

We Are Waiting for You Whites to Tell Us Your Stories

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In *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories*, Ted Chamberlin wants to persuade non-Aboriginal Canadians to acknowledge Aboriginal title to the land. This is a new idea and a radical project. Ted reassures the fearful that title to the land is a fiction and would not change anything, but, of course, it would also change everything, because it would change how non-Aboriginal Canadians think of Aboriginals and of themselves. *We* (Euro-Canadians, Ted's 'We') would need a new story, one that took in *their* story. But to have a new story or to receive another's story, people must first realize their own need for stories.

There is something counter-intuitive here, even scandalously so. The premise of most current criticism is that only white English-Canadians have been allowed to tell their story; their story has been propagated as the only story; and those on the margins with different faces and speaking in different languages or with different accents have had their stories silenced or, in the case of Aboriginals, taken away from them. As Mongane Wally Serote puts it, in a different context:

White people are white people,
They must learn to listen.
Black people are black people,
They must learn to talk. (41)

Ted, however, makes the opposite assumption: that manifestly it is Aboriginals who have stories—stories are what they base their relation to the land and their awareness of themselves as humans on—and that it is white Canadians who have forgotten that they have stories and have allowed themselves to go silent. White Canadians have too readily accepted that, unlike Aboriginals, who think in such simple and untranslatable forms as story and song, they themselves explain the world and their place in it in terms of the law or in terms of history and science, number and fact. Ted believes the problem is not with history and science but with how these have been understood. Canadians have let scientists and accountants do the thinking for them, let government represent them, and let history books do the telling for them. Most criticism assumes that Aboriginals have been dispossessed by the settlers' illegitimate claim to the land. But Ted assumes Aboriginals have never been dispossessed in spirit: they know who they are and where they are because they tell

stories. It is white Canadians who have forgotten their stories, or rather have forgotten that they have them.

The Mozambican Mia Couto also understands that stories are the property of the dispossessed and that the dominant classes resist story. In his magic realist novel *The Last Flight of the Flamingo*, the narrator serves as an interpreter to an Italian sent by the United Nations to investigate the mysterious disappearance of UN peacekeepers. The narrator patiently explains to Massimo Risi that he is going about his investigation all wrong:

- Another thing: you ask too many questions. Truth escapes many questions.
- How can I get answers if I don't ask questions?
- Do you know what you should do? You should tell your story. We are waiting for you whites to tell us your stories.
- A story? I don't know any stories.
- You do, you must know. Even the dead know. They tell stories through the mouths of the living. (84)

Massimo, who approaches truth as a detective would, confident that his interrogations will eliminate all that is false and leave only the one true explanation based on commonsense causality, does not understand that “truth has long legs and treads the path of deceit” (83). Couto presumes a distinction between European ways of knowing, based on the separation of the knower from the world he seeks to know, and African ways, based on story-telling, that locate the knower in the world. The European seeks knowledge by eliminating mystery, while African story-telling accepts mystery as integral to any knowledge of the world.

White Canadians, of course, like to think that they invented UN peace-keeping. They believe that, while others spend their years as a tale that is told (the title of Isabel Hofmeyr's study of South African oral traditions), they themselves perform the useful function of standing apart and mediating. In some respects, this makes white Canadians the quintessential critics, processing and interpreting the tales of others. Ted, however, is a Canadian *and* a critic who eschews the role of critic in favour of that of story-teller.

The title *If This is Your Land Where Are Your Stories?* is a challenge that Ted once heard from an Aboriginal elder. Instead of taking it to mean “You have no stories, so this cannot be your land,” Ted accepts the challenge and sets out to prove that white Canadians also have stories. But his intention is to prove it to white Canadians themselves. This is not an exercise in hegemonic discourse, proving title by controlling the master narrative. On the contrary, Ted feels that only by telling a story does one open oneself to hearing a story. Ted believes that, if white Canadians are to find common ground with Aboriginals, they must *first lay claim to the land themselves*, not as property but the same way Aboriginals claim the land, in the form of stories. To stake a claim based on stories is to accept the legitimacy of stories as ways of knowing and being. When non-

Aboriginal Canadians can say, “This *is* our land and here are our stories to prove it,” they will also be saying, “So tell us *your* stories.”

To accept the elder’s challenge is to accept stories as the very ground of legitimacy, and thus to change the way we look at the ground. Ted seeks a home for New World whites, people who must first be convinced that they need a home. And, even more radically and paradoxically, he argues that Aboriginals and New World blacks will not have a home until New World whites recognize how much they themselves are in need of a home. In staking a claim to the land, Ted opposes much recent criticism, which values exile, diaspora and migration for the promise that they hold out of critical detachment and the possibilities of self-invention. Ted’s notion of home is not opposed to exile. The home/exile binary is an absolute one, such as he mistrusts. Instead he wants to find us a home that, like story, includes conflict and contradiction. This is what this book does: it offers a home to white Canadians, as familiar as the favourite foods from childhood, as strange (to me at least) as grizzlies and cowboys, and, of course, a home that recognizes Aboriginal title.

Try as I might, I find it a great effort to speak as Ted does of We and Us. I prefer the terms “self” and “other,” abstract, analytical terms that allow me to pretend to step outside the binary. To write of self and other is to abjure one’s own story. In Ted’s terms, it is to renounce a claim to the land, presumably in order to better float free of the land. Ted, however, believes that we must make a claim. We must join those for whom a claim on the land is their lifeblood. To make a claim is to tell a story, and to do that the claimants must write of Us. Ted abjures the superiority that comes from seeing more clearly than others and appeals to white Canadians *where they are*. Only thus will it be possible to persuade them that where they are is not where they think they are.

Those of us who are white Canadians, Ted urges, must learn to think of ourselves differently, and to do this, it helps to look in the unfamiliar mirror of cultural others, those who have always thought of themselves differently. Ted’s project is to persuade non-Aboriginal Canadians how much we ourselves already are like Aboriginals. White Canadians also spend our years as a tale that is told. It is a mistake, says Ted, to think that We have reason and They have myth; We have science and They have magic; We have history and They have story. Instead we must learn that We, like They, rely on songs and stories, not to tame or order the world, but precisely to make us face the mystery and the paradox of our humanity. If we recognize how We are the same as Them, that we too need homes and tell stories, then We can appreciate what They have suffered in having their homes, their languages, and their stories taken from them. We must learn that we are in need of the same things they need: they need stories and ceremonies, and an audience of their own gods bearing witness to the atrocities inflicted upon them.

In order to persuade readers that those of us who are white also have stories, Ted spends the greater part of his book breaking down the

distinction that he relies on between Us and Them, not because there is no distinction, but because the distinction is not what it is usually thought to be. Ted does not prove that They are like Us: the differences are real and matter. Their stories are not ours. Nor does he argue that We should be like Them: idealization can be as dangerous as contempt. Instead, Ted says, it is necessary to appreciate the strangeness of Them and their ceremonies. That is what he means when he says belligerent conservatives ask better questions than sympathetic liberals (21). Only if we look point blank at what is strange in Their ceremonies can we appreciate what is strange in Ours. And then we can see that They are not like Us but We are like Them.

Ted's preferred strategy is to break down binary oppositions by showing that both elements already contain each other. He shows, for instance, that oral cultures all have forms of writing while written cultures all use speech; nomads stake claims to the land, settlers are wanderers; and there is no culture that does not use both lines and circles to understand the world. All understandings of the world work with both particulars and universals. The distinction between culture and anarchy is another binary Ted explodes: culture is always anarchy. I think this way of breaking down binaries provides a valuable way of looking at something like the magic realism of Mia Couto. Too often criticism of magic realism relies on a distinction between Their magic and Our realism. This criticism assumes that magic is Their realism, that is, magic is a direct mirror in which They perceive the world, only They see spirits where We do not. But this is a mistake. Realism is not the real, and neither is magic realism. As Ted writes, the neolithic painters in Chauvet Cave knew all about painting: they were not painting horses and buffalos but paintings of horses and buffalos. Magic and realism are both modes of story-telling. Rather than seeing magic as *their* realism, it makes more sense to say that realism is *our* magic. After all, what could be stronger magic than the nation-state, that modern phenomenon brought into being by the magic of newspapers, novels, and history books and nowhere visible yet somehow able to speak to citizens in their hearts and win their love?

Much literary theory deconstructs the distinction between self and other, proving that it is mere ideology. It then seeks a space outside ideology in ever greater self-consciousness. As long as I write about "self" and "other," I lay claim to a position outside both. And even when I acknowledge my own subject position, admitting my implication is a way of presuming common ground with the reader and thus a way of pretending to escape implication, of saying, in effect, "See, I, like you, know about race privilege and the patriarchal dividend, therefore we are outside the system. Do not confuse me with *them*." Typically, literary critics are careful to avoid the shameful association with the bulk of society, described as mainstream or hegemonic and scorned as bourgeois. For instance, in *Imperial Leather*, Anne McClintock's critical study of the intersections of colonialism and patriarchy in Britain and Southern Africa,

she repeatedly uses “we” when she speaks of women but never when referring to whites. She insists on her identification with the oppressed with whom she shares a gender, even when the women that she writes about are of a different race or class than herself, and she never acknowledges an identity with the oppressor with whom she shares race and a cultural background. When discussing white colonizers, McClintock, like most of us, is careful to speak in the third person, of “they.” Ted, however, believes that common ground is not to be found by pretending the likeminded can meet somewhere else, in some neutral space. In order to persuade his fellow white Canadians he must stand where they stand (and show us where it is that we stand).

Most criticism assumes an impossible distance between the oppressor and the oppressed that can only be traversed if the oppressor surrenders his position of power. The rhetorical and political force of this is to discern a gulf between those who see correctly and those who remain blind. Theory provides the critic with certain compensations, especially a sense of mastery (I know better) and virtue (I am on the side of the right thinkers). Theory also exacts a toll: it can easily make a reader feel “I must be stupid because I do not understand” or, just as likely, “I had better watch what I say lest I prove I do not belong among the right thinkers, after all.” In other words, being a critic is often like being a UN peacekeeper or a Canadian who has not yet made a claim to the land.

Literary criticism regularly bemoans its own hermeticism and its distance from those it writes *about*—even if the subaltern were to speak, no one would dream of speaking to her—but criticism evinces little concern for reaching those it writes *against*: the white bourgeois middle classes in a position to identify with the nation. Ted, on the other hand, addresses readers who are not versed in ideological deconstruction and social analysis and who do not already know what they must think. I find that part of his book embarrassing: I am forced to respond to this Us. It is not so difficult as a critic to say I am a white Canadian if that admission implicitly sets me apart from others as someone who *knows* what Canadianness is. But to say I am a white Canadian *just like everyone else*... that’s harder. Yet when I read Ted, I feel invited to join this Us that he wants to recreate. This is no small feat because I am uncomfortable telling stories about myself: I feel that my story should not get in the way of my understanding. My own instincts as a critic are to seek distance—not detachment, which implies an impossible neutrality, and not objectivity, which implies a single truth that all agree upon—but an ever greater self-consciousness. I am frequently sceptical of appeals to personal experience, a scepticism I justify by saying experience is never raw and unprocessed but is a narrative and necessarily an ideological construction. Of course, my cherished self-consciousness is itself inseparable from my experience: it has been fostered by the amount of time I spend by myself in libraries and by the kind of thing I write, which only a few likeminded ever read. If I was to tell my story, it would inevitably be not communal

but confessional (see what I mean?). I am, in other words, a UN peacekeeper at heart. A critic in a blue helmet who says, “Don’t mind me: don’t let my story get in the way of you telling your stories.” Reading Romeo Dallaire’s *Shake Hands with the Devil*, I found myself impatient. It was such a Canadian story, so well-meaning, so naïve in the face of the deepest and darkest human mysteries, so inadequate. It was also too close to home.

Ted invites me back into the human fold. Literary criticism betrays its modern European origins when it assumes that there is only representation, which involves standing apart from the world and creating a model of it. Post-structuralist critics are able to explain how representation works and how it is inevitably riddled with ideology and wish-fulfilment, but always the focus is on representation and the goal remains to stand outside. For all their sophistication, poststructuralist critics are still critics, seeking power over what they describe. Most literary scholars—it can hardly be a secret—do not love literature. Ted does. Certainly, most critics would not say, as Ted does, that their job is to tell stories; I would have said my job was to foster critical thinking. Susan Sontag argues that literary criticism is the revenge of the intellect against art. Ted, however, believes that we cannot understand what They, Aboriginals in Canada and Australia, or Rastafarians, or the !Khomani people in the Kalahari, are doing unless we appreciate how much it is a question of story and ceremony and ultimately of belief, and how at the heart of it there is not ideological mystification but the reverse: paradox and mystery. And we can only understand this if we understand that our own stories (and for that matter, those things of our own, like math and science, that do not look like stories but are) fulfil similar needs.

Ted’s breaking down of binaries is the very opposite of naïve, yet he is willing to risk appearing naïve by joining readers where they are. Ted never resorts to irony, the trope that invites the reader to join the writer at some place above what is actually said. Instead by telling his story he invites readers to join him. Central to his self-definition is always his experience as a son and as a father. He deliberately includes the songs that meant something to his parents and the songs that mean something to his children.

Ted follows such decidedly out-of-fashion critics as Cardinal Newman and Northrop Frye in thinking that culture lies in story and song, arts and sciences. When he turns to the classics, it is as often as not to the discredited classics that have become bywords for falseness: for instance, to the Wordsworth of the daffodils, to Kipling and Arnold. This also makes Ted very different from many contemporary critics, whose favourite rhetorical strategy, the scholastic appeal to authority—“as Foucault says” or “as Homi Bhabha says”—requires an acute sensitivity to vagaries in the reputations and creditworthiness of authorities. Ted deliberately invokes the outmoded, the embarrassingly traditional, and the suspiciously conservative. Yet his classicism is the very opposite of

canonical: he is not interested in defending high art against the threat of barbarism. With high seriousness Ted discusses nursery rhymes and pop songs, and even table manners. What is notable is his generosity: he is certain that if people love a poem or a song, however kitschy (a word that is not in Ted's vocabulary), then that poem or song must be worth loving. Ted trusts that deep down people know what matters. Again, this is the converse of much current literary criticism, convinced as it is that people are dupes.

All this makes for a unique and attractive optimism. Much literary criticism implies an adversarial world that must be combated, a dark world of lies that only the critic and the writer see through. Ted, on the other hand, does not see society as the enemy but as a potential home. He can read like a motivational speaker (and I mean no criticism): upbeat, full of personal anecdotes and judicious quotations, and most importantly, offering personal testimony: this is what one man has learned in the course of his travels and as a result of much thinking and listening. Ted abjures a certain kind of power, that which is based on standing apart, on displaying superior intelligence or superior virtue. If, as Peter Middleton argues, representation is central both to all forms of modern knowledge and to masculinity, then Ted's own writing, which values story rather than representation, is remarkably free of all that is debilitating in modern masculinity.

Yet I cannot conclude without also drawing attention to something unresolved in my response to Ted's book. Ted makes white Canadians the heirs of western European culture in general, or rather makes Western culture, explicitly including math and science, part of the stories that white Canadians must bring to the table. We are used to thinking of math and science as the opposite of story and magic, as fact is the opposite of fiction. Some contemporary literary theory has tried to unmask the pretensions of science as fact by insisting it is more ideology. Ted's approach is different. He believes math and science are also story and song. The result is he gives his readers permission to feel that all that is human, indeed the whole of the cosmos as far as the human imagination can reach, is also ours and we live in the heart of it.

The equivalence drawn between Western culture and English Canadian culture is, however, a slippery thing: on the one hand, we are invited to see ourselves as heirs of the entire world; on the other hand, we have stories about *this* land and our place in it. Is it Western culture as a whole or English Canadian culture in particular that constitutes our story? If science and math are our culture, does this mean that they do not belong to Aboriginal Canadians? Aboriginals bring to the table stories that belong to themselves alone, while white Canadians bring stories that belong to many people and that have, in the case of history, science, and math, been seen as belonging to everyone and no one. There is an asymmetry there.

Couto, in a move that Ted would appreciate, reverses the usual dichotomy whereby it is the European who can live anywhere because his

knowledge is universal and the “native” who is limited to a particular location because his knowledge is bound to that location. The narrator has the following conversation with the Italian sojourner Massimo, who is only in Mozambique long enough to make his report:

- You know, Massimo, I pity you being all alone. I couldn’t bear to be left so utterly on my own.
- Why?
- Even if I was torn away from here, if I was taken to Italy, I wouldn’t be in such a difficult position. Because I know how to live in your world.
- And I don’t know how to live in yours?
- No, you don’t.
- That doesn’t bother me. All I want is to carry out my mission. You don’t know how important this is for me, for my career. And for Mozambique. (83)

In Couto’s novel, European epistemology is not only inadequate; it is actually harmful to the knower, who stands outside the world or at least pretends to, and who consequently cannot imagine how to live in the world of another. It is the person who stands resolutely in the world who can live in other places.

Ted wants to convince readers that they, like everyone, have culture in the form of stories, riddles, and songs. He presumes a world of many diverse cultures, each performing the same function of expressing humanity and making liveable the universe, and to that extent all equivalent. But, although he never forgets the damage and suffering inflicted on some cultures by others, Ted does not discuss the ways in which cultures are not equal, how it is that some cultures have more power than others, indeed have power over others. I can’t help but ask: what if the reason white people have forgotten how much we live according to stories is that we have become enthralled by the very real power that other cultural instruments bestow? I am thinking specifically of the modern analytico-referential and instrumental reason described by Timothy Reiss, that works by creating graphic models of the world that remain always distinct from the world. These graphic representations, at the basis of much of *our* knowledge, are not riddles or charms such as Ted celebrates; they are maps that treat all space as secular and measurable. They are not the numbers zero or infinity, which so fill Ted with wonder, but the numbers of accounting that allow horses to be treated as “sheep units,” and the numbers of statistics that allow people to be known neither as individuals nor as an organic community but as interchangeable parts of a mechanical monolith. These representations count and measure rather than tell stories. They cut the observer off from the world and thus from others and from his or her own humanity. And they have proved to have undeniable power, both to manipulate the world and to shape human psyches. This is not culture like all other cultures.

Ted argues for a return to wonder, but says little about the enemy of stories. He mentions that Wordsworth, two hundred years ago, saw “getting and spending” as the way that we ‘lay waste our powers,” our

powers of the imagination, but Ted does not discuss how this happened. He is all about how we can still make a home in the world and not about how we got where we are. "Getting and spending" or in the language of modern criticism, commodification, are part of modernity. What if it is not the case that all stories are the same kind of story? What if something happened to one culture, a dissociation of sensibility, a fall into modernity, that both threatened the humanity of the members of that culture and unleashed a rapacious power that could be wielded against the world and against other cultures? What if, in other words, there is not a common tradition linking us to the classical and medieval worlds because something intervened to break that tradition? What if modernity drove a wedge between words and the world precisely in order to better control the world?

Ted explicitly denies that the enemy of stories is as strong as stories. He argues that, to say that We, white Canadians, use analytical reason whereas They, Aboriginals, think according to sympathetic magic, is to eliminate the possibility of common ground. And Ted is right: no culture is ever one thing: the West has always included magic, metaphor, and analogy and includes them still. But he does not care to look too closely at the "getting and spending," or at the power of graphic representation. He does not concern himself with power. To say that We have culture just as They have culture is to ignore the very real power to control the world and to shape the psyche that a modern culture based on representation bestows.

To understand something of the power of modern representation, we need modern theory. Theory itself seeks to harness some of the power of representation by representing it. Even as it gives us tools to understand and deconstruct representation, it cannot imagine knowledge without representation. It is thus always complicit. Contemporary theory is part of the alienated capitalist (and even masculine?) economy of representation that it analyses. Even at its most politically aware, it seeks to stand outside in order to see the whole. Its power partakes of modernity's power. But the power it wields is genuine and may be necessary to combat the power of the enemy of stories.

Ted generally ignores contemporary literary criticism, twice dismissing it as "clever," meaning, I think, not that it is tricksterish but rather that it is merely intellectual and not in touch with the spirit. But by ignoring power and how it works, Ted implies another Us and Them, a binary between those who tell stories and celebrate the human spirit and those who analyse the enemy of stories and spirit. This is a binary that I find harder than the other binaries to deconstruct. Nor do I know how to tell critical analysis as a story so that I can live with it. My home is also an exile and a place of discomfort where it is impossible to rest. But, thanks to Ted, I understand that this place of unease can also be, must also be, a home.

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