
By Elizabeth Yeoman, Professor, Memorial University, St. John’s NL A1B 3X8

Collaborative authorship is a complex and often fraught process. Since the appropriation debates of the 1980s and early 90s, non-indigenous recorders and editors of Aboriginal stories have been forced to re-consider their roles in the production of collaborative texts. Meanwhile, Aboriginal people themselves have been developing new forms of collaboration. *First Person Plural* examines a range of collaborative texts, including traditional “told-to narratives” but also reports of land claims cases, public forums and commissions, ethnographic work, films and media representations.

The book is organized around several themes: the concept of “native voice” and appropriations and subversions of that voice, literary sovereignty, connections between storytelling and the land, the practice and politics of partial translation, inadequate translations - by non-indigenous collaborators, by interpreters, or by the storytellers themselves when they told their stories in English to their collaborators - and representations of the north and of conflicts such as Oka. Sophie McCall explores not only the more obvious sets of “told-to” stories (with particular attention given to *Life Lived Like A Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Elders* by Julie Cruikshank in collaboration with Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith and Annie Ned, Harry Robinson’s
Write It On Your Heart: The Epic World of an Okanagan Storyteller, edited by Wendy Wickwire, and Ila Bussidor and Üstün Bilgen-Reinart’s Night Spirits: The Story of the Relocation of the Sayisi Dene) but also films ranging from Alanis Obamsawn’s detailed documentation of the history, background and aftermath of Oka to Hugh Brody’s ethnographic films to the burgeoning Inuit film industry, especially the work of Zacharias Kunuk and Isuma. In addition to these bodies of work, she also provides nuanced discussion of land claims trials like Delgamuukw v. Canada and documents such as the Berger Report and the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. All of these involved extensive collaboration and, despite numerous and at times heartbreaking flaws in the processes, they bring new insight into what collective storytelling is and could be.

The book does not address collaborations based on original writing in Aboriginal languages. Perhaps this is not a fair criticism since the book focuses on oral narratives but the title suggests that written narratives might be included as well. Though McCall critiques ‘the binary oppositions of the teller versus the recorder, the oral versus the written” (212), and “a Native literary canon” versus “told-to narratives” (78), this lacuna suggests that the binary is difficult to escape and that those who are not literate in a colonial language do not write at all. There are numerous examples of diary keepers and life writers working in indigenous languages, particularly Inuktitut, from the historical example of Labrador Inuk Abraham Ulrikabe who kept a diary while he and his family were exhibited in European zoos in the 1880s, to Peter Pitseolak’s People from Our Side, consisting of his own manuscript and photographs along with a narrative by Dorothy Harley Eber based on interviews conducted with the help of interpreters, The Autobiography of John Ayaruqaq, published in syllabics only in 1968 with some sections
translated into English and published in *North Magazine* in 1969 and *The Rankin Times* in 1974, and Nuligak’s autobiography, edited by Maurice Metayer and more recently made into an award winning film, *I, Nuligak: An Inuvialuit History of First Contact*, produced by White Pine Pictures in 2005. Most of these examples are from an earlier period than McCall’s focus (the 1990s) but the recent production of the film version of *I, Nuligak* and new versions of *People From Our Side* and *The Diary of Abraham Ulrikabe* suggests that they would be worth attending to in the contexts McCall’s book addresses.

One reason I was so interested in *First Person Plural* is that I am currently working with Labrador Innu elder Elizabeth Penashue on the translation and editing of her diaries, which she has been writing in Innu-aimun since the Innu protests against NATO low level flying in the 1980s and continues to write as the Lower Churchill hydroelectric dam project proceeds. I was left wondering whether there are other current examples of life-writers working in indigenous languages or of collaborative work on older writings such as *I, Nuligak*. It would be wonderful to have Sophie McCall’s keen insight on such projects - perhaps in a future edition of the book, which, I am certain, will be reprinted many times. *First Person Plural* is a wide ranging, nuanced and perceptive book, one that researchers and writers will find extremely helpful in thinking through issues of collaboration. I recommend it very highly.

Works Cited:


