

Renewing the Fire: Notes Toward the Liberation of English Studies

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Reading Roots

Freedom came early to me in the form of literature. One of my earliest memories is of reading Ilse-Margret Vogel's gentle children's book, *My Little Dinosaur*, and the slow, indescribable awakening of that moment. It was the first time I'd ever read a book by myself, without someone reading the story aloud to me and passing far too quickly from one page to the next. The realisation that I had the power to open up such mysteries by myself filled me with such an energising joy that I fell passionately in love with literature that day.

Such freedom was not something many people seemed to understand in my home town of Victor, Colorado. It's a small mining town on the eastern edge of the Colorado Rockies, and has long been a hard place to make a living. Until limited-stakes gambling arrived in the neighbouring town of Cripple Creek in 1990, the only viable jobs were in mining or the ever-mercurial summer tourism industry. This was 1980, and a difficult time for both. Most families—mine included—struggled hard to get a little ahead in the summer, and fought against snow and despair in the winter to make it to the too-few warm months of the next summer. Imagination is a frequent casualty to the grinding plod of poverty.

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Fortunately, my parents treasured and encouraged my love of reading, so books became a feature of my life that wasn't shared by many other kids in town. My mom would take me to the local library, and there *My Little Dinosaur* was followed by William Steig's *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble* and Mike McClintock's *A Fly Went By*. The Victor Public Library wasn't particularly well stocked with books, but to five-year-old me it was a wonderland of imaginative possibilities. Everything about the place thrilled me: the rich, crackling pop of a new book's spine as I opened it for the first time; the crisp smell of old, slightly-musty paper; the dust motes that hung suspended in the fading light of a golden afternoon; the squeaking rustle of the bean-bag sofa as I settled down to immerse myself in another story.

I remember being particularly thrilled about Kindergarten, where I expected to meet other children and share my stories with them. My classmates didn't tend to share my enthusiasm about storytelling and reading, but books meant something to them, too: only the coolest kids ever had access to Tomi Ungerer's brooding storybook, *The Three Robbers*, and it was always checked out. The day that I finally found the blue and black book on the shelves was a coup, and I relished my victory that night as I read it to my parents at the dining room table.

For whatever reason, my peers lost their love of reading while mine flourished, and we became strangers to each other. By second grade I was designated a first-rate nerd, nicknamed "Tinkerbelle" for my love of fairy tales and fantasy stories. It got worse as we grew older, and as all the pain and uncertainty of puberty raged through us, and as new desires stirred in our blood, their suspicion became contempt. And I retreated again to my books, emerging only after the storms of adolescence had passed over. My books and stories were no blind sanctuary, as some might argue; they were instead a safe harbour that helped give me healing, that showed me the possibilities of a life lived fully, free from fear or resentment. They opened my imagination to hope.

A Vulnerable Passion

Now that I'm a literature professor, I often think back to my childhood, to the memories of pain and passion that are tangled in my experiences as a reader, and I wonder what happened to so many people in the daily toil of life to strip away the tender joys of reading literature. It seems that too many of our students see reading—deep, life-altering reading—as nothing more than a necessary but unpleasant means of getting a bigger paycheck, a nicer car, another garage on the house. And, sadly, it seems that far too

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many English instructors, from grade school to university, have forgotten the joys that first brought them into the field.

What's left of English Studies? Everything. English Studies remain a site of powerful progressive potential, where literature and theory can enrich our understandings of ourselves, one another, and the world around us. We can see the links and patterns between our age and those that came before; we find ourselves immersed in the endless flow of thoughts and emotions, desires and fears, building upon the past or moving toward a different future. Humanity, sacrifice, generosity of spirit, and courage to challenge complacent ideologies are the ideal legacies of study in such a field.

Too often, however, that progressive potential is poorly realised. Resistant students encounter weary instructors, the necessities of full-time jobs take the place of the perceived indulgence of reading, and classes that are increasingly over-crowded with under-prepared and overwhelmed students chip away at the ideals we bring to the classroom. We're *all* impoverished as a result.

This essay isn't a eulogy to English Studies; if anything, it's an assertion of the necessary significance of the discipline. But rather than argue whether literary studies and cultural studies belong together, or whether a focus on theory impoverishes our understanding of literature, I'd like to approach the concerns about the present/future of English Studies from a different angle: how can we reinvigorate English Studies with the transformative passion that brought so many of us into academia in the first place? In other words, how can we make English Studies matter more to ourselves, to our students, and to the world?

