

**Images from the Spoken Word: A Comparative Study
of Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm's
*My Heart as a Stray Bullet and Standing ground***

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Recently, a non-Aboriginal, white female dramaturge friend told me that “The problem with realism is that there is nothing festive in it.” Intrigued by her observation, I responded, “The festive can be *real*. In India, it is very much so.” “But would you really find the festive in realism. If it is festive, how could it be real? Is that not fantasy”? I was reminded at this point of the words of the Columbia author, Garcia Marquez in his Nobel Lecture:

I dare to think that it is this outsized reality, and not just its literary expression, that has deserved the attention of the Swedish Academy of Letters. A reality not of paper, but one that lives within us and determines each instant of our countless daily deaths, and that nourishes a source of insatiable creativity, full of sorrow and beauty, of which this roving and nostalgic Colombian is but one cipher more, singled out by fortune. Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable. This, my friends, is the crux of our solitude.¹

The point is not to compel indigenous literatures to suit a theory like “an ill-fitting overcoat.” In a personal interview with Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm in 2009, the Anishinabe poet narrates her experiences at the university where non-Native students could merely apply alien theories to indigenous literatures, collect their grades, and move on. She calls it the “cookie cutter approach” which refuses to accommodate diverse world views. Indigenous literatures not only counter biases of colonialist versions of history, they also reveal sharp, penetrating humor and self-referential cultural topoi which expresses subtle virtuosity. The EuroCanadian or EuroAmerican system of thought wishes to categorize, label, and name. Naming is a site of authority. The explorers of yesteryear on their discoveries, mapping lands, digging flags, exerting ownership as exhibited on the moon, and now in outer space as well, have always positioned themselves in the discursive field of knowledge within imperialism and neo-imperialism. Any portion of reality which is

¹Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Nobel Lecture, http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1982/marquez-lecture-e.html.

not tangible is deemed as “fantasy,” as “non-analytical” and hence, deserving of condescending patronage at the most. A story can never be “real.”

The Laguna storyteller Leslie Silko reminds us,

I will tell you something about stories,
[he said]
They aren't just entertainment.
Don't be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
all we have to fight off
illness and death.

You don't have anything
if you don't have the stories.²

Storytelling, then becomes a powerful weapon of subversion, of protest against racism. Douglas Cardinal (Métis and Blackfoot) discusses the power of man in shaping reality through language. Language becomes a metaphor for potential change. A commonplace assumption such as the power of language gains greater relevance in the context of vanishing or extinct Native languages in the North Americas. Surveying the link between language and creativity, Cardinal writes,

The essence of creativity in all things is what makes the universe shift. It is to cause something to become from nothing. The word in that way is powerful. When we speak a word, we declare something. We create it and then it can be.³

Colonial ideology has been sustained by a continuous negation of indigenous notions of history. This was because more than often, such views were considered “primitive,” “incorrect,” and also ones which subverted and revolted against the colonial machinery. History is being re-written, or rather re-spoken by Aboriginal women writers across the world. Aboriginal women writers construct their own theory. Their stories provide the theoretical framework of their writing. Renate Eigenbrod cautions that

... if non-Aboriginal scholars apply established theories in order to read Aboriginal literatures critically; they do not decentre the dominant discourse but, on the contrary, emphasize its centrality as it often seems to “validate” marginalized voices.⁴

² Leslie Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Viking Press, 1997), 2.

³ Douglas Cardinal, *The Native Creative Process: A Collaborative Discourse between Douglas Cardinal and Jeannette Armstrong with Photographs by Greg Young-Ing* (Penticton, British Columbia: Theytus Books, 1991), 89.

⁴ Renate Eigenbrod, *Travelling Knowledges: Positioning the Im/Migrant Reader of Aboriginal Literatures in Canada* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2005), 189.

Perhaps, therefore, it would not suffice to merely create a “third space” of interaction with Aboriginal writings. One may then at this juncture await for the next critical moment and movement. “Poco” being controversial as a theoretical premise makes one flounder in the methods of actually contributing towards “politically relevant” work. A misplaced loyalty towards postcolonial theory vis-à-vis the diversity of world cultures and decolonizing struggles can also lead to the production of a colonizing “master narrative that contains all difference.”⁵ A Eurocentric perspective is forced upon cultural products, located in different specificities. Again, a sensitivity to “difference,” the primary tool of investigation per se, dissipates in the face of Elizabeth Spelman’s “boomerang perception”: “I look at you and come right back to myself.”⁶

What concerns one more is not merely to “identify” with Aboriginal Canadian literatures in the contextualist trinity of “race, moment, milieu,” which relates literary creations to the external dispositions of national character, pressures of the natural environment, and periods of cultural development. In the context of Aboriginal Canadian writings, Taine’s classical three-pronged approach to studying the forms of art could be reworked and therefore subverted if one asked: Which race? Which moment? Whose milieu? Because, this would then show how the *history* of “nation,” the makings of the “natural” environment and the “influence” of “culture” narrate a painful story of colonization for the founding peoples of the Americas in the post-contact period. Post-contact/ postcolonialism is in itself a debatable term in the indigenous vocabulary as is best articulated by Aborigine activist Bobbi Sykes, who asked at an academic conference on postcolonialism, “What? Postcolonialism? Have they left?” Moreover, in the Canadian context, the notion of “Canada” itself is ambiguous. Sophie McCall explains:

The Canada – US border has long been considered a soft border, more a state of mind than a physical presence. However, for Aboriginal peoples, the border is a constant reminder of colonial history. It is an enduring scar that not only obscures the violent appropriation of Aboriginal territories over the past four-hundred years but also effaces older maps of Native North American nations.⁷

For a reader in India, Canada is also a remote reality. A hazy notion of vast open spaces, a part of the developed world and often synonymous with the United States of America are some of the attributes that are commonly associated with “Canada.” Therefore, a reading into indigenous literatures becomes even more pertinent with the political significations of the 49th parallel. The 49th parallel is more than often ignored by Aboriginal authors in North America as a superfluous identity, imposed by imperial administration. In the Introduction to *Reinventing the Enemy’s Language: Contemporary Native Women’s Writing in North America*, Muscogee (Creek) poet Joy Harjo elucidates,

⁵ Ann duCille, “Postcolonialism and Afrocentricity: Discourse and Dat Course,” *The Black Columbiad: Defining Moments in African American Literature and Culture*, ed. Werner Sollors and Maria Diedrich (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1994), 33.

⁶ Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon, 1988), 12.

⁷ Sophie McCall, “The Forty-Ninth Parallel and Other Borders: Recent Directions in Native North American Literary Criticism” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 34.2 (2004): 205.

We decided that the work should be arranged by theme, rather than by false political boundaries (or any other arbitrary category). This was important. As Native peoples, we are now restricted by national and political boundaries that did not exist before colonization. There was no Canada, United States or Mexico, for example. And nations such as Yaqui, Okanagan, and Mohawk weren't falsely divided by their boundaries as they are now, their lands separated by two international borders.⁸

In the course of my readings, I shall attempt to deconstruct the notion of "Canada" as a fluid space of contact between different nations. This would problematize the concept of a "postcolonial" state, as well as bring to the foreground the white-Canadian self-image of non-racist tolerance. The paper will especially focus on a comparative study of Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm's collection of poetry, *My Heart Is a Stray Bullet* and her spoken word CD *Standing ground* released in 2005. The CD is a collaboration with a group of Indigenous artists including Te Kupu, Koru, Joy Harjo, Marcos Arcentales, John Thorp, Lucho Abanto, Rhys B., and Raven Polson-Lahache. Akiwenzie-Damm is an Anishinaabe writer of mixedblood from the Chippewas of Nawash First Nation. She lives and works at Neyaashiinigiing, Cape Croker Reserve on the Saugeen Peninsula in southwestern Ontario.

In 1993, Kateri decided to put together a collection of her poetry while working as the Conference Coordinator for "Beyond Survival: The Waking Dreamer Ends the Silence," an international Indigenous Arts Conference organized by First Nations artists and held at the Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec. Her thinking was simply that many great Indigenous artists from around the world would be attending and it would be a wonderful opportunity to share her writing with others. She opines,

I thought I could trade some with other writers and sell some as well. I applied for a grant from the City of Ottawa, where I was living at the time and was successful. Because I belonged to a Native writers group, WINO, I decided to start an imprint and use money from the sale of my book to fund publishing another writer from WINO.⁹

Standing ground resulted from The Nishin Spoken Word Project. Akiwenzie-Damm initiated this project because she wanted to continue to work on combining her poetry with music. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, she belonged to WINO, and one of the members belonged to a Native reggae/world music band. They were also friends and worked together so, along with other friends from WINO, they began to do performances combining poetry, music and projected images. After moving from Ottawa to her home community at Neyaashiinigiing, Cape Croker Reserve, this aspect of her work lost momentum. At the same time she was meeting Indigenous musicians and artists from various parts of the world and realized that she could explore a wider range of Indigenous music and continue to broaden the scope of her work. Finally, as a lead-in to the work,

⁸ Joy Harjo, "Introduction," *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Women's Writings of North America*, ed. Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997), 26.

⁹ Personal Interview, October 2009.

she undertook a project for a CBC radio program called *Out Front*. She involved a new friend, Raven Kanatakta Polson-Lahache, who had recently graduated from the renowned Berklee School of Music. This radio piece combined her poetry with Raven's music and was called "Two Spirited Nanabush." Raven became part of The Nishin Spoken Word Project (NSWP), along with her main collaborator Te Kupu (Dean Hapeta), a Maori hip hop artist and friend. Others involved included Joy Harjo, Shona Kish, Johnny Thorp, Marcos Arcentales, Koru, Rhys B., and Luis Abanto. The CD, *Standing ground* was a result of some of these collaborations. The music is composed by Indigenous composers and features traditional Indigenous musical instruments, sounds, and rhythms from the Andes, North America, and Aotearoa. *Standing ground* is a unique offering heralding a new era of musical collaborations between Indigenous peoples. A new form of music blending Indigenous music and poetry with influences ranging from hip-hop to jazz, *Standing ground* represents a contemporary musicality, aesthetic, and state of mind largely unknown outside of Indigenous communities. Five years in the making, *Standing ground* was recorded over two years in four countries. The instrumentation varies from acoustic Native drums, guitar & flutes, to programmed hip-hop beats, tribal trance, Andean, and live rock/blues/alternative. Vocals include spoken word, singing, chants, rap, and vocables. The poetry ranges from playful to hardcore but never strays from a solidly Anishinaabe perspective.

An analysis of the multidisciplinary nature of the collection of poetry and the CD collaboration highlights the power of images, and the imperatives of indigenous philosophical thought, which views art as an extension of wisdom. The works reflect how native women artists not only explore the axiomatic of imperialism, but also re-inculcate learning of respect, reciprocity and community values in the process. As veritable word artists, these writers have been involved in revamping epistemologies of domination and control. Activism married to cultural knowledge base provides the strength and necessary motivation for the writers such as Akiwenzie-Damm to confront their own personal values as well as the exploitation rampant in their external worlds. This process initiates decolonization and reaffirms Indigenous peoples as responsible, community- or nation-based entities. Some of the thematic concerns of the projects, especially *Standing ground*, deal with her concern for the suppression of natural human feelings, including the erotic, in an Indigenous context. This is certainly apparent in a few of the tracks on *Standing ground* including "smudge," "a song the bones sing," and "my wild horses." In *My Heart Is a Stray Bullet*, it's apparent in "mixed blood: notes from a split personality," for example.

