aboriginal Culture in Canada

Zusammenfassung

Résumé
Marx assimile les "tricksters" — tel le coyote, héros de la culture amérindienne — au sous-prolétariat alors qu'Adam Smith percevait le travail des acteurs et des écrivains comme éphémère. Les conteurs considèrent cependant que les histoires qu'ils racontent comme étant à la fois une forme d'ouvrage et productrices de richesse. Un jugement récent de la Cour suprême du Canada stipule que le témoignage historique de tradition orale peut être admis dans les cas de revendications territoriales. Ces histoires, racontées par les groupes spécifiques, peuvent alors favoriser l'obtention de biens matériels. Les peuples amérindiens soutiennent que l'autenticité de telles histoires ne dépend nullement du témoignage d'experts non-autochtones mais plutôt d'un processus aborigène de validation d'histoires qui sont racontées lors de cérémonies faites en présence d'individus capables d'attester de la vérité de celles-ci. Afin d'illustrer ces éléments, plusieurs conteurs et histoires, incluant celles de Harry Robinson et de Jeannette Armstrong, sont considérés dans cet article.
If stories in Aboriginal culture and the idea of work are to be brought together, perhaps I should begin by staging an encounter between the Aboriginal trickster and culture-hero, Coyote, and that heroic theorist of work, Karl Marx. Coyote's relation to work is problematic, that's for sure. Do tricksters work? Marx does locate Coyote in a social class, but it is predictably the "lumpenproletariat", which forms the "scum, offal, refuse of all classes":

Alongside decayed roues with dubious means of subsistence and of dubious origin, alongside ruined and adventurous offshoots of the bourgeoisie, were vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds, escaped galley slaves, swindlers, mountebanks, lazarouni, pickpockets, tricksters, gamblers, maquereaus, brothel keepers, porters, literati, organ-grinders, ragpickers, knife grinders, tinkers, beggars in short, the whole indefinite, disintegrated mass, thrown hither and thither, which the French term la bohème (Marx, 1963, p. 75).  

Marx, like Adam Smith in The Wealth of Nations, describes this group as simply circulating goods, rather than producing value. This group, like Coyote, lives by its wits. In it, Smith includes the Sovereign, the armed forces, and also "men of letters of all kinds" and the actor, whose work "perishes in the very instant of its production" (qtd. Parker, 1998, p. 232). Thus, men and women of letters fall into the same category as Coyote; apparently, as Native writer Thomas King would say, "this world is full of Coyotes" (King, 1993, p. 272). But although Coyote does some very bad things, he (or she) also brought many good things to the people. So do oral storytellers. How can it be that they don't produce any value?

John Guillory tackles this problem in Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation, where he says of Kant's aesthetic theory that his focus on the connection between natural beauty and artistic beauty forecloses on the market, as the consumer of natural beauty normally does not have to pay for it: "beauty never passes through the market, and can never be assigned a value in exchange, because it is a form of production which is not 'work'" (Guillory, 1993, p. 319). But, Guillory points out, the split between art object and commodity (or our worry that all good things are being commodified) is a problem caused by the use of money to measure the value of everything:

The premise of our social life is the absolute commensurability of everything. ... In fact, it is only the money-form which permits such commensuration, as it is entirely possible to conceive of different kinds of 'good,' of objects which never need to be placed on the same scale of value, which need never be compared at all (Guillory, 1993, p. 323; see also Hensel, 1996, pp. 7-14).

Pierre Bourdieu talks about goods such as art, literature, and stories as having dual value: "Symbolic goods are a two-faced object; their specifically cultural value and their commercial value remain relatively independent although the economic sanction may come to reinforce their cultural consecration" (qtd. Guillory, 1993, p. 325). However, he notes a distinction between the painting or objet d'art, where value resides in part in its being a kind, and stories or texts, noting that "it is difficult to fix the price of work in the verbal arts according to the principle of rarity that determined the price of plastic art" (qtd. Guillory, 1993, p. 329). Anyone can learn a story and tell it to someone else, and access to written stories, with the rise of mechanical production of cheap editions of books, has become easy. But, as Bourdieu points out, the dominant classes were able to restrict access to the verbal arts not by raising their price, but by restricting access to the means by which they could be deciphered, that is, to the kind of education required to understand them. Thus class distinction in the contemporary West is based on taste, a taste regulated by education. Not everyone can read a sonnet or a Shakespeare play and understand it, and not everyone can listen to an oral story and understand it either. Those who can read (or pretend to have read) Shakespeare have what Bourdieu calls "cultural capital." Guillory describes this as, in part, "symbolic capital, a kind of knowledge capital whose possession can be displayed upon request and which thereby entitles its possessor to the cultural and material rewards of the well-educated person" (Guillory, 1993, p. ix). Similarly, those who can understand and tell oral stories have cultural capital. Mrs. Angela Sidney comments to Julie Cruikshank, "I have no money to leave to my grandchildren. My stories are my wealth" (Cruikshank, 1990 p. 36).

This need to educate taste explains the emphasis on the part of the oral storytellers that I am examining that their works be made accessible to children in the schools. The three women who told the stories to Cruikshank collected in Life Lived Like a Story, Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned, were quite clear that the main object of their telling stories was to educate their grandchildren, and that this meant telling the stories in English and having them printed:

Although enthusiasm for Native language instruction in Yukon schools has been growing during the 1980s, it is still the case that all Yukon Native children begin school with English as their first language. These narrators want to produce booklets that their grandchildren can read. Their own childhood instruction came either from observation or from oral tradition, but they recognize that children now learn from books. Mrs. Smith explained her motives for recording her stories with reference to a great-grandchild: 'Well, she's six years old now. She's going to start school now. Pretty soon paper's going to talk to her!' Schools teach things totally outside the experience of elders; stories, on the other hand, recreate the life cycle. Women see their books of stories as a connection between the world of tradition and the school's 'paper world' and feel that, thus legitimized, the stories should be part of the school curriculum (Cruikshank, 1990, p. 16).

They know, just as well as Bourdieu, that "The educational system, claiming a monopoly over the consecration of the past and over the production and consecration of cultural consumers, only posthumously accords that infallible mark of consecration, the elevation of works into 'classics' by their inclusion in curricula" (qtd.  

Guillory, 1993, p. 339). The struggle over Native education has gone on a long time – church and government residential schools took children away from their cultures, and the position paper produced by the National Indian Brotherhood, Indian Control of Education (1973), was an important moment in the move to return control of education to Native communities. Revelations of abuse in the residential schools and the movement for redress have been a preoccupation of the last decade: many literary works, including Tomson Highway’s *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and Shirley Sterling’s *My Name Is Séepeetza* on the personal and cultural destruction caused by these schools. Native stories, then, have become central in the education of the young, who will reproduce Native culture. This book has status as culturally consecrated objects, classics, but they also convey cultural knowledge, history, politics, and ethics. As Cruikshank says,

An ultimate value of oral tradition was to recreate a situation for someone who had not lived through it so that the listener could benefit directly from the narrator’s experience. Mrs. Ned notes emphatically that ‘old-style words are just like school!’ Mrs. Smith regularly punctuates her account with the comment ‘Young girls, I could teach them!’ And Mrs. Sidney points to the value of story models in her compelling statement that she has tried to live her life ‘just like a story.’ The persistence of stories and storytelling suggests that oral narrative is central to an indigenous intellectual tradition and provides the core of an educational model (Cruikshank, 1990, p. 340)

Traditionally, the old told stories to the young. Harry Robinson, as a child, looked after his partially blind grandmother while his mother worked: “Somebody’s got to be with her all the time. And when we’re together just by ourselves, she’d tell me, ‘Come here.’ And I sit here while she hold me. And she’d tell me stories, kinda slow. She wanted me to understand good.” (Robinson, 1989, p. 12). Because the nearest school was twelve miles away, Robinson stopped attending, only learning to read when he was twenty-two. But he could tell many more stories than the hundred recorded by Wendy Wickwire, a selection of which is published in *Write It on Your Heart: The Epic World of an Okanagan Storyteller* (1989) and *Nature Power* (1992). He told Wickwire that he "could tell stories for 'twenty-one hours or more' when he got started. 'Kinda hard to believe,' he continued, 'but I do, because this is my job. I'm a storyteller.'" (Robinson, 1989, pp. 13-14) He had not always been a story-teller, having spent most of his life as a rancher: "I feed stock from January 2, 1917 until 1972 – over fifty years I feed cattle without missing a day in feeding season, rain or shine, snow or blizzards, Sundays, holidays and funerals" (Robinson, 1989, p. 13). He, unlike Marx, knew that ranching and storytelling were both labour, and that both produced value.

My title alludes to Cruikshank’s book *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative Knowledge in the Yukon Territory* which is a reflection on how the stories that she collected from Mrs. Sidney, Mrs. Ned and Mrs. Smith functioned in the community. Part of her work deals with the ways in which traditional stories are used by their tellers to suit new circumstances: her prime example is of the ways in which the "same" traditional story of Kaa’ax’ch’gook was told by Angela Sidney in three different circumstances with three very different communicative purposes. Kaa’ax’ch’gook was a traditional hero-ancestor of the Tlingit Kiks.adi clan who went out hunting sea mammals, received a sign that this was an auspicious time for hunting and returned home. However, when his family began to suffer from hunger, he defied the omen, went out, and was blown off course with his nephews onto an island. They spent some time there, but Kaa’ax’ch’gook finally, by plotting the rising of the sun and the stars, was able to get them home successfully. In singing the account of his travels he says "I gave up hope and then I dreamed that I was home" (Cruikshank, 1998, p. 35). The first version of this story that Mrs. Sidney told Cruikshank was recorded in 1974 and published in a booklet designed for use in the schools. However, once Mrs. Sidney knew that Cruikshank knew and understood a traditional tale, she then never told it in full to her again, but used it as a reference point. Once, she explained how she had used this story in another way when her son had been away fighting in World War II for five years, and she wanted to celebrate his return. She decided to sing the Kaa’ax’ch’gook song. However, her right to sing the song was challenged by "the men of her father’s clan who were senior to her" (Cruikshank, 1998, p. 37). Rights to songs and stories are often connected to clan membership, traced through the maternal line. Thus, she and they were of different clans. She argued that in fact, this story had been given to her clan during a dispute as a ransom for a man her clan had captured: "Because songs are among the most important property owned by clans, the dispute was considered settled" (Cruikshank, 1998, p. 38; see also Keesig-Tobias, 1997, on the ownership of stories). She consulted on the propriety of her using this song with several elders in order to claim the right to use it as she had. Much later, in her eighties, she again used it at a public occasion: by this time she was a famous storyteller, a member of the Order of Canada, the inspiration for the founding of the Yukon International Storytelling Festival, and, as Cruikshank puts it, "no one was going to challenge her right to tell whatever story she chose" (Cruikshank, 1998, p. 39). She was asked to perform at the opening of Yukon College in 1988, and again she chose the story of Kaa’ax’ch’gook. Her comment on why she chose this story again connects stories with education: "The reason I sang this song, is because that Yukon College is going to be like the Sun for the students. Instead of going to Vancouver or Victoria, they’re going to be able to stay here and go to school here. We’re not going to lose our kids anymore. It’s going to be like the Sun for them, just like for that Kaa’ax’ch’gook." (Cruikshank, 1998, p. 40)

Cruikshank’s books show how stories are used to construct social meaning in particular contexts, how the storytellers used them as a "kind of cultural scaffolding on which to construct the story of her own life" (Cruikshank, 1998, p. 41). These stories not only carry meaning – how to survive by being observant, say – but can also be deployed as consecrated objects to add meaning to other social events, or, as Cruikshank puts it, "you learn what the story can do when it is engaged in a strategy of communication" (Cruikshank, 1998, p. 41).

Cruikshank’s three collaborators directed the material they produced towards their families, as a way of locating them in a traditional kinship network, and towards the young people of their community more generally, to preserve the cul-
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Deisheetaan owns Beaver: just like the British have a flag, we have Beaver and we have our own songs – they belong to us. This is the story about it. They say there was a little lake behind Angoon. Beaver owned that place - a beaver lake. Here, one time, somebody saved a little beaver and Deisheetaan people raised it. When it got big, that chief said to let it go. But Beaver dammed it up they say – he dammed up the creek, and when he did that, it raises the lake. He made tunnels all over the place, under the town. And when he slapped his tail and when he dived, the wave from that goes into the tunnel. And one time the town sank ... caved in ... too many holes. He made a great wave which drowned most people. That wave just washed our Angoon. So those who survived made a song about Beaver. The words of it are:

Who was smart enough to stop [advise against] this city at the sandy beach?
Are you going to save your Crow?
Is that why you are crying about it, Wolf, dear Wolf?
We own that song: it’s like our flag (Cruikshank, 1990, pp. 37-38).

To understand this story, one must understand the clan system of the region, but even without insider knowledge, the function of this story to consolidate a community identity (it’s like our flag) becomes clear. And Laura Goldsmith had learned to tell a version of it, establishing a Native identity in the face of the residential school's attempt at assimilation. However, there's more. Laura Goldsmith begins her story with the tag, "This is a true story." We smile at this, because it is, in our terms anyway, obviously a mythical story or a children's story. We might say that it does speak of relations between people and animals that blur the border between human and animal that is so important to us, and that arguably might explain the difference in ecological awareness of Native people, who regard animals as part – and a very important part – of their spiritual and social system, but we are still unlikely to regard this story as true in the sense that Laura states it is.

However, this story is, in fact, a very important type of story; it is a story that is not just like a flag in a metaphorical sense, but in fact is a story of the sort that may well lead to the acknowledgement of national territory for a First Nation by the Canadian state. On December 11, 1997, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that in Delgamuukw v. R., a case put forward in British Columbia by the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs to uphold their claim to their traditional territories, that the judge, Allan McEachern, had erred in refusing to accept the oral history evidence in that case. In his ruling, the Right Honourable Antonio Lamer, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, summarized the reasons given in the McEachern judgements, and assessed their impact on the admissibility of oral history evidence:

Although he framed his ruling in terms of the specific oral histories before him, in my respectful opinion, the trial judge ... in reality based his opinion on some general concerns with the use of oral histories as evi-
dence in aboriginal rights cases. In summary, the trial judge gave no independent weight to these special oral histories because they did not accurately convey historical truth, because knowledge about these oral histories was confined to the communities whose histories they were and because those oral histories were insufficiently detailed. However these are features, to a greater or lesser extent, of all oral histories. The implication of the trial judge's reasoning is that oral histories should never be given any independent weight and are only useful as confirmatory evidence in aboriginal rights litigation. I fear that if this reasoning were followed, the oral histories of aboriginal people would be consistently and systematically undervalued by the Canadian legal system (Culhane, 1998, pp. 361-62).

In his opening statement to the court in the original trial, in May 1987, Chief Delgam Uukw comments on the nature of this oral history: "My power is carried in my House's histories, songs, dances and crests. It is recreated at the Feast when the histories are told, the songs and dances performed, and the crests displayed" (Wa, 1989, pp. 7-8). (The Feast he refers to here was popularly called the potlatch, and was banned by the federal government between 1885 and 1951; see Bracken, 1997). He continues:

You will hear how each Gitksan House is identified by its crests, images that encapsulate and provide a visual record of the major historical events experienced by the ancestors of this group. The Gitksan crests, ayaks, commemorate the group's origins, odysseys from ancient villages, moments when the people drew upon the assistance of spirit power, the defeat of the neighbouring peoples who threatened their security, of the discovery of new ways to survive the natural disasters they periodically experienced. With the crest goes the ada'ox, the verbal record of the event. Key images within the ada'ox are evoked by songs, limx'ox', that come out of the ancient past, literally from the breaths of the ancestors, to take the listener back in time by the very quality of their music and the emotions they convey (Wa, 1989, pp. 25-26).

What the ada'ox are for the Gitksan, the kungax, the trails of song are for the Wet'suwet'en (Wa, 1989, p. 30).