It's a big task, surely, but the first step is the most important, and it's the most accessible: a passionate love of language, literature, and story. I know few English professors or graduate students who haven't had at least one life-changing encounter with literature. Very often, it's such an experience that guides us into English Studies. Yet all too often we fail to translate that experience into our teaching and scholarship; to admit to a love affair with literature is to admit both emotional and intellectual vulnerability.

It is precisely this human connection that is most urgently needed in English Studies if it is to be relevant and enriching in an increasingly commercialized, consumer-driven, and anti-intellectual world. The liberal arts are all affected by these forces, but we are perhaps the most vulnerable precisely because we have the most potential to radically shift the balance away from corporatization to humanitarianism. Remember that poets

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were forbidden in Plato's ideal republic. To Plato, poets were dangerous liars, but he was trying to create the perfect government, one always shadowed by tyranny. He failed to acknowledge the fact that dreamers offer the best weapons against tyranny: imagination, inspiration, and passion.

We must remember our passions, our reasons for loving this work to begin with, and we must share these experiences and feelings with our students and our peers, even when it makes us vulnerable—perhaps *especially* when it makes us vulnerable, because that is when the power of literature is most tangible. Students and colleagues can see our investment, can understand why we've chosen to dedicate our lives to the life of scholarship, and can experience those life-altering realities for themselves.

It would be both naive and disingenuous to pretend that rekindling and sharing our own passion for literature is without dangers; if anything, the dangers multiply, because great love inevitably brings great risk. This is the reality for anyone who challenges conventional thinking, especially now, when the socio-political climate in North America has been so insidiously and swiftly tilted rightward since 2001. The passionate thinker and dreamer is dangerous to those who seek to narrow the world to easy answers and false binaries. As Xicanista poet Ana Castillo reminds us, "The dreamer, the poet, the visionary is banished at the point when her/his society becomes based on the denigration of life and the annihilation of the spirit for the sake of phallocratic aggrandizement and the accumulation of wealth by a militant elite" (Castillo 16). Dissent is labelled treachery by the fearful; the practice of democratic protest is deemed subversion by those who most stand to benefit from autocracy. To exercise the right of moral and intellectual inquiry into ideas that are deemed above debate is to invite censure by those who lack faith in the justice of their own convictions. Yet to bypass our obligations as scholars to seek the world's truths—no matter how unpopular the quest may be—is a failure of both courage and imagination.

Literature And Liberation

The written word has particular associations with freedom and liberation among my people. In the early 1800s, a crippled Cherokee silversmith named Sequoyah developed a written alphabet based on the syllables of the Cherokee language. Although initially treated with some scepticism by traditionalists, Sequoyah revealed his syllabary to the headmen of the Nation at a gathering in 1821, and the success of that introduction spread the syllabary throughout the Nation with remarkable speed. By 1825, the Cherokees had one of the highest literacy rates of any people in the world.

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In 1828, the Cherokee Nation began publishing its own bilingual newspaper, *The Cherokee Phoenix*, printed half in English and half in Cherokee.

I teach Indigenous literatures in an English department, and it's a good home for this work. The literature comes first, but it exists in a relationship to its influences; to separate text from context in either direction is to impoverish our understanding of both. My students and I discuss Jeanette Armstrong's revolutionary novel, *Slash*, the chronicle of a young Okanagan man coming of age during the Red Power movement of the 1960s and '70s. To get a full picture of the influences on the novel, we also examine documents about the notorious 1969 White Paper and the history of AIM, the American Indian Movement; we listen to personal stories of people who lived through that fiery political era.

Similarly, when we read Gregory Scofield's poetic remembrance of his mother and aunt in *I Knew Two Métis Women* (1999) or Maria Campbell's 1973 autobiography, *Halfbreed*, we also listen to the old-time country music of Kitty Wells and Jimmie Rodgers included in Scofield's book and discuss its relevance to Métis communities today, and we study the history of Métis disenfranchisement and socio-political resistance in Canada. We discuss the complications of identity, and we grapple with the tensions that blood quantum and the rhetorics of race have imposed on Aboriginal communities throughout North America.