The identity of the "Native" thus has undergone shifts pertaining not always to the socio-political realities of the indigene, but rather to legal, constitutional definitions of the "Indian" as present within a colonial and racist framework in the Canadian democracy. Kateri Damm observes:

There are status Indians, non-status Indians, Métis, Inuit. Dene, Treaty Indians, urban Indians, on reserve Indians, off-reserve Indians; there are Indians who are Band members and Indians who are not Band members. There are First Nations peoples, descendents of First Nations, Natives,

Indigenous peoples, Aboriginal peoples, mixed-bloods, mixed-breeds, half-breeds, enfranchised Indians, Bill C-31 Indians. There are even women without any First Nations ancestry who gained “Indian status” by marriage. And these are just some of the labels we must consider in identifying ourselves. There are also definitions based on Tribal/First Nations affiliations, on language, on blood quantum. But what does this have to do with a discussion of literature?¹⁰

The dilemma imposed on the aboriginal Canadian writer is wittily exposed by the poet in “indian enough”:

as i speak
 i have felt a cold martyred patience
 blasting from those who want to hear “Native storytelling”
 for as long as the words shall flow¹¹

The sociopolitical definitions labeled upon an Aboriginal person in Canada are related to a prolonged history of colonial oppression. The innumerable “categories” assigned by the Canadian government to its Aboriginal populations epitomize the western imperial mind’s desire to fit the unknown into a readymade compartment. In the poem, “woman to woman,” Akiwenzie-Damm plays upon the category of the “native woman” as simply “woman” with “memory”, and as a “maker.” The poem states:

i make people and clothe them all
 touch them
 they are not afraid to be held¹²

The poem thus negotiates the changes in the traditional distribution of power and authority. By reinstating the role of the Indigenous woman, the narrative formulates and solidifies an emerging indigenous community identity.

In the realm of literature, scholars who have received training in European critical traditions, work in tandem with different aesthetic assumptions and narrative structures. The tendency is to impose favorite literary theories on the Indigenous text, without any prior knowledge or understanding of indigenous literatures. Therefore, an Aboriginal writer in her works uses the medium of the written word to initiate the process of decolonization. Such a statuesque forces one to discuss the positionality of the author in relation to the text, a location predicated upon colonial definitions and impositions. This is true of contemporary writers who also are plagued by the western concept of individual voice in creativity. Duane Niatum explains,

¹⁰ Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, “Says Who” in *Looking At The Words Of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*, ed. Jeannette Armstrong (Penticton, British Columbia: Theytus Books Ltd., 1993), 12.

¹¹ Kateri Damm, *My Heart Is a Stray Bullet* (Ontario: Kegedonce Press, 1993), 20.

¹² Akiwenzie-Damm, *My Heart*, 4.

Songs in the old days were not called art. Art objects such as poems, paintings, sculptures, pots and rugs were considered expressions of the community as a whole, not as personal egocentric works. To do the work of an artist was simply an integral part of the normal routines of the tribe. Art, work, play, religion and society, to name just a few of the things we do as a group, were linked to each other as the tribe's single thread of experience.¹³

However, to expect such selfless portrayal of the work of art, without naming its creator can also lead to other problems. The appropriation of the Indigenous story has been an abiding issue. Indigenous writers have been indignant on being silenced, and when plastic shamans have usurped their positions such as the legendary Grey Owl. Appropriation of knowledges and resources is a historical reality for Indigenous peoples across the world. An understanding of the process of appropriation encapsulates the idea of decolonization. Indigenous writers, therefore, are extremely categorical about the abiding influences in their lives. A due homage to their teachers is imperative for an effective "trinity" of "asking, listening, and hearing,"¹⁴ which entails a non-Indigenous reader to become the trickster, to draw his/her own lessons from the story, only if s/he wishes to. It is always open-ended. This does not imply that such stories encourage dilettantism, or anarchy in thought. But then, what is going on here?

Jeannette Armstrong explains in her interview with Hartwig Isernhagen that "social constructs which promote a certain way of dialogue and a certain specific way of perceiving the interaction with not only people but the rest of creation, I guess...become paramount in terms of a fundamental difference and a fundamental difference in literature."¹⁵ "Fictional narrative" offers a space within which "philosophies are seen in action, where their consequences, their burdens and their fruits form what we know as the 'story'"¹⁶ The reason for literature is always, "story." Discourse then is an ongoing process, a changing process of social practice, shaped by dialogue, responses, feelings and interactions. Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna Pueblo/ Sioux), for instance, writes in her essay "The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective," that for "the American Indian, the ability of all creatures to share in the process of ongoing creation makes all things sacred."¹⁷ This implies that each and every part of life, animate or inanimate, is responsible for the enhancement of experiences and understanding. The concept also relates to the choice many indigenous writers have had to make vis-à-vis people as individuals and the idea of the community. Communities emerge from extended family

¹³ Duane Niatum, "History, Nature, Family, Dream: The Musical Colors of Their Poems" in *Looking At The Words Of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*, ed. Jeannette Armstrong (Penticton, British Columbia: Theytus Books Ltd., 1993), 71.

¹⁴ Helen Hoy, *How Should I Read These? Native Women Writers in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 35.

¹⁵ Hartwig Isernhagen, *Momaday, Vizenor, Armstrong: Conversations on American Indian Writing*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 139.

¹⁶ Ipshita Chanda, "Hawk and Eagle: Cultural Encounters and the Philosophy of "Understanding" in Achebe's Narratives," *Philosophia Africana*, August 2006.

¹⁷ Paula Gunn Allen, *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 57.

ties and kinship, which in turn expostulates the idea of the Native family. According to Thomas King, the idea of community and its relationships with individuals is often ignored by non-Native writers because the latter would prefer to imagine “Indians” as isolated figures on the verge of extinction.¹⁸ Native writers, on the other hand, would like to assert themselves in relation to a thriving and alive community, which would also relate to the larger environment. According to Kateri, it is important to acknowledge the influences in her life for effective rendition of her “story.” Her urgency to write and perform is derived from the various relationships she is involved in, animate and inanimate:

My community both in terms of the people and the land itself; the natural and supernatural worlds that surround me; my grandparents; my family, especially the children – my son, my nieces, and my nephews; the traditions, stories, and ceremonies of the Anishinaabe, other writers including Gregory Scofield, Patricia Grace, Haunani-Kay Trask, Ben Okri...; the desire to dispel the lies about Indigenous peoples and to tell the truth about who we are and our histories and current lives; the need to speak out against injustice, colonialism, racism, genocide, and violence in various forms against Indigenous peoples, especially women and children.

Writers have often said that their mixed ancestry opens the boundaries and disrupts the rules that usually bind racial and cultural groups. Being of mixed ancestry, according to Akiwenzie-Damm, enables the Native woman writer to write her book as she employs the advantages of her dual position.¹⁹ Paula Gunn Allen, speaking of herself and other Aboriginal women asserts,

We survive, and we do more than just survive. We bond, we care, we fight, we teach, we nurse, we bear, we feed, we earn, we laugh, we love, we hang in there, no matter what.²⁰

Native Aboriginal women writers have not only attempted to reclaim their identities as distinctly cultural individuals, but they have also carved a niche of their own for healing. By way of “gatherings,” “tellings,” conferences, workshops, seminars, kitchen-table talks, Aboriginal writers have formed bonds of solidarity which have in turn enabled better opportunities of marketing, publications and discussions of political agenda.

¹⁸ Thomas King, ed., *All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Fiction* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 1990), xv.

¹⁹ Akiwenzie-Damm, “Says Who,” 21.

²⁰ Allen, *Sacred Hoop*, 190.