

Ted Chamberlin Meets a Critic

Regna Darnell

University of Western Ontario

When I was invited to join a panel discussing Ted Chamberlin's book *If This is Your Land, Where are your Stories?*, one of my colleagues in comparative literature observed that I was not a critic but that she had recommended me anyway. Indeed, despite a first degree in English, I am a cultural anthropologist and linguist rather than a teacher of literature. As a social scientist, I honour the commitment to accuracy about the world outside that text which most clearly distinguishes the social from the human sciences. There is also, of course, much that we share, which I bring to bear on my reading of this book.

I have been thinking about the degree to which the persona of the critic entails literary criticism, or more generally, whether it is a question of academic discipline. I do not think discipline is the primary issue, although a broadening of the legitimate range of critical response to a text entails an obligation to specify the standpoint of the critic. Moreover, readers are no more interchangeable than critics. The process of specifying the positions of diverse readers is particularly significant given the genre in which Ted Chamberlin has chosen to write. His voice is personal, moralistic, hortatory—in the best tradition of the English language essay. Readers are invited to imagine the community of humankind as inclusive, intelligible, not different in kind from the everyday world of the self—to seek, in the words of the subtitle, "common ground." I cannot help but wonder why that suspension of inherited belief, that exercise of empathy, remains so difficult for us to perform. Sadly, the cohesion of one's own world too often frames the interpretation of the "other"—as threat rather than as opportunity to think outside familiar categories. To have a home, whether geographic or cultural, is to defend it, to draw boundaries around it—at least in the settler traditions of the Canadian mainstream.

If we aspire to move beyond self-defensiveness in our encounters with other cultures, it seems to me that the tools of literature often work more effectively than polemics. That is, "the truth about stories" (the title of Thomas King's Massey lectures of 2003) is that they move us past artificial boundaries to empathy and imagination. A story, or a storied voice, opens up the possibility of alternative groundings of reality, potential incommensurabilities requiring the suspension of both belief and

disbelief, raising the possibility of conversation across cultural boundaries and the urgent need for translation.

Storytelling, and the exegesis of stories that often follows it, is one form of translation. The stories of others often remain unintelligible to the hearer/reader socialized within a different interpretive community. Nonetheless, unfamiliar surface forms of story yield, often almost seamlessly, to the universal storying capacity of the human imagination.

This does not mean, of course, that stories are always understood in the same way by culturally naive readers as by members of the cultures within which they arise and remain grounded. For example, A. Irving Hallowell's ethnography of the Berens River Ojibwe, *Culture and Experience*, includes an extensive dream narrative told to him by Chief Willie Berens, his principal consultant. Chief Berens' surface narrative was about a journey on the river, meeting some strange people, being taken to a cave with many marvellous things in it, and being invited to return. An Ojibwe listener would have recognized instantly the cues to the supernatural status of the people met and the invitation to Chief Berens to accept them as tutelary spirits. For the non-Native reader, however, the narrative remains a "realist" one until Chief Berens reports matter-of-factly that then he woke up. He further confounds the distinction between the real and the spiritual by explaining to the anthropologist that he later found the place on the river where that happened in his dream. But as a Christian, he chose not to accept the invitation given to him.

I have spent much of my career as an anthropologist talking about cross-cultural miscommunication of this sort. The need for translation is obvious when speaker and listener do not share a language. The words of a Gitksan elder from whom Ted Chamberlin takes the inspiration for his title signify her identity to her own linguistic and cultural community and to herself, but they convey no substantive meaning to an English speaker (although their symbolic import may cross the language barrier). A literal translation does not necessarily clarify the miscommunication. At a deeper level, the singing or saying of a genealogy that goes back to Killer Whale and serves as a title deed to traditional land is not intelligible in its own terms without a *cultural* translation, a bridge to the assumptions taken for granted within an unfamiliar interpretive community. It is not a metaphor and it does not mean that the speaker cannot tell the difference between a human person and a whale. Rather, what the Anishnaabek of the Great Lakes region call "all my relatives" includes human persons, animals, and "other-than-human persons" (Hallowell *passim*) as well as the land on which they live. The creation stories of many Aboriginal groups merge the fates/origins/futures of what Charles Darwin and Carl Linnaeus pigeon-holed as discrete species. Contemporary thinking about ecosystem and co-evolution of species, however, opens up perspectives from Western science that more easily calibrate to the stories of Aboriginal origins and cohabitations.

Another of my own biases emerges here. I do not range as widely in the examples I use as does Ted Chamberlin. My ethnographic work has been primarily with Canadian First Nations, especially of the Algonquian language family—Plains Cree in northern Alberta and Saskatchewan, Ojibwe in southwestern Ontario. In terms of the educated Canadian public that I suspect is Ted Chamberlin's primary intended audience, therefore, I elide the range of the argument for effective cross-cultural communication. I look for the stories, and the ways of telling them, that are familiar to me from nearly four decades of trying to get my head around what I have called "the cultural structures of First Nations imagination." What I find in this book is mostly familiar in its style. Ted Chamberlin has employed the kind of voice that First Nations storytellers use. It arises primarily from oral tradition, although it is presented to us in written form. Perhaps most saliently, it is a voice of personal experience. He talks about what he has witnessed and what he has heard. He has gone out to many strange places and returned to tell us back home how these stories might enrich our own worlds. We are encouraged to respond with curiosity rather than with fear. And, having gotten past all that cultural baggage, there is an implicit call for activism, for a response to the historical injustices suffered by Aboriginal peoples and for the discrimination that persists within Canadian society. If the reader comprehends how it feels to walk in the moccasins of a First Nations storyteller, then it follows that something has to, or at least ought to, change in the world outside the stories. That is "true" because stories do not exist in isolation from the world. Indeed, the world is in some very serious sense emergent from the stories and the sense we make out of them, the sharing of meanings across interpretative communities.

