



## **Relational Accountability, or, The Limits of Objectivity**

—Mavis Reimer

The first issue of *Jeunesse*, which appeared in the summer of 2009, carried three reviews of *Home Words*, a collection of eleven essays on Canadian children’s literature. Publishing a group of reviews of a single scholarly book was an inversion of the pattern of review essays about groups of texts that had become the standard form in the journal that preceded this one—*Canadian Children’s Literature / Littérature canadienne pour la jeunesse*—and the idea of editor Benjamin Lefebvre. The reviews had been commissioned many months previously and originally were intended to appear in the final issue of *CCL/LCJ*. For reasons I can no longer recall and perhaps never knew, they were held over for the inaugural issue of *Jeunesse*. All of this would have been an ordinary, even banal, occurrence in the production process, except for the fact that I was both the editor of the volume of scholarly essays and the incoming lead editor of the new journal. While I took some pains in my editorial to the issue to register my distance from any oversight of the reviews (7) and Lefebvre introduced the essays by

assuring readers that he had been given “total freedom to arrange for a review” (94), I remained uneasy about the perception of too close a connection between reviewers and reviewed. Shortly after the issue appeared, a discussion thread on a listserv for editors of scholarly journals took up exactly the question that had been discomfiting me: under what circumstances might it be acceptable for editors to publish reviews of their own books in their journals? The general opinion, as I feared, was that good journals, reputable journals, do not. Retaining the status of trusted purveyor of knowledge meant restraining the appearance of material to which editors might be attached.

That objectivity is the proper stance for a scholar is an assumption deeply engrained in Western systems of thought and knowledge creation. Associated with the development of modern scientific method, objectivity is the attribute of knowledge that, among other things, is impersonal, has predictive saliency, is built on observations of events outside the mind, and can be tested and replicated experimentally

(see, for example, Gillispie 10). The extent to which these attributes describe scientific method in practice accurately is questionable. “[O]fficial ideologies about objectivity and scientific method are particularly bad guides to how scientific knowledge is actually *made*,” according to feminist scientist Donna Haraway (576). Historiographer Hayden White blames historians for perpetuating “*bad science*,” which he characterizes as “contained above all in the outmoded conceptions of objectivity” historians often invoke (“Burden” 127). Nevertheless, it continues to be true that the attributes associated with objectivity are highly valued far beyond the domain of experimental science: the principal contemporary meaning of the word, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is “the ability to consider or represent facts, information, etc., without being influenced by personal feelings or opinions” (“objectivity”). In common usage, in short, objectivity has become more or less synonymous with intellectual and professional integrity.

The prompt for my recollection of my unpropitious beginnings as editor of *Jeunesse* was a more recent publication resulting from another collaborative research project in which I have been involved for the past seven years, a publication that is unlikely ever to be reviewed in this journal. The Six Seasons of the *Asiniskow Ithiniwak* Picture Book Series project sets out to document some of the stories of the Rocky Cree people of northern Manitoba (the *Asiniskow*

*Ithiniwak*) from the proto-contact period of the mid-seventeenth century: this was a time before any Europeans appeared in the region, although the Rocky Cree had already heard tales about the presence of non-Aboriginal people on the land and a few European goods such as metal knives had arrived in their communities through their extensive trade networks (Brownlee and Syms 5–6). The first publication of the series is a picture book authored by storyteller William Dumas and entitled *Ptsim Finds Her Miskanow*. To refuse to promote the appearance of this book in this journal in order to maintain editorial objectivity—a stance Thomas Nagel famously dubbed “the view from nowhere”—seems to me a fundamental betrayal of the project itself, since the explicit goal of the Six Seasons research is to make available to contemporary audiences some of the history of a people who have long been subjected to official, systemic attempts to destroy their ways of living and knowing.

