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Standpoint Theory Approaches to Recent Canadian Autobiographical Text

Lynette Hunter
University of Leeds

Dear Marta,

Here with my abstract for your conference. Hope it's not too abstruse.

Lynette

Dear Marta,

Yes I know I promised a paper on nomad literature but that was two years ago over a second bottle of wine - besides it's a little too close to the bone. What I really had in mind was how to sort out an anecdote my friend Hilary told me about someone researching domestic violence in South Africa who couldn't wait to get away from the anti-apartheid celebrations, and how the voices on the domestic violence side which sometimes come through in literacy work are so important but so « un-literacy » that no one pays any attention, no one hears them. I suspect it has something to do with jettisoning post-cartesian aesthetics.

Love to the twins

Lynette

Marta

Of course I'm not going to talk about S. Africa.

L.

Dear Marta,

Sorry abt the one-liner you got yesterday. I've decided to talk abt Lee Maracle's stuff. The big problem is how to talk abt vulnerability without putting it away in a box - we've all had to become such highly skilled analytical rationalists that we could define anything into or out of existence. I think I'll have to start off with some conversational rhetoric - I'm obsessive abt topical logic at the moment. But I thought I'd better check it out with you first just to make sure it doesn't offend anyone. It really comes out of all this VE-day material we're being bombarded with but it's something one of the women in the wholefood group told me about a street party they'd had. She was deeply sweetly into it and showed us all the pictures with children and « old ladies » who had lived through the war and my generation with the folk guitars & her own generation - ten years younger. The media was targeted precisely on people her age, and we've endured weeks of VE-day as a « celebration of joy » which she's been stepping back into as if it's an old sepia photograph, a vicarious war for those who've never had one because the Falklands was too far away and there's a communications blackout erasing...
Ireland. She said that one of the « old ladies » — her words not mine — sang popular war songs like « Hitler has only got one ball » and all the children joined in — much to her shock, but I remember Alexander singing it with Thatcher's name in the key position a few years back, must be a playground song.

But what struck me at all this celebration was what my friend Hilary said about VE-day, all those people in the streets in 45. She said she remembered not joy but a peculiar combination of relief and grief — and no one was telling this story. Maybe it's too difficult to talk about. We can tell stories about tragedy and joy but not about the other complicated stuff. I had several relatives who died in the war; I guess lots of people did, Allied & Axis: England & Germany; England and France: Canada and France: France and France — that gets complicated. A series of tragic stories but there aren't any particular stories about the human remainders, the people who remained alive. It's difficult to talk about the day to day.

I thought if I told a story like this at the start of the paper it would pay respect to Maracle's work on the daily — I'll bring along the photos and try to be vulnerable. What do you think?

Lynette

I would like to try to begin with a question several critics have raised with regard to Lee Maracle's work: why is it that writing, which to many readers is sloppily written and not very good, is given such much cultural and critical attention? The question is implicit if not explicit in critical readings of a growing number of texts that have come into publication through the publishing programme that has resulted from Canada's intellectual commitment to the encouragement of cultural definition since the 1950s. Some people have even said that too much gets published. The writings by Maracle on which I want to focus are I Am Woman and Sojourner's Truth.

A traditionally trained reader can pick up either and find lapses in conception on almost any page. For example, early in I Am Woman the narrator says:

« I asked me to read. I doubt very much if she knew how hard that was going to be for me. She and my partner were the only ones who knew that I wrote poetry: everyone else thought of me as a political essayist and occasional short story writer. I have said things that I now have to live with. I have told the world my private aspirations, my dreams and the pain of my resistance. I lay myself on everyone's feet. I have very little self that is left that is private. (WOM, p. 9).»

The insistent repetition of « I » at the start of each syntactically simple sentence is likely to grate on a sophisticated reader, and is oddly placed within a double focus of narcissism and sententiousness. The preceding paragraph alternates between

2. For example, M. Dvorak spoke about this issue at the Moving Words/Moving Worlds conference in September 1994. Cf. « Yes, But Is It Literature? » in Commonwealth, vol. 18, nº 1, National Identities in the New Literatures in English, Dijon, Editions Universitaires de Dijon, autumn 1995. But one could also say that Maracle has been excluded, for example she is not within the selection Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada, compiled and edited by Perreault, J. and Vancle, S., preface by Larocque, B., Edmonton, NeWest, 1990.
3. All quotations are taken from the following editions: Maracle, L., I Am Woman, Vancouver, Write-On Press, 1988, abbreviated into WOM; Idem, Sojourner's Truth and other stories, Vancouver, Press Gang, 1990, abbreviated into SOJ.

« I » sentences and the flat assertiveness of statement: « Part of being colonised is the need to remain invisible. They erase you, and you want to stay that way. Being a writer is getting up there and writing oneself onto everyone's blackboard » (WOM, p. 9). The statements offer important commentary on the relationship of coloniser and colonised, on the positions for speech and writing within colonisation and their relevance to the perceived dichotomy of private and public communication; yet they may be dismissed because of an apparent loss of control over register.

Another example, picked at random from the end of the chapter « I Am Woman », engages with a topic central to women's studies: the way in which within so many societies women learn to hate each other. Maracle overlays this topic with questions of race, intensifying the ambivalence of any analysis:

We have done enough to help Europeans wipe us off the face of the earth. Everyday we trade our treasured women friends for the men in our lives. We even trade our sisters. Let Wounded Knee be the last time they erased us from the world of the living. Let us all blossom beautiful and productive (WOM, p. 22).

Yet the prose is littered with collective pronouns into which readers may resist being collected; each sentence has a commonplace topic tendency toward cliché as in « wipe us off the face of the earth », with the final sentence ending on the arguably inappropriate lyricism of the word « blossom » used as a verb. The ambivalence of analysis can be obscured by what could be read as naive excessiveness. Similarly, Maracle's narrator of the chapter « My Love » takes on one of the issues at the heart of Western metaphysics, how to love without reward, in the following passage:

Somewhere along the road I must have taken on the settler women's attitude, for I knew not how to love. Part of me craved your undivided attention, your absolute devotion. I sought to free you; to free myself from this self-seeking madness.

I am torn apart and terrorized, not by you, my love, but by the war waging inside me. A new torrent grips me for I know the battle will grow in intensity, until my desire to love you without reward wins. As the war grows, so grows my madness (WOM, p. 38).

At the same time as it considers an issue that has been discussed from Plato to Arendt, the text is structured by religious sentiment with distinct echoes of the Christian liturgy, which could be read as crude modulations of a subtle discourse. A final example, taken arbitrarily from this work, is the direct and outspoken voicing of a key to the problem of racial exploitation of First Nations Peoples in « Pork Chops and Apple Sauce »:

It [the land] was wrested from us by force and since conquest (not « contact »), they have built a system of lawless pillage and plunder of the earth and its people on the graves of our ancestors. Everytime I say that people jump and cry « what are you going to do with all these white people, send them back to Europe, drive them into the sea, put them onto reservations? » (WOM, p. 154).

Here once again, the centrality of a problem which is often an unspoken fear, can be overwhelmed by the hyperbole of propagandic vocabulary even if it is contained within the recognised device of « scare quotes ».
Much of Sojourner’s Truth is open to similar judgments of stylistic excess and apparent lack of experience. «Polka Partners» opens with the mixed register of the “petulant youth” ambling downtown, and more colloquially “the skins for white folks” (SOJ, p. 80). “The color of earth death” and the “earth’s last supper” side by side with the slang of “It seemed a little hokey to take a bus across the bridge and haul ass through nature’s bounty”; and later the narrator “thoughtlessly scolded the purveyor of the passed-out man’s purse before I relieved him of his catch” offering archly formal syntax paired with the conversational idiom that immediately follows when she “geared up my mouth” and peeked at “a whack of cash” (SOJ, p. 81). Despite the immense regularity of such register contrasts, many readers only note the initial jarring of convention. Just so, the constructed grammatical confusion that arises over the pronoun “he” during the re-telling of the story about a mugging (SOJ, p. 82) is strategic, so that mugged and mugger are mixed up and our stereotypes of which would be the Native person are called upon: is this conscious device or carelessness? The sharp inappropriateness of lyric in for example the description of spring with “spiky slivers of earth-milk squeezed from her voluptuous breasts streaked across my face” (SOJ, p. 85-86) placed alongside the dingy streets, underlines the juxtaposition of sublime and banal, yet is it bathos or pathos? Readers have a choice.

The way in which these examples are often read indicates that what is being done with the words as signifiers is different from what they convey. The text makes highly radical comments but maintains a stylistic status quo, using sentimentalism, cliché, inappropriate lyricism, excessive repetition: There is altogether too much bias in this autobiography. The contradictions resonate strongly with issues raised around other similar writing concerned with bringing the personal and political together from Mary Shelley to George Orwell not to mention the entire field of recent women’s writing addressed to personal/political theory. And, as with those writers, the literary criticism is left with a series of questions to address. The following set marks the conceptual terrain with which I wish to engage:

1. Should « bad » writing get published?
2. Should we value a text for its content when it is « badly » written?
3. Should we teach « bad » writing just because it’s the only available writing from socially marginalised groups?
4. Should we allow our political correctness to determine literary availability or should we use aesthetic standards?
5. And more immediate and personal: why are we so embarrassed by certain texts that we call them « bad »?

Of course, the key words in these questions is « bad » which indicates aesthetic judgment, and all judgment proceeds from sites of power. What I would like to do now is question aesthetic power in a rather different way to the way we normally question it.

Most studies of power deal with it either as a cause of domination (theories of ideology) or in terms of its effects (theories of discourse). Both approaches first assume that power has a particular formation and location, and then focus either on what power does or on how we experience/feel it. Both approaches are trapped in the a priori of the ideology-subject axis which we have learned from Lacan to call the « always already »: an anthropomorphising of power that is called a number of other things depending on which discourse we work within, and which is tied together with post-Cartesian notions of the adequacy/inadequacy of language that have solidified the myth of monoglossic presence. Now instead of working from the premise that power determines individual action let’s ask: how and why do individuals agree to particular locations for power, to recognise them as such and in the repetition of that recognition, to legitimise that power?

This approach engages with issues of legitimation in the representative democracies of the modern western world, particularly with the effects of the enfranchisement of populations in Northern Europe and North America early this century. With that enfranchisement, strategies for the legitimation of power which had been in place since the classical period, have had to change. Attempts to deal with these changes in theories of ideology and of discourse have largely operated as though these strategies are still effective. In the abstract provided to the conference I suggest that standpoint theory offers an alternative approach because it works from marginal positions which can see the limitations of ruling power, both its causes and effects, quite clearly—especially in terms of the effective continuation of disenfranchisement. While discourse theory and cultural studies have partly been a response to the massive impenetrability of ruling ideology, Foucauldian counter-discourses too often have to isolate specific sites of struggle such as punishment or...

5. Within this category come ideology for Althusser, discourse for Foucault, master narratives for Jameson.


8. For a more extensive background see HUNTER, L., « Ideology as the Ethos of the Nation State », Rhetorica, XIV, n° 2, 1996.

9. Standard definitions of literature are based on poetics being a transgression of convention. This concept of difficulty or defamiliarisation neatly fits the structure of the Lacanian symbolic informing so much feminist theory, and the Freudian mirror stage used so often by postcolonial theory, and has become part of the theorisation of alternative voices. At the same time it brings with it the double bind of the « always already », the inevitable entrapment into the ideological that renders the condition of « woman » or « postcolonial subject » tragic. Yet it is the possibility of the tragic that opens the door of « literature » to the relatively disempowered. The entire conceptual scheme upon which this metaphysics is based focuses on prior acceptance of a division between the mind and the body, a separation usually constructed via the entry into language, which is why the scheme has become so immediately important for writing. Unfortunately this conceptual structure has no space for the disempowered, and it discourages approaches to literature that are not trapped in the transgressive. It is unfortunate since such writing by marginalised peoples is often precisely negotiated and sentimental. However, this scheme is certainly not the only available concept for either knowledge, language or power. The proposed paper will discuss recent work by Canadian standpoint theorists and their international community, and will bring some of the ideas derived from the work on autobiography, diaries, journals and letters, to some recent Canadian texts: particularly the writings of Lee Macarel.

sense. Yet at the same time, each would continue to work within the ideology/subject axis even as a counter-discourse. None would require us to look at how and why we have agreed to the criteria for justification, so all would be appropriations into our own legitimating system.

In fact this kind of justification is something that at some times has to be done as a political act, but I would question its effectiveness in all cases, even in the long term. I wonder whether we shouldn’t ask rather different questions, so that we can negotiate with the text on its terms as well as our own. Here standpoint theory can be helpful because it asks us to work outside the ideology/subject axis as the locus of ruling power, and to work with the text, to negotiate an assessment of common grounds that might provide a basis for agreement. Standpoint offers different strategies for knowing the real, agreeing about common ground, repeating, recognising and legitimating that knowledge. For writing and reading standpoint asks us to engage specifically with the field of relations between language and epistemology. As we repeat those agreements about common grounds – in our writing, our teaching, our conversations with others – and recognise those grounds elsewhere, they may acquire stability and become legitimating factors. It is, to an extent, to accept the text as a human construct, necessarily messy, to attempt to be its friend. It does not mean that after this work we can say: this is a “good” text or this is a “bad” text: but that we may have located areas where we, both reader and writer, can agree and disagree about common grounds. Life-writings, diaries, journals, letters, personal anecdotes are fruitful texts for learning about such negotiation, because they don’t structure the messy into neat packages, they don’t evade the messy.

As currently articulated by Canadian philosophers and social policy theorists, and other international writers, standpoint theory allows one to question power from the standpoint of positions outside ruling power, to think about how power is negotiated and exerted not only within governing institutions but also in many other locations. For example: it would enable us to read I Am Woman recognising the position of a Native Canadian writer from a group of peoples who only received the vote in 1961. Many Native writers working in the 1990s will remember quite clearly a time when their community had no legitimate position within the discourses of state and society. As a strategy appropriate to a specific position, where a white reader may find herself negotiating the value of cliché as opposed to lyric in First Nations political propaganda, standpoint can come close to offering new representations for subject positions, newly allowable objectivities. Indeed it has been criticised for its apparent exacerbation of difference to the point of isolating one marginalised group from another.

Yet standpoint’s insistence on material detail gives it a rhetorical slant that encourages a reading across positions in search of common ground. With one aspect of Maracle’s writing for example, we are encouraged to look at the attempts at agency from those who, even with the vote and supposed access to political power, are still effectively disenfranchised. For a European, where the consciousness of continued disempowerment despite the franchise exploded in 1968 into the enervation of the 70s most commonly presented by ahistorical postmodernism, this chronologically contemporaneous thrusting out of agency on the part of the First Nations Peoples asks us to change our grounds, to learn from the text about strategies for constructing sites of power to change our lives. The “sentimental” may need to be reassessed as just such a helpful device. What this contemporaneity does for a Canadian caught in the contradiction of simultaneous national consciousness in 1967 and the consciousness of disenfranchisement that occurred in the West in 1968, must be something different – probably more difficult.

Texts such as those by Lee Maracle are precisely not concerned to fit the allowable representations and representational forms and structures. They can lead traditional readers, as most readers are by virtue of education, to engage with them and other texts not as subjects, but in Canadian philosopher Lorraine Code’s words as “friends.” I would like to finish with two observations. First: Liz Stanley, who works on working class women’s autobiographies in England, reminds us that feminists, men or women, still do not write about autobiography in a feminist way, even though they are eager when reading Woolf, Cixous, Wollstonecraft, or working class women’s texts, to talk about those as feminist writing. Second: I suspect that it’s in this kind of negotiation that a lot of work on language and writing goes on before it more or less self-consciously enters the field of conventional literary judgment. Those writings that don’t enter that field are doing so for a reason, reasons that we need to learn to recognise, negotiate and value.