During the course of the trial (and now a complete new trial has been ordered) some archaeological evidence was produced to support events mentioned in the ada'ox:

For example, the Gitksan ada'ox of Medeek describes the destruction of Temlaxam by a terrible force which ripped through the forest, bringing down trees in its wake and causing a rapid rise in the waters of a nearby lake. This destructive force is attributed in the ada'ox to a giant grizzly bear. The ada'ox describes this in graphic detail. Using the detail of the account in terms of the nature of the event and its physical loca-

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ences exist from one culture to the other (it should be remembered that the languages of this coast vary far more than the languages of Europe).

A good deal of the debate in the Delgamuukw case was over the concept of what were called "frozen rights," or the restriction of the rights under discussion to the assertion of only those Aboriginal activities that took place before contact, or sometimes, before the assertion of British rule. This fits with the idea that pure indigenousness existed only before contact, and that it subsequently has vanished under the impact of Western culture. But First Nations people are still producing stories, as they still have a living culture. They are also still passing on songs and stories according to traditional rules. They never stopped eating fish during the long period when it was against the law, and when to hold such feasts meant to risk jail. Jeannette Armstrong's story, called "This Is a Story" begins in a familiar way "This story happened a long time ago. It's real" (Armstrong, 1990, p. 129). As Wendy Wickwire says of Harry Robinson's stories "All the stories are considered true stories. In fact, Harry, in the tradition of Okanagan storytelling, would never dream of making up a story" (Robinson, 1990, p. 16). This story is about the Okanagan people, and tells about the second time that Kyoti came up the Okanagan River. The first time, he came to give salmon to the people. Having just woken up from an "unusually short nap" he is coming up the river again, looking for a great salmon feast. But he finds that the People no longer speak their language, and he is confronted by great barriers across the rivers that block the fish. When he asks for something to eat from two men who are fishing, they laugh at him, and he complains "I'm hungry and you don't even offer me anything to eat". "Well that shamed those guys out. Even though they weren't quite sure of what Kyoti was talking about. One of them said 'Cheeze, you could just sit that in the first place. We're Indians. Come on, we'll go over to the house and feed you up'" (Armstrong, 1990, p. 131). Despite changes, they are still holding to the rules for hospitality. And in the village of Nespelem, Kyoti finds an old woman who still speaks the language and who, weeping, explains what has happened to the salmon. Kyoti goes further up the river and at one point suggests to a headman that he just break the dams (this is what Coyote actually does in Thomas King's Green Grass, Running Water). But the headman says "We gotta work with them [white people] now, even if we don't exactly like what they do ... That's how it is, we can't go back to old times, we don't know about that ... We just got to try harder to be like them. So get outta here. You're not real anyway. You're just a dream of the old People" (Armstrong, 1990, p. 133). But Kyoti persists, and promises a young Salmon Chief, who is still watching for the first salmon to come up a river that has been blocked off by dams and killed by pollution, that he will destroy the dams. The story ends this way: "That story happened. I tell you that much. It's a powerful one. I tell it now because it's true. Sometimes I think of that story and that morning at Owl Rock, when I see rainbow colours in the oil slicks along the river, during salmon-run time in the Okanagan, and I feel the ground shake ever so little" (Armstrong, 1990, p. 135). A recent collection called First Fish, First People: Salmon Tales of the North Pacific Rim contains writings, photographs, poems and polemics from members of salmon cultures in Canada, the United States, and Japan. All tell the same story, of being cut of from their main source of food and thus from a huge range of cultural practices surrounding the salmon, both by ecological destruction (dams, clearcutting, effluent from pulp mills, oil spills, raw sewage, urbanization, and the introduction of foreign fish species, including Atlantic salmon escaped from fish farms) and fisheries laws, including the international salmon treaties. In this collection, Armstrong notes that all five species of salmon are at risk and in the Okanagan valley "salmon have utterly disappeared, except for the several dozen miracle sockeye which somehow battle courageously over the many U.S. dams on the Columbia River and its tributaries to reach us" (Armstrong, 1998, pp. 181-82). As she points out, Aboriginal fishing rights don't mean much if there are no fish, and to add insult to injury, the Aboriginal fishery is frequently blamed for the destruction of the resource by sports and commercial fishermen. Finally she points out that while local communities are attempting to restore salmon spawning streams and rivers, the beneficiaries of these efforts are, in fact, large multinational fishing companies. Here again we see the connection between stories, land, and work. The stories maintain the links between the Salmon People and human beings. The value of a sustainable salmon resource cannot be measured only in monetary terms, but must be examined in a value system that takes into account whole ancient cultures and their survival on their traditional territories.