The many ways in which Indigenous people have been silenced and absented from the centre of Canadian society are well documented: the displacement of Aboriginal peoples from traditional lands to facilitate the settlement of European immigrants; the repeated failure to honour the terms of the treaties signed with Aboriginal peoples, which guaranteed access in perpetuity to the land being shared with European newcomers; the criminalization of cultural practices; the institution of the Indian

Residential School system through which, over a long stretch of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Aboriginal children were removed from families and communities not only to be trained in European systems of knowledge but also, explicitly, to be trained out of traditional knowledges. While these policies were set in place by Canadian governments, in that they were legislated acts backed by law enforcement, such actions by democratically elected and re-elected governments could not have been undertaken without at least the tacit consent of many Canadian people, consent also expressed through pervasive societal racism against Indigenous people. Moreover, these were not punctual actions—performed only once—but actions that were distributed and repeated across territories and time, some of them continuing today and all with consequences resonating throughout contemporary Canadian society.<sup>1</sup>

Indigenous resistance to colonial governments and to colonizing practices is also an action distributed and repeated across territories and time, as Gord Hill emphasizes in his graphic history of the colonization of the Americas, *The 500 Years of Resistance Comic Book*. In the current moment of Canadian history, this resistance is palpable and insistent: in 2012–13, a time that the Kino-nda-niimi Collective calls “the winter we danced,” Indigenous people and allies across Canada protested the introduction of federal legislation that buried significant changes to laws

governing Indigenous people, the environment, and water inside a five-hundred-page omnibus bill disingenuously entitled the Jobs and Growth Act. The teach-ins, flash mobs, round dances, hunger strikes, and other community actions assembled under the label of the Idle No More movement not only called, specifically, for the repeal of sections of the bill but also called, more generally, on all Canadians to join “conversations about how to live together meaningfully and peacefully, as nations and as neighbours” (“Idle” 23). The bill passed the Senate and received royal assent in December 2012, but the movement has not ended. There is a gathering hope among Indigenous and allied people that “this time and place” (“Idle” 23) is the beginning of an awakening on a “large and collective scale” (Belleau 351) that will transform the relations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

The Six Seasons project was conceived in full knowledge of the history of the fractured relationships of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada and burdened by the weight of the consequences of colonial practices. The collaborative group is a mix of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal researchers, some of whom are survivors of the residential school system. Lived experiences, opinions, conflicts, anxieties, and hopes have inflected and informed our research from the beginning, sometimes stopping our work for weeks and months while we searched for or put together



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understandings that would allow us to move forward again. When we wrote the introduction to *Prsim*, we agreed that the best description of the process of the project was to call it “a labour of love” (n. pag.). The research was and is fuelled by the conviction that the transmission of healing stories is possible and, in this sense, it is an inherently political undertaking.

The project had its beginnings in 1993, when two fishermen from the community of South Indian Lake found beads made of pin cherry seeds floating in the water off the shore of Nagami Bay, a find that led them to a burial site on the banks of the lake. The site, excavated in 1994, was the burial of a young woman who died when she was in her mid-twenties. She was named Kayasochi Kikawenow, Our Mother from Long Ago, by members of the community. Among the objects found in the grave were more beads of local pin cherries, beads of bone, red pipestone beads from southwestern Minnesota, glass beads of European manufacture, and a variety of hand tools. In part because of the radiometric dating of the beads, archaeologists concluded that Kayasochi Kikawenow was buried about 1660 (Brownlee and Syms 52). Permission to study the belongings and the remains of the woman was given to archaeologists from The Manitoba Museum by Elders of the O-Pipon-Na-Piwin First Nation, who concluded that the revelation of the burial site should be understood as knowledge passed on to the present by the ancestors of the Rocky Cree people who live in the region today. In particular, the Elders observed, the findings were to be regarded as gifts that “are to be used by our youth to learn about the old ways and gain respect for the past” (Brownlee and Syms 1). Archaeologists Kevin Brownlee (a member of the collaborative research group) and

E. Leigh Syms worked to report their research results in non-specialist language (Brownlee 61), but community member and teacher William Dumas was troubled by the sense that the promise to pass on the knowledge brought back to the present to the young people of the community had not been fulfilled. This was where his idea to produce a picture book began: he decided to reanimate Kayasochi Kikawenow by placing her within the historical, geographical, and cultural contexts of her time and telling stories about her life as a young girl. The Six Seasons project is the result: the books being created through the project seek to address young people—in the first instance, First Nations young people—in order to tell new stories about who they are, to what they can aspire, and what their place in the world is by telling stories about the past and about the ways in which people thrived through honouring their relationships to the land and to their networks of kinship groups.

The unbroken connection between past and present is central to the view of healthy social life for the Rocky Cree. As Dumas explains it, the idea of culture translates into Cree as *pimātisiwin*, a word that can be unbundled into its constituent parts to make its meaning clear: *pimā* means moving forward; *tisi* is the root of the word for umbilical cord; and *win* is a suffix indicating a way of being. Culture, then, is a way of being in which human societies move forward because they are tied to the source of their life (“Cultural”). To

tell a historical narrative is to promote such a way of being and moving.

This view of history is quite distinct from the academic traditions of scholarly historical discourse. As scientific method came to be the dominant paradigm for the creation of knowledge during the nineteenth century, other disciplines—including history—sought to define their methods through parallel terms. As White describes it, the attempt to understand history as a kind of science was based on “conceptions of objectivity” that treated “‘facts’ as though they were ‘given’” or “‘found,’” rather than “‘constructed’ by the kinds of questions which the investigator asks of the phenomena before him” (“Burden” 127). Not surprisingly, the mode that ultimately was privileged by nineteenth-century historians was that of irony, which is often taken to be value-neutral or objective. It is a mode that continues to inform many contemporary historical projects. Lloyd S. Kramer summarizes White’s description of the ironic trope into which historians seem to be locked as “a skeptical attitude” that allows historians to take a “superior view of the people and events that they discuss,” because, it is assumed, “people always lack the perspective in their own time to see the disjunction between their words and experience as clearly as historians see it in retrospect” (104). Irony appears to be “transideological,” in that it can be used tactically either to defend a variety of ideological positions or “to pillory the ideals” of

opponents, White observes, but, “as the basis of a world view,” irony also “tends to dissolve all belief in the possibility of positive political actions” (*Metahistory* 38). At the conclusion of *Metahistory*, his influential account of the dominant modes of historical discourse in nineteenth-century Europe, White argues that the reasons for choosing one interpretation of historical events over another are ultimately moral and aesthetic rather than empirical; and he opens up the possibility that, if historians were to understand their indebtedness to philosophical and literary conceptual frameworks more fully, historical thinking might “generate” systems of interpretation that “challenge the Ironic perspective” (433).

White’s verb tenses imply that he sees such systems as arising in the future—he is writing in 1973—but, as Dumas’s account of *pimātsiwin* demonstrates, alternative systems for understanding history have long been available to scholars who consider ways of knowing other than those endorsed by Western academic traditions, ways of knowing that are both older than and contemporaneous with these dominant traditions. White himself begins his study by noting that the Western accounts of history and historical thinking he takes as his focus might be understood as a “prejudice by which the presumed superiority of modern, industrial society” over “cultures and civilizations preceding it [and] also to those contemporary with it in time and contiguous with

it in space” can be “retroactively substantiated” (2). His procedure for unveiling the terms through which nineteenth-century European historians represented historical events is unabashedly literary: he begins from the assumption that the “historical work” is “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes” (2). White continues to be regarded as an important and even controversial representative of the poststructuralist linguistic turn in the philosophy of history,<sup>3</sup> but many of his groundbreaking assertions are commonplaces of Indigenous intellectual traditions.

First Nations scholar Nigaanwewidam James Sinclair, for example, observes that “Anishinaabeg conceive of the universe as constituted by language” (ii). In his 2003 CBC Massey Lectures, novelist Thomas King explores the ties of Native culture to storytelling, demonstrating repeatedly through a series of variations that “[t]he truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (2, 32, 62, 92, 122) and that, exactly because of the performative nature of stories in Native culture, “once a story is told, it cannot be called back” (10). Winona Stevenson describes Cree histories as consisting “of many different kinds of overlapping and related stories” (33), and Chris Preston observes that Aboriginal peoples in Canada use stories “as a vehicle for historical knowledge within oral histories” (56). Cree scholar Neil McLeod explores the implications of this interwoven understanding of story and history in some

detail: Cree history is carried in “narrative memory,” narrative that is “saturate[d] and permeate[d]” with “metaphorical discourse, composed of symbolic and poetic descriptions of the world and our experiences” (“Cree” 89). As poetic discourse, he proposes, Cree historical narrative is better approached through literary paradigms than through what he sees as “the epistemological straitjacket” of social science paradigms (“Cree” 89). The “dense and compacted language of poetry” allows readers and listeners to “arrive” at their own interpretations of stories, promoting “the multiple possibilities of understanding” that are much valued in many Indigenous traditions: for example, he notes that, “[o]ften in Cree, things are kiskino, pointed to, but never completely articulated” (Introduction 5).

The story of Pīsim is, in McLeod’s sense, history and poetic discourse simultaneously. The events of Kayasochi Kikawenow’s life were pieced together carefully from her remains and from her belongings; these facts were interpreted and contextualized through available archaeological, anthropological, and historical records, as well as through the knowledges of *Asiniskow Ithiniwak* culture, language, practices, places, and place names held by community members.

The process of development of the illustrations by Leonard Paul is just one example of the way in which the research group worked recursively with texts and with traditional knowledge keepers to build the historical details of the story. The pictorial style of Paul’s

watercolour paintings—representational realism—signals the status of the story as history. The actual sites at which the family camps as they move toward the Spring Gathering at Kakakiniyahk (Crow Point), which is the destination of their journey, were determined by Dumas and other experienced land-based community members. The paintings themselves are built on photographs of the campsite locations and, more generally, of the landscape through which the family travels (see fig. 1 and fig. 2). But locating relevant photographic records was no simple task. The burial site of Kayasochi Kikawenow was found because the banks of Nagami Bay have been eroding since Southern Indian Lake was flooded for a hydroelectric project in the 1970s. Finding pictures of the featured sections of the lakeshore as these looked before flooding took many hours of sifting through mid-century archaeological archives.

While the locations of the story are based on actual places, are assigned the Cree names that in themselves carry aspects of their history, and are rendered as accurately as possible, they also accrue poetic resonances. Importantly, the illustrations reclaim spaces that have been damaged through the impositions of industrial colonial society and imaginatively restore them. The journey itself is at the same time the literal journey of a family across a landscape they know well and the metaphorical journey of the adolescent Pīsim (the fictional name Dumas chose for Kayasochi

Kikawenow) toward an understanding of her *miskanow* or life path within her community. That path is defined by her becoming an apprentice in midwifery, so that a baby's birth and his welcome into the circles of kinship relations are logically important events in the narrative, but at the same time these events act as metonyms of Pisim's movement toward womanhood (see fig. 3). The place of the temporary shelter that houses the labouring mother is known as Hole in the Wall to contemporary people of the lake, a place that looks like a solid rock wall from a distance but, on closer inspection, discloses a narrows through which a boat can pass. The landscape, then, repeats at a different scale the experience of birthing; the place and the climactic events that occur at it are also figures for the hope for new beginnings and relations that has motivated the research project from its beginnings.

The detachment and irony that characterize the historical narratives of objective scholarship are neither adopted by the tellers of this story nor offered as interpretative positions to readers of the story. Rather, the assumption that informed the creation of the text and that reveals itself in the themes of the text exemplifies what Myra Sitchon, an impact assessment archaeologist with the Province of Manitoba and a member of the collaborative research team, has called the "relational accountability" at the centre of Indigenous research methodologies and interpretative paradigms. Relational accountability not only "fosters

respect for all involved" and "maintains the **relevance** of the knowledge in its significance to everyone involved" but also "ensures **reciprocity** exists throughout all aspects of the research" and "upholds an awareness of **responsibility** for researchers towards the research" (85–86). Knowledge *is* relationships, Cree scholar Shawn Wilson maintains, and as knowledge keepers and creators, we are "accountable to all our relations," including the communities of people surrounding us, the land, ancestors, and generations to come.

Generations to come often are understood to be represented in our own time by children. Several of the articles in this issue of *Jeunesse* consider the question of how actual and figurative children are used to manage adult perceptions of and anxieties about time—past, present, and future. In the lead article of the issue, Lisa Farley takes as her object of analysis a series of photographs by Canadian Jonathan Hobin, called *In the Playroom*, which features children as "doubles" who re-enact scenes of historical violence. Revisiting the common cultural gesture of representing the child as an emblem of futurity, Farley proposes that, in Hobin's series, the possibility of newness rests not on the literal fact of the child at play but, rather, in the play of signification opened up in the haunting encounter with old scenes. Molly Rosner, in her article about the American Girl Company, demonstrates that the strategies of advertising, distribution, and display





**Figure 1:** Pre-flood Kakakiniyahk (Crow Point) (HeLr-12). Photograph by Tim Jones, pre-1975. Courtesy of The Manitoba Museum.



**Figure 2:** Illustration of Kakakiniyahk by Leonard Paul from *Ptsim Finds Her Miskanow*. Reproduced with permission from Portage & Main Press.



**Figure 3:** Illustration by Leonard Paul from *Psim Finds Her Miskanow*.  
Reproduced with permission from Portage & Main Press.

designed to sell company merchandise draw on the nostalgic desires of consumers for an imaginary, sanitized history of the American nation. Notably, many of these consumers are adults who purchase the dolls and their supplementary texts for children.

In her essay about images of disability in Shaun Tan's celebrated picture book *The Lost Thing*, Nicole Markotić notes that critics habitually have understood Tan's narrative as mourning the fall of the boy narrator into normality as he grows up, a condition in which he no longer sees the wondrous things around him in the world. Markotić suggests that, rather than focus on the devolution over time of the narrator, we might begin from another interpretative question and ask about the cognitive differences that characterize the boy observer at the heart of the story.

Dorothy Karlin takes up the analysis of two YA novels about the disordered eating of adolescent girls—Carolyn Mackler's *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* and Laurie Halse Anderson's *Wintergirls*—and details the ways in which these novels appear to challenge dominant cultural messages about bodily norms but, in fact, reiterate the lesson that appropriate consumption is the mark of productive members of contemporary society.

The tensions between the normative and the deviant, between the commercial and the aesthetic, are addressed in a variety of ways by the contributors to the forum on comics that appears in this issue. As Naomi

Hamer observes in her introduction, these tensions are often mapped onto the question of whether comics are for kids or for adults. Glenn Wilmott resolves the question in his contribution to the forum by suggesting that comics can be considered a cross-writing tradition, both in terms of form and theme. Bart Beaty demonstrates that dominant methods of literary reading are inadequate to the task of interpreting a “self-evident” text for young people such as Archie Comics. Janette Hughes and Laura Morrison recount the reluctance of many teachers to consider graphic novels to be “real” books, even though their research has shown that these texts are excellent tools with which to explore difficult subjects with students: they focus specifically on the way in which graphic novels can be used to build cultural awareness of Indigenous perspectives. Andrew Woodrow-Butcher, manager of Little Island Comics, “the only shop in the world dedicated exclusively to comics for children,” prefers to blur the lines between such genres as picture books and comics and between such distinctions as literary and popular texts. Rather than categorize texts, he is interested in considering the long traditions of style and content on which comics draw and watching to see how comics change as they respond to new multimedia forms.

Finally, the review essays in this issue are divided between those that consider single critical studies of texts for young people and those that review a group of primary texts for young people. In the first category are

Louise Renée's review of Nelly Chabrol Gagne's analysis of more than three hundred French picture books published since the 1980s for their representations of girls, women, and "the feminine"; Cathrine O. Frank's review of Michelle Ann Abate's outline of a "homicide tradition" in American children's literature; and Nancy L. Canepa's review of Lindsay Myers's history of Italian children's fantasy in relation to the history of the Italian

state. In the second category are Paula T. Connolly's review of ten books about slavery published in Canada since 2009 and Abbie Ventura's review of four recent Canadian YA novels about child abuse. As the list of the topics taken up by reviewers reminds us, texts for young people and the critical discussions that surround them are some of the sites at which fundamental questions about history, politics, power, and identity are regularly asked.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Useful resources with which to begin to explore some of these issues, especially in the context of Canada, are Harold Cardinal's *The Unjust Society: The Tragedy of Canada's Indians*, Ward Churchill's *A Little Matter of Genocide: Holocaust and Denial in the Americas, 1492 to the Present*, Thomas King's *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America*, and the preliminary report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *They Came for the Children: Canada, Aboriginal Peoples, and Residential Schools*.

<sup>2</sup> The metaphor of awakening is used widely by Idle No More activists. Lesley Belleau uses the term *Pauwauwaein* to describe the "large and collective scale" of the shifts in understanding revealed through the movement and quotes John Burrows's definition of the term: "a revelation, an awakening, a vision that gives understanding to matters that were previously obscure" (351).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Ankersmit; Marwick.

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