These connections and relationships matter. They deepen our understanding, and they illuminate the human concerns expressed in literature. A text alone can say much, but the literary is never far from its context, especially among Native people, for whom words are generally regarded as having profound, world-altering power. *The Cherokee Phoenix* wasn't simply a bilingual newspaper. It was also a political symbol to the world that the Cherokees would not passively accept the Indian Removal Act, a Draconian piece of racist legislation that mandated the forced expulsion of Native people from their traditional homelands in the eastern United States. *The Phoenix* enabled all Cherokees to communicate with one another and to understand what was happening in the world beyond their borders. The printing press provided a vigorous forum for debate and discussion, and its presence in large part maintained the solidarity and unity of Cherokee opinion against removal. The influence of such a powerful symbol wasn't lost on those hostile to the Cherokee cause; in 1836, the press was seized under orders of the U.S. agent to the Cherokees, John Schermerhorn, to be used to discredit the Cherokee leaders who opposed the Removal Act.

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We need not lose the literary text to place it within a larger body of knowledge and experience. If anything, we enrich both the text's significance and our understanding of the multilayered resonance of the literature by seeing it as part of something more than itself.

Connections

When Cherokee/Appalachian poet Marilou Awiakta told her mother of her dream to be a poet, her mother replied, "That's good. And what will you do for the people?" (Crowe 43). This simple question is the ethical centre in which my teaching and scholarship are embedded: *And what will you do for the people?*

How does our work make the world better for our people, for all people of peace? The issue for me has never been whether or not literature can change the world, because I've experienced that transformative possibility in my own life, and I've seen it happen with many other people. The dilemma is, instead, *how* to make it happen.

I've never found the literary to be an obstacle to an active engagement with progressive social activism on behalf of Native rights; if anything, the literary is central to a holistic understanding of our current and historical realities. Indigenous epistemologies generally don't divide knowledge into hierarchical and easily-divisible categories; thus, all the courses I teach include substantial historical, sociological, and political content. This is particularly important in Aboriginal literature, as most of my students have little experience with Indigenous peoples beyond media stereotypes and broad cultural biases. To focus only on the literary texts is to erase the necessary contexts that would place the literature into broader streams of thought and experience that the writers themselves are addressing; yet to focus only on historical or political context is to strip away the human voices emerging from the texts. Both are needed for understanding.

If Indigenousness is about anything, it's about relationships: to one another, to the land, the cosmos, spirits of the past and of the world around us. At its best, academia is about many of the same things: relationships between people, ideas, and experiences.

Sadly, the historical relationship between Native peoples and academia is one of tension, exploitation, and abuse. Although there have been significant changes in the past thirty years, academics still often see Indigenous traditional knowledge, stories, ceremonies, and bodies as resources for the cultural/economic benefit of non-Natives. As Koyangk'auwi Maidu poet Janice Gould has noted, "there is not a university in this country that is not built on what was once native land. We should reflect on this over

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and over, and understand this fact as one fundamental point about the relationship of Indians to academia" (qtd. in Powell 1).

Yet universities aren't simply the colonizing site of academic exploitation. They are increasingly sites of cultural recovery, and in this way, too, the literary can serve the purposes of human liberation and dignity. Many Native people—myself included—were not raised with their Indigenous languages and do not live within their Nation's land boundaries. A Native literature classroom might be the first place that a dislocated Aboriginal student will deeply engage with Indigenous perspectives and voices; or, for those with more vexed cultural connections, it might be the first place that a student will be able to stand up against a lifetime of racist ideas and see her heritage as something that isn't shameful. Similarly, a Native literature classroom can act as a catalyst for non-Native students to engage in a substantive, enriching way with the lives, concerns, and intellectual traditions of Indigenous peoples and thus share their efforts in creating a just, non-racist world. These students often emerge from these classes with a deeper appreciation of their own traditions and histories. Our work can help *everyone* move toward a life-long journey of healing.

As a boy, I didn't want to be Native; Indigenousness was associated in my mind with poverty, pain, and scorn. Although I loved my parents, I wanted to be anything but a working-class Cherokee kid from the mountains; I wanted to be a Rhodes Scholar and live in an English manor, my pinkie raised during high tea, far from any memory of my life in Victor. It wasn't until I was an isolated, self-hating and suicidally unhappy third-year undergraduate that I read a book by an Indigenous writer, and the experience changed my life. I'd long assumed that the only worthy literature came from England; the idea that I could have a career examining the literature of my own people—and to see worthy ideas and expressions within it—was revolutionary.

It helped lead me home. It helped save my life.

What's Left Of English Studies?

Many of the most profound moments of my life as a student and a scholar have taken place through a passionate engagement with literature. The experience hasn't always been pleasant, however. When, as a fourth-year undergraduate student, I told a professorial acquaintance about my decision to study Indigenous literature, he looked at me with disappointment and said, "I thought you were a better scholar than that." I've often been greeted with incredulity by non-academics when I explain that, yes, Native

people do have literature and, yes, it's a very substantial and growing body of work.

Indigenous languages are besieged but still strong; those of us who have been denied our Indigenous tongues still long to reclaim them. Much of the most important work in Indigenous communities today surrounds language preservation, and rightly so, as much of the most vibrant, culturally-rooted, and life-affirming knowledge of our communities endures within those ancient languages and the worldviews embedded within them. Yet many Native people have only known English (or Spanish, or French, or other colonizing languages); many are taking the advice of Joy Harjo (Mvskoke) and Gloria Bird (Spokane) and "reinventing the enemy's language."

To assert the validity of these languages for those Native people who speak them doesn't require a rejection of Indigenous languages. We know far too well the horrors visited upon Aboriginal children under Canada's assimilative boarding school policy, which included language destruction as a top priority. Language needn't be seen as an either/or proposition. Perhaps multilingual education that honours our Indigenous tongues while acknowledging the place of Eurowestern languages in many of our communities is another healing option. Besides, influence doesn't move in only one direction: English, French, and Spanish have all been deeply shaped in this place by Indigenous languages and traditions. They don't belong only to Eurowesterners; they belong to Native people, too.

Unfortunately, many scholars and lay people still believe that the only "authentic" Indigenous literature must be written in an Indigenous language (or must only exist as oral literature), that anything written in English is somehow tainted or illegitimate. This insistence on artificial purity erases the real and valid life experiences of many Indigenous people throughout the Americas, and it assumes a static, monolithic Native identity that belies the diversity of history and experience of the thousands of Indigenous Nations in this hemisphere. The underlying assumption behind all of these positions is that Native people don't belong outside of museums, that we're only "real" when we're unchanged from before 1492 or when we're vanished—and then, of course, we're dead.

To teach Indigenous literature with a belief in the full humanity of Indigenous people is to inevitably engage in an act of political resistance. In this regard it doesn't really matter where that teaching takes place. But while I'm a strong advocate of area studies programs—Indigenous/Aboriginal Studies foremost among them—I also believe that English Studies departments are essential sites for enriching social activism, because

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literature matters. Whether or not we agree with the idea that there is transcendent meaning in literature, there's no doubt that many people find deep, compelling value and purpose in a thoughtful engagement with the written word. Those of us who are committed to the goals of peace, equality, and dignity can't afford to abandon English Studies, because we'd be abandoning many who need our help the most. If not for the passionate, intellectually-rigorous and dedicated professors and friends I've encountered through my work in this discipline, my own long journey toward healing and scholarly maturity might have been much more painful. I've been blessed by many: from Janie Hinds and John Brand at the University of Northern Colorado to Fran Kaye, George Wolf, and Malea Powell at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, to all the many others among them and since. Now it's my turn to share some of their generosity with those who follow me.

In her book *Writing as Witness: essay and talk*, Bay of Quinte Mohawk writer Beth Brant reflects on her own understanding of the power of literature: "Story is meant to be spoken—that has not changed. The written becomes the spoken whether by hands or mouth, the spoken enters the heart, the heart turns over, Earth is renewed. In the end, this is what matters to me. 'I write because to not write is a breach of faith'" (Brant 82).

My thoughts occasionally wander back to that little five-year-old boy in the Victor Public Library who discovered new worlds of limitless wonder and possibility in the musty pages of a storybook. He's older now, and a bit worn by the cynicism of the world, but that passion still endures. I write, and I teach, because to do otherwise is no real choice at all. English Studies, for all its problems, is still a discipline worth fighting for; it's still a place where profound progressive change can occur, where a passionate investment in transformative and challenging intellectualism can save lives and enrich our reality. By doing this work, we give honour to the struggles of all those for whom literature has been a step toward liberation.

We can still change the world.

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