In conclusion, I am going to touch on a range of papers that discuss how different conceptions of art and of the role of the artist in society may affect the way we understand the social work of Aboriginal oral stories. Barbara Godard's article, "Feminist Speculations on Value: Culture in an Age of Downsizing," talks about the ways in which the view of the artist as individual hero by grants agencies makes it difficult for women to build community or engage in political activism. Stephen Muecke argues in "Aboriginal Literature and the Repressive Hypothesis" that the repression-expression theory produces the Aboriginal as an individual coming to consciousness and Aboriginal texts as evidence of liberation for the group at a universal human level. However, he notes that these assumptions elide the forces of production and consumption. Since publication is, for the most part, directly controlled by non-Aboriginals, and indirectly by dominant discourses, familiar genres, and popular subject matter, those Indigenous writers who write or speak are constrained in a variety of ways: free expression is not only an impossible ideal, but it blinds us to the interesting ways that Indigenous writers negotiate with the mainstream to position their literature in a way that works for their communities. Muecke remarks that "rather than seeing the text as a place where the desire to speak is liberated, it could be seen as a site of multiple constraints pertaining both to form and contextual relations" (Muecke, 1988, p. 417). He says that readings of literature should be aware of "distinctive repertoires of knowledges, different readerships and the ideological pressures which privilege different ways of reading" (Muecke, 1988, p. 418). He says that "if one wanted to make a cross cultural comparison with the production of Aboriginal texts, then it is in marked contrast to the situation where 'custodianship' tends to displace 'authorship,' where individual subjects are socially positioned as the repeaters of traditions rather than the sources of original or creative material" (Muecke, 1988, p. 406). Crouch and Elizabeth Fumiss who notes that economic inequality in communities originates not just in racism or in economics: "It is maintained and reproduced through manipulation of
symbols and by the power to control representations that allows one sector of society (settlers who define themselves as 'pioneers') to control the images and the public identities of others (whom they collectively lump as 'Indians') without their input' (qtd. Cruikshank, 1998, p. 164). Cruikshank comments that "the need to reclaim control over representation has led to a 'virtual explosion' of cultural projects, including oral histories, storytelling festivals, films, plays, cultural documentation" and remarks that "the process whereby young people take on, reenact or reincorporate stories during successive hearings over the course of their lives, making them their own, is one that long preceded writing but that may be extended by writing, film, and other artistic production when elders are no longer living to tell the stories themselves" (Cruikshank, 1998, p. 165).

How then, do First Nations stories work? Stories, like all cultural products (as Marx himself was quite aware), cannot be reduced to one simple function or category. The stories are, as Robert Bringhurst suggests, the way "people think themselves in myths," an "intellectual bioregion" (Bringhurst, 1999, pp. 16, 17). The telling of stories not only keeps Aboriginal cultures alive, but also helps them innovate and flourish in a modern world that would like to see Aboriginal culture as past. From one perspective, stories can be seen as producing capital in the form of land. However, this is a non-Native perspective, since the First Nations believe the land has always been theirs. The stories manifest the power of that belief.

Notes

Thanks to Gernot Wieland for translating the abstract into German and for his useful comments on the First Nations view of land ownership. Thanks to Alain-Michel Rocheleau for translating the abstract into French. Any errors in either are due to my faulty transcription.

1 Marx used the German word "Taschemenspieler" here, and was certainly not referring to Native American tricksters. However, I have no doubt that if he had been asked to put Coyote into a social class, the lumpenproletariat would have been his choice.

References


British Columbia Native Arts Society, 1973, Tales from the Longhouse by Indian Children of British Columbia, Sidney BC: Gray's.