In *Telling Our Stories: Omushkego Legends and Histories from Hudson Bay*, James Bay Cree elder Louis Bird laments, in English, the passing of a way of life in his isolated community of Peawanuk, Ontario, and dates that passing to 1980, recently enough that many people remember the times before, when almost everyone lived on the land. He argues that his people lacked a "community," although not a collective identity, prior to forced settlement in permanent townsites. The infrastructure or administrative organization imposed by the fur trade, missionaries and residential schools was unnecessary when people rarely congregated in large groups and then only temporarily. To become settled was the beginning of the end, in his elegiac lament for the nomadic subsistence tradition and the storied world that accompanied it.

Although it may be of scant comfort to Mr. Bird, my own current work tells a somewhat different story of what I call "nomadic legacies"—persistent decision-making strategies of movement around a territory without clear boundaries to exploit available resources. Today, these resources are more likely to be education, employment, medical and social services rather than moose, fish, berries, and mosses.

"Home" is as critical to this non-traditional narrative as it is to Ted Chamberlin's. A former student, James Birckhead, now living and working in Australia, wrote to me about similar patterns of Aboriginal urbanization there:

Many native title holders from the last claim that I worked on over a number of years lived in Sydney, not "up 'ome", but travelled back and forth (about 800 miles from Sydney) and still maintained connection to "country" and sites. I once went up there with a field assistant from Redfern (Sydney), a street kid and drug pusher, with a cigarette behind his ear, baseball cap on back to front, and the latest Chicago type cool gear. He has [sic] fathered a number of kids by the time he was 17 and lived the Redfern ghetto life. But once up at Muli, he took me to sites, observed the proper protocol of addressing the spirits of various places, and related well to the elders. He knew "lingo" and tradition. You would never pick it up seeing him in his urban element in Redfern. The courts and the native title legislation have difficulty coming to terms with the idea that city Aborigines may still maintain strong connection to "tribe" and "country."

The film *Once Were Warriors* records a similar pattern of mobility and recovery for New Zealand Maori. The link of land and language resonates among Indigenous peoples around the globe. In Canada, it fuels the rhetoric of residential school abuse, of what was stolen from the First Peoples. Keith Basso's *Wisdom Sits in Places* describes how the Cibecue Apache use landscape to trigger stories about the moral obligations of human persons.

People go out from home, but they also return. I argue that such a perspective reframes the off-Reserve residence of over half of Canada's Aboriginal population at any given time, as well as the citizenship issues surrounding negotiations around self-government. One need not live in a place to belong to it. Although I am a social scientist, I use stories to convey the experiences of particular First Nations former nomads and their present-day movements. Genealogies and life histories document the logic of an interpretive community. Demographic statistics fail to elucidate the quality of experience or the rationale underlying its interpretation, resulting in a deep divide within the social sciences between the quantitative and the qualitative. To strengthen the latter requires readers to think about cultural difference in ways that are more literary than scientific, at least in the conventional sense of this dichotomy.

At some long ago conference, a frustrated student asked my colleague Dick Preston to define his methodology. Dick was talking about some of the things he had come to understand about the James Bay Cree. He is a big, slow-speaking, soft-spoken man, who uses words carefully. He thought for quite a long moment, then responded, "I think about things a lot"—implicitly, for a long time, over a lifetime of listening to stories and reflecting on their meanings, often in dialogic engagement with his James Bay Cree teacher John Blackned, an interpretive process which has continued long after Mr. Blackned's death. Social scientists as well as literary critics need to teach their students how to learn from listening, from stories.

I contend that the methods of comparative literature and the social sciences, at least the kind of anthropology that I practice, are not all that different. Ted Chamberlin works with stories and goes out to hear them first-hand. This is little different from my own ethnographic method. Such a method renders detachment impossible; one writes in solitude but learns in company. Ted Chamberlin's book confirms that the line between literature and oral tradition is an artificial one. I would further argue that the line between fiction and non-fiction is of minimal relevance, once we have specified standpoint and genre.

Young First Nations scholars today are far more likely to turn to history or to literature than to the social sciences, where the conventions of academic writing and research threaten to stifle the stories that are the core of contemporary Aboriginal identity. This trend constitutes an indictment of a kind of social science whose alternatives require models from the humanities. When I teach the cultural structures of First Nations imagination, I begin with life histories, experience told in the words of those who live it (for example, John Neihardt's recording of the life of Black Elk, structured around his visions, or Julie Cruikshank's *Life Lived Like a Story*, in which the kind of stories outsiders often call "myths" provide a template to interpret personal experience), or the classic texts recorded by outsiders from monolingual speakers (for example, Robert Bringhurst's *A Story as Sharp as a Knife* for Haida or H.C. Wolfart and Freda Ahenakew's *Our Grandmothers' Lives, as Told in Their Own Words*, and *The Cree Language is Our Identity* for Plains Cree). Then I move on to what is more conventionally glossed as literature, by contemporary First Nations writers in English, for example, Thomas King or Tomson Highway. These works fall on a continuum.

Ted Chamberlin's work also raises the question of what we, who are outsiders, can say ethically and without appropriating the voices of those to whom we listen. We who are translators and builders of communicative bridges can tell our own stories of coming to know and learning to listen. This is the narrative thread that makes *If This is Your Land, Where are your Stories?* an ethical work. The reader cannot help but take away with him/herself the title-inspiring story of how the land cannot belong to usurpers who fail to interact with it and respect it. We learn a lot about some of the experiences of the author. But it is not about him. It is about the obligation of the storyteller in an oral tradition to make clear his/her right to speak from experience. And there begins the dialogue of finding common ground. We must find "the confidence to reject the choice between words and the world" (240).

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