

Author Responds to Critics

For thirty-five years, I worked at two jobs . . . or so it sometimes seemed. On the one hand, I was teaching English and comparative literature at the University of Toronto; on the other, I was a consultant to Aboriginal communities and governments in Canada, the United States, Africa, and Australia on land claim settlements.

In time I came to realize that these were two sides of the same coin. And that the currency was stories. Stories that tell us who we are and where we belong. Stories that keep us together and others apart. Stories about the past, the present, and the future. National literatures are collections of such stories, as are the literatures we organize along lines of race, gender, and region. When Aboriginal communities go to court to claim jurisdiction over land and livelihood, they too tell stories.

I came to an understanding of all this slowly, which is the privilege that society gives us when we work in a university. And slowly too, I began to formulate some questions about these stories. Why do we believe in them; and why at times, do we not? What difference does it make whether we listen to them or read them? How do we learn to believe, especially the things that we know are not true, or not real?

I began to realize that stories are ceremonies of belief as much as they are chronicles of events, and that the practice of believing is something we come to very early in our lives, and share across cultures. Even though beliefs often differ and other people's ceremonies often seem strange, I hoped that by understanding the character of these ceremonies of belief we might find some continuity and common ground in a world—and an academy—preoccupied with differences.

Early in my career I wrote a couple of books, both of them about what used to be called the history of ideas. The first was titled *The Harrowing of Eden: White Attitudes Towards Native Americans* (1975), and it traced some differences between Canada and the United States in their historical relationships with Aboriginal peoples. Its most contentious argument—surprisingly controversial at the time—was that we need to take treaties seriously. In practice, treaties may have sometimes been colonial scams; but in principle, they were sacred agreements. And by their very nature they represented one thing that both sides believed in: that Aboriginal peoples constituted national communities and that settler societies must deal with them as such. Now we are returning with First Nations to the unfinished business at the heart of this country, and to the fundamental challenge of making this one land home to more than one people.

My second book was *Ripe Was the Drowsy Hour: The Age of Oscar Wilde* (1977). It took the tellers of tales as seriously as my first had taken the makers of treaties. Wilde was one of the first modern writers to outline

a theory of how the imagination shapes reality—in his signature phrase, how ‘life imitates art’—and through him I began a long, slow return to the wisdom of my childhood, and to taking the tellers of tales seriously. It is, after all, what literature is all about.

During this time, I also became involved in land claims research, working with Thomas Berger on the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry and then on the Alaska Native Claims Commission, and appearing as a witness on behalf of First Nations communities. I went to Australia to find out what was happening with Aboriginal rights there, and found anger and frustration. But I also found hope and possibility in a new storyline. An Aboriginal Arts Board had just been established, as part of the Australian equivalent of the Canada Council; and its first director was an Aboriginal actor and political activist named Gary Foley, who had led the famous ‘tent embassy’ when Aboriginal communities settled down for months on the lawns of Government House in Canberra. Foley was determined to demonstrate that the imagination also shapes *Aboriginal* reality, in the stories and songs and bark and sand paintings and dancing and drumming and all the other forms of imaginative expression that grace and define and hold together their communities.

If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories? is about finding common ground across cultures. It is also about the contradictions at the heart of all stories and all ceremonies—contradictions between the real and the imagined, between the true and the not-true, between the strange and the familiar, and between reading and listening. Many people seem to want to reduce stories and songs to social or economic or political documents. They are that, to be sure. But they are also covenants of wonder with the world.

I believe that those of us who call ourselves literary critics and anthropologists and historians and political scientists are custodians of this wonder. Wonder and wondering are at the centre of our experience of the world, and of each other. They are spiritual as well as material conditions; and without exception, all of the people I have been privileged to work with do not separate the material and the spiritual. This is as true of our poets, writing of ancestors or angels or country landscapes or living in the city, as it is of Aboriginal singers and storytellers.

But this is not the only reason why I use the language of faith in this book. It is also because our simplest ceremonies, the everyday ones we use to organize our social relationships, require faith in the meaning of meaninglessness, in the arbitrary ways we make sense of the world. Language is one of these, of course; and so are many of the ways in which we comfort and console ourselves, and communicate with each other. I can’t get through a day without thinking that the sun rises in the east, and sets in the west. And yet I know that it does no such thing.

I want to address a couple of issues raised by Susan Gingell in her kind review of *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?* She challenges me on the voice given—or in her opinion, not given—to

women in the book. She may be right, though I hope I have done better than she suggests. I hope so not simply because I do not want anyone to feel outside the circle of ceremonies I talk about—and that, of course, is her worry too—and not just because I want to be politically correct, but because the presiding spirits of the book—those who provided inspiration for it, and sustained me throughout—were mostly women: the Gitksan singer and storyteller Antgulilibix (Mary Johnson), the ~~≠~~Khomani elders Elsie Vaalbooi and |Una Rooi; my dear Yup'ik friend Martha Demientieff; my Metis godmother Margaret Williams; and my wife, the poet Lorna Goodison. If I have failed to convey this, I am sorry. Perhaps I should have named them more often, or have had them speak louder. In any event, I hope that the stories I tell in the light of their inspiration—their spirit—come through.

This book is about reimagining Them and Us. It is about trying to resist those who would drive a wedge between words and the world—to use Neil ten Kortenaar's phrase—in order to control both. It is also about finding ways of getting beyond the dichotomy of words and deeds, which Cheryl Suzack identifies, in a shared understanding of the nature of belief. And it is an attempt to bring detachment and engagement, judgement and sympathy, back into the centre of the conversation about what it is we do—to paraphrase Regna Darnell—as insider/outsideers. One of the things I am proudest about is that, judging from the responses I have had, my book seems to have encouraged women and men to return to their own stories and songs and think about them in new ways. If I have done nothing else with this book, I will be happy.

To take up a final point raised by Susan Gingell, I have no footnotes in the book, only endnotes that acknowledge those to whom I have listened, or whom I have read. I make no apologies for this, though I know that it frustrates some readers. As they are prescribed by our academic lawmakers, footnotes seem to me to privilege written texts over oral performances, and one-liners over storylines. In a book where so much came to me from storytellers, I was unwilling to extend that privilege. Where I draw on written texts, as I do often enough, I name them and expect interested readers to read them. The books I turned to were ones that nourished me as meals, not as snacks.

It has been a rare honour for me to have my book attended to in this inaugural "Author Meets Critics" panel at the Congress. I am deeply grateful to Susan Gingell and Jill Didur, who organized this gathering; and to Neil ten Kortenaar, Cheryl Suzack and Regna Darnell for taking the time and trouble to engage my book—and me—in this generous-spirited way.