CANADA'S DAY OF ATONEMENT: THE CONTEMPORARY NATIVE LITERARY RENAISSANCE, THE NATIVE CULTURAL RENAISSANCE AND POST-CENTENARY CANADIAN MYTHOLOGY

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of English
University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT

Little attention has been paid to the Contemporary Native Literary Renaissance (CNLR) and the Native Cultural Renaissance (NCR) of the 1960s and 1970s in Canada. As well, there has been little consideration of the manner in which this Renaissance has affected non-Native Canadian literature. However, this dissertation attempts to prove that the CNLR and the NCR have affected both contemporary Canadian mythologies and the criticism of Native literatures in Canada.

This dissertation relies more on the principles of storytelling than theory to make its suggestions. It immerses itself in a story which surfaced in the nineteenth century in Canada and which I have called Canada’s “search for a sacred mythology.” It then draws connections between this story and later manifestations of this story in post-centenary, non-Native Canadian mythologies and the criticism surrounding Tomson Highway and his work in order to suggest that contemporary modifications of this story indicate that Eurocentric negotiations with pan-Canadianism, or nationalism, show an anxiety with contemporary aboriginal influence.

When I do rely on theory, I rely heavily on Northrop Frye, and I create both a large pan-Canadian “centre” and pan-Indian “centre” to account for mythological change and cultural exchange. While such centres do not exist, and while post-structuralist theories could easily dismantle the binary which I have created, my methodology has
allowed me to search for large mythological changes, and my three most noteworthy findings are the following: 1) given time, it may be possible to suggest that Canadian history has become a contemporary trickster which has been born out of contemporary, reductive notions of the sacred and profane, or reductive understandings of “Native culture” and the “Canadian nation,” respectively; 2) contemporary attempts to justify this nation’s beginnings are often arrested in traumatic recall of the holocaust which has happened here; and 3) that self-reflexivity which is found in post-centenary Canadian mythologies, as well as in the criticism surrounding Tomson Highway, might be attributable to the social and political fervor of the NCR, which rekindled an awareness of the importance of participation between speakers and listeners, and/or the formal characteristics of Native oral literatures.
If this is your land . . . where are your stories?

(Tsimshian man speaking to government foresters in a dispute over jurisdiction in Canada’s Northwest; qtd. in Chamberlin, “Doing Things With Words” 74)
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Any faults or weaknesses found in this work are solely my responsibility.
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Introduction

Most history, when it has been digested by a people, becomes myth. Myth is an arrangement of the past, whether real or imagined, in patterns that resonate with a culture's deepest values and aspirations. Myths create and reinforce archetypes so taken for granted, so seemingly axiomatic, that they go unchallenged. Myths are so fraught with meaning that we live and die by them. They are the maps by which cultures navigate through time. (Ronald Wright, Stolen Continents 5)

There are a number of conflicting, sometimes agreeing, but always competing stories which have shaped the history of the Americas. One of my favorites is recounted by Ronald Wright in Stolen Continents: The Indian Story when he tells the story of Handsome Lake (233-38). Handsome Lake was a Seneca prophet who was born near modern-day Avon, New York in 1735 and who cast away a life of alcoholism in 1799 after he was moved by his niece's death and after this death made him realize that he had lived a life of sacrilege. However, although Handsome Lake had sworn off drinking, his disease continued to plague him, and one day, his half-brother, Cornplanter, discovered what he thought was Handsome Lake's corpse. Preparing Handsome Lake's body for burial, Cornplanter and his nephew were surprised, however, to find a warm spot near Handsome Lake's heart, and when Handsome Lake's breath returned and when he opened his eyes, he informed his family that he had seen the most beautiful visions. Divine sources had given Handsome Lake a doctrine that he called Gaiwiio, and, until his death in 1815, Handsome Lake would preach throughout the Iroquois League.

Wright interprets this prophet's significance by placing emphasis on the idea that the Gaiwiio is an example of how aboriginal and European religions were either divinely combined or purposely mixed together by Handsome Lake to create a syncretic theology.
that would ensure the longevity of the Iroquois nation. Wright points out that Handsome Lake had been strongly influenced by Quakerism and the moral precepts of "temperance, non-violence, and frugality" (235), but he also underscores the recognition that, although Handsome Lake was understood by Thomas Jefferson and others as having converted to a form of Christianity, "the Good Message" (236), as the Gaiwiio came to be called, had also revitalized the old Iroquois religion. For example, this "new" religion included old Iroquois rituals and festivals, and as Wright sees it, Handsome Lake's message was actually an "'Old Testament' reinterpreted in the light of a new" (236). In essence, for Wright, the Gaiwiio points to the notion that new and vital beliefs had been created in the Americas out of a mixture of aboriginal and non-aboriginal traditions. Indeed, this is one interesting consideration, but this is only part of Wright's narrative.

Included in Wright's story of Handsome Lake is another interesting story. Wright explains that when Edward Cornplanter gave Arthur Parker a printed copy of the Gaiwiio a century later, this text included a legend entitled "How the White Race Came to America and Why Gaiwiio Became a Necessity." As Wright explains, this story was not part of the doctrine handed to Handsome Lake but, rather, part of the Iroquois Apocrypha, and it served as an introduction to the Gaiwiio. "How the White Race Came to America" is a story of the "discovery" of the Americas, but it is a story told from the viewpoint of those who were "discovered." In this "legend" (236), as Wright calls it, a young man from the land of England has a vision. He sees an island in the middle of the Thames, and on this island is a castle of gold. The young man knocks at the castle door and meets another young man whom the first supposes is the son of God. This man then tells the young
visionary that across the ocean lies another world filled with virtuous people, and he gives his visitor five things which he says these people will enjoy: “a flask of rum, a pack of playing cards, a handful of coins, a violin and a decayed leg bone” (Díaz, qtd. in Wright 237). Although feeling that the whole situation is a bit strange, the young man looks for someone to take the gifts across the ocean, and he finds a man named Christopher Columbus.

Of course, it is not difficult to trace parallels between this story and between those stories which tell the tale of Christopher Columbus from a more Eurocentric standpoint. However, “How the White Race Came to America” does not end here. With Christopher Columbus bound for the new land, the man from the golden castle begins to laugh since he realizes that these gifts will ultimately destroy the people whom Columbus is about to encounter. As Wright puts it, “the man in the golden castle on the Thames is not the son of God at all, but ‘Hanisse’ono, the evil one” (238). Not surprisingly, then, evil ensues in the world which Columbus visits, but, even so, this story ends on a promising note: the Creator intervenes at a crucial moment and sends messengers and words of hope to the prophet Handsome Lake.

There are a number of interesting considerations which surface here. First, “How the White Race Came to America” accentuates the recognition that history contains myth just as myth contains history. For instance, while a historical account of Columbus becomes mixed with a golden castle symbolic of both hope and deception, so, too, does the myth of the golden castle become mixed with the historical account of a man who sailed the ocean blue in 1492. Indeed, it is difficult to separate myth and history, and it is
difficult to say where mythology begins and where history ends and vice versa. But what
this story emphasizes, more than anything else, is the idea that myth and history are not
mutually exclusive and that certain cultural truths or beliefs are borne out of the interface
between the two.

Second, this legend exposes the idea that historical “facts” serve to create different
archetypes for different cultures. For example, such events as “the discovery of the New
World,” “invasion,” and “settlement” may produce stories of national unification in such
places as Canada and the United States while these same events may be employed by
different aboriginal nations to speak of displacement and loss of nationhood. Wright
broaches this same recognition when he states the following: “Those vanquished by our
civilization see that its myth of discovery has transformed historical crimes into glittering
icons. Yet from the West’s vantage point, the discovery myth is true” (5). In essence,
these reflections and “How the White Race Came to America” serve to introduce the
notion that each culture inevitably strives to make the muse’s voice its own.

Third, this legend and the larger narrative to which this legend belongs expose
some very real challenges which attend a study of myth-making and history-making. For
example, it is significant to note here that there is a huge difference between “How the
White Race Came to America” and the sacred text of the Gaiwiio. The latter underscores
the recognition that there is a cosmic orientation to some myths and that there are some
myths that are divinely ordained and that come from the gods. Revelation, in other words,
is not a product of the imagination but a product of divination. As well, “How the White
Race Came to America” exposes the idea that historical myths reveal culturally dictated
perceptions of truth which must inevitably vie with different perceptions. Undermining European accounts of history, this myth shows how historical myths can be re-written by mortals and time, and promising redemption and announcing the arrival of Handsome Lake, this myth underscores a certain kind of subservience to those sacred myths which are about to be recounted in the Ga'iwii o. Thus, we may recognize, then, two different kinds of myths: sacred myths and historical myths. The former are divinely ordained and cannot be contested, and the latter are the products of human ordination: thus, these myths can be contested and re-written. However, with these distinctions drawn, it is equally plausible to say that something lies between the poles of sacred myth and historical myth and that something may, in fact, be created out of the nexus between the two. And I have chosen to call this sacred historical mythology.

Sacred historical mythology emerges when interpretations of the past are effectively blended with a body of beliefs which descend from the gods. Now, in this sense, all myths could be understood, then, as conforming to this definition. Myths order the past in an attempt to dictate the future, and most myths can be traced back to a sacred origin. But in a discussion of national articulations, the search for a sacred historical mythology may be more complicated. For example, while some nations can identify their sacred historical mythologies since they can trace their national legacies back to both a sacred myth and an historical event, there are those countries which cannot boast of a sacred historical mythology. And one of these countries is Canada.

Here, in Canada, we can point to historical mythologies. For example, we can recognize how the archetypes of “discovery,” “invasion” and “settlement” have given birth
to the myth of national unification, and we can re-order and re-write these myths as our understandings of these archetypes change with the revisioning of history. As well, and in a sense, we can also point to sacred origins or sacred mythologies in Canada. Some of the first peoples to come to Canada from Europe were extremely religious, for example, and they naturally carried with them their sacred beliefs or myths. The Jesuits provide strong proof for this point, as do other Roman Catholics and Anglicans. As well, there are many different collectives who live in Canada today who are held together by a shared understanding of the sacred. Mennonites, Muslims, Parsees, Buddhists, Evangelists, Mormons, Rastafarians and many more are part of what has been called the Canadian mosaic. But what is more difficult to recognize in Canada is the reality of a sacred historical mythology which speaks for a nation.

I do not wish to suggest that sacred historical myths are simply creation myths, but an examination of creation stories helps to shed light on a conviction which is central to this dissertation. For instance, and if we turn for a moment to a consideration of aboriginal creation myths, we must recognize that indigenous creation myths can trace aboriginal legacies back to the lands of this world. On the west coast of what is now Canada, the Haida were born from the clam shells on the shores of Haida Gwaii, or the Queen Charlotte Islands. In the central woodlands of Canada, or traditional Ojibway territory, Kitchi-Manitou, or the “Great Mystery,” “created the world, plants, birds, animals, fish, and the other manitous in fulfillment of a vision” (Johnston, The Manitous xv). In the Canadian Yukon, it is Crow who, for the Tagish and Tlingit, created the world and brought light, fire and fresh water to human beings. These are just a few examples
from amongst numerous possibilities, but what they serve to underscore is the idea that while aboriginal nations can trace sacred myths back to a divine source which emanates from this world, the Canadian nation cannot trace any comparable legacy back to the gods of this land. And, thus, and as this dissertation will go on to suggest, the viability of a sacred historical mythology is rendered tenuous at best.

Admittedly, this discussion is brashly reductive and based on numerous stereotypes. Humankind is complex and sophisticated, and national boundaries and affinities are not so neatly connected to religious ideologies. Someone who chooses to define herself or himself as Canadian may possess a strong belief in the creation myth as outlined by the King James Bible. Someone who defines himself or herself as aboriginal may choose to do the same thing. A Christian may convert to Judaism. A Hindu may become Muslim. An Iroquois may became a Quaker, and the list goes on. But the study of national mythologies must deal in stereotypes and such distinctions because, to begin with, myths are based on grand distinctions, absolutes, and dichotomies.

In fact, as the proper adjective “Canadian” attests to, such a study is carefully delimited from the start. It presupposes that a study of mythology is possible without considering the differences between regions and different cultural identities within Canada. But that said, this is a study which attempts to make sense of how a story about the search for a sacred historical mythology influenced the ways in which certain authors attempted to create new myths during a period of official nationalism in Canada which followed on the heels of this nation’s centenary. It traces the desires of certain writers such as D.G. Jones, James Reaney, George Ryga, Leonard Cohen, Robert Kroetsch, Jack Hodgins and
Margaret Atwood back to a dominant mythos that was given birth to at an early date in Canadian thought and that was embraced by the writers of the mid-to-late twentieth century as they attempted to create something comparable to a sacred historical mythology. This study turns to but one story in the history of Canada's mythological development, and it traces only one important, influential and critical trajectory. But this story, although it is only one story amongst many possible stories, seems to shed some light on how one kind of desire to understand this nation is predicated on a search for the sacred.

This study begins, then, by turning to the seeds of a notable story which began to surface in discussions of Canadian literature in the late-nineteenth century and which continued to surface well into the mid-twentieth century. Certain early critics of Canadian literature, such as Edward Hartley Dewart, Archibald Lampman, Archibald MacMechan, and E.K. Brown, maintained that the development of Canadian literature had been arrested almost at the same time as Canadian literature had begun. As they suggested, because Canada was a colony and because Canada, unlike such nations as England and the United States, had never experienced an Armada or revolution, Canadian literature could only be a colonial construct. As these critics saw it, until Canada had experienced a moment of extreme social or political fervour, Canadian literature would continue to lack originality and the impress of anything that smacked of true Canadian content. These critics were suggesting that history leads national consciousness, and they therefore determined that because Canada's history was "owned" by Britain, a national literary consciousness was simply not possible in Canada. But as this study will also reveal, these critics were
actually anticipating a moment when history would be "swept away," as it were, by a revolution which would provide the basis for an "originary moment" that sacred historical mythologies traditionally need. That is, they were anticipating something comparable to the American Revolution, the French revolution, or the Norman Conquest which would erase the past and allow time and mythology to begin anew. In other words, these critics were recognizing--albeit not in these terms--that sacred origins could be created through significant secular and collective acts which would allow for the creation of a sacred historical mythology in Canada.

By pointing to this story which, at an early date in Canadian thought, began to lament the idea that Canada possessed no real national voice, this dissertation attempts to identify different developments in this narrative and the larger narrative to which this original story gave birth, and it attempts to consider how history, the product of human thought, is inevitably disappointing for those who are in search of a moving and unifying national consciousness. For instance, it was Northrop Frye who, in the 1950s, amended this story about a search for a national mythology. While Frye supported what earlier critics had been saying about Canada's colonial mentality--while he noted that this mentality threatened the viability of a national literature and while he also maintained that this nation still needed a social impetus to encourage the creation of indigenous voices--he drew an important distinction between history and myth and emphasized the importance of the latter. Frye noted that while history had, indeed, seemed to lead Canada's national consciousness until the mid-twentieth century, it was possible that if writers embraced and recognized their own national mythologies, Canadian writing would come into its own.
Moreover, Frye later suggested that Canada's centenary, what he called this nation's "Day of Atonement" (1965, "Conclusion to LHC," in BG 224), would be a significant enough ritual to inspire the beginnings of a true, indigenous, national mythology.

By pointing to mythology, instead of history, as a shaping force in the development of a national literature, Frye was underscoring the importance of the sacred in the development of national literary consciousness. He was indicating that if national mythologies were embraced, then mythology and history could be joined to produce a body of sacred historical mythology in Canada. Indeed, and as this dissertation will go on to argue, Frye's addition to this narrative is an astute and important one. But it is at this point that I wish to engage with this story in a different way and, in a sense, re-write it, because I think that, like all historical myths, this story begs to be re-written.

While Frye pointed to Canada's centenary as a shaping moment in the development of Canadian mythology and as a moment that would inspire writers to embrace mythology instead of history and, therefore, encourage a revisioning of national articulations, this study underscores the importance of a literary movement and of a cultural movement which took place in Canada around the time of Canada's "Day of Atonement": the Contemporary Native Literary Renaissance (CNLR) and the larger Native Cultural Renaissance (NCR) to which this literary movement belonged. It was during the late 1960s and 1970s that an unprecedented body of Native writing was published in Canada, and it was also during these decades that the American Indian Movement, the Native Alliance for Red Power, and other Native groups and individuals came together and inspired and created a notable social revolution. Granted, a
consideration of these movements cannot be divorced from the recognition that the CNLR and the NCR belonged to a moment in time when global consciousness underwent sweeping changes and when the Vietnam War, the FLQ crisis, the Black Power Movement and different national independence movements reconfigured how many people understood the world and history. But concerned as this dissertation is with Canada and Canadian mythology, this study looks at the CNLR and the NCR in an isolated Canadian context in order to suggest that the CNLR and the NCR have had a profound effect on Canadian mythology and on certain attempts to create a sacred historical mythology.

Therefore, within the story which this study is tracing, I am suggesting that it is the CNLR and the NCR which provided what Archibald Lampman called that moment of "passion and enthusiasm" (38) which he claimed was capable of transforming Canadian literature. And the following argument is the central tenet of this thesis: the CNLR and the NCR drew attention to the idea that this "search for a sacred historical mythology" was highly problematic, and both of these movements also encouraged the creation of new things in Canadian mythology. More specifically, this thesis argues that the values which grew out of the CNLR and the NCR have found their way into Canadian literature and that they have re-defined conceptions of the sacred and profane--grand informants in all mythologies.

As well, this study also suggests that although the CNLR and the NCR can be recognized as constituting a crucial moment in the development of Canadian mythology, these movements also expose a difference between what Benedict Anderson would call a Canadian "image of . . . communion" (6) and other national "images of communion."
Relying on the theories of Ernest Renan who claimed that a nation is formed when a nation collectively “forgets” (*Qu’est-ce qu’une nation*, 11), I argue that post-CNLR and post-NCR Canadian literature is evidence that, since the advent of the CNLR and the NCR, negotiations with nationalism have been shaped and problematised by an act of remembrance. That is, I argue that both the CNLR and the NCR made people remember a part of Canada’s past—a holocaust—which could never sanely be embraced by national idealists, and, therefore, I also argue that this nation will probably never boast the reality of a neat monolithic mythology and that it will take a long while for this nation to boast any kind of sacred historical mythology. But this is not a bad thing. Rather, the CNLR and the NCR have created an awareness of tensions which should be recognized, and as I hope will become apparent throughout this thesis, the search for truth is largely borne out of tensions.

Chapter One, “Moving Towards the Head-waters of Design: The Search for Canada’s Sacred Historical Mythology,” summarizes certain early responses to English-Canadian literature, and this chapter argues that the identity crisis which began to shape one school of thought about Canadian literature at an early date is inevitably informed by the recognition that Canada’s first stages of imaginative writing reveal imported paradigms of thought. From the very start, this search for a conventional, collective mythology was problematic because the language and philosophies which had been used to create national stories had been imported from Britain and had not grown with this world. This recognition is most apparent when one considers how some early settlers responded to the literal lands of the “New World” and when one considers that there were a number of
early influential writers and thinkers who described the “New World” with romantic British sentiments.

As well, this chapter argues that because Canadian settlers did not possess the memory of a common exodus there was no shared concept of the divine or sacred in early Canadian thought which is necessary, in a traditional sense, for the creation of a sacred historical mythology which speaks for a nation. This is not to say that myths have to be shared by an entire nation, but it is to say that, for those who follow a story which searches for a sacred historical mythology, the sacred must be collectively recognized. Furthermore, because this search for a national mythology seems to have been predicated on an earlier narrative which considered the “New World” to be tabula rasa, this dissertation argues that settlers did not recognize, and could not embrace, the indigenous gods of the land. To trace this search for a national literature back to its roots is to recognize that the nature of Canada’s unsettled populace was not amenable to the formation of a traditional body of mythology. However, this chapter ends by concluding that certain important changes began to take place in discussions of Canadian literature in the 1960s and 1970s and that these changes were responses to this story which continued to search for a unifying, national mythology. During this point in time, critics began to draw attention to the idea that Canadian literature had been a literature privy to the processes of translation, and this suggestion was supported by the recognition that Native literatures, unlike English-Canadian literature, have grown up with this world.

Chapter Two, “Canada’s Day of Atonement: The Contemporary Native Literary Renaissance and the Native Cultural Renaissance,” provides an overview of that body of
Native literature which was published during the 1960s and 1970s and of some of the key social and political activities of the First Nations during these same decades. This chapter recognizes both movements as constituting an important social revolution in Canada, and, within the narrative which this dissertation is tracing, this chapter also recognizes this moment to be an important climax. I argue that both the CNLR and the NCR called into question Canada’s one-hundred year legacy and that they also poignantly underscored the recognition that there were stories other than colonial ones which told and recorded different histories about the lands of this world. Although there are many ways in which one could discuss these movements, this chapter interprets the CNLR and the NCR in light of the interests of the first chapter and suggests that, unlike the history of the development of Canadian literature, the history of Native literature reveals no identity crisis. This body of literature is governed by confidence and authority, and it exposes the fact that Native literatures, unlike Canadian literatures, have grown quite comfortably with this world.

Chapter Three, “Tricked by History: Tracing the Paths of Influence in the New Anti-hero, the New Trickster and New Languages,” begins by suggesting that the CNLR and the NCR prompted Canadian writers to re-visit the past and to re-consider the relation between myth and history. More specifically, this chapter argues that at a time when this nation was ripe for mythologising, the CNLR and the NCR exposed the trauma of this nation’s past and drew attention to the recognition that the First Nations possessed a certain kind of authority for which there was no parallel in Eurocentric Canadian history. And what I then suggest is that this new awareness of Canada’s history and this new-felt
authority began to shape certain mythological works which were predicated on a traditional Canadian attempt to create or recognize some kind of sacred historical mythology.

By looking in detail at Robert Kroetsch’s *Badlands*, George Bowering’s *Burning Water* and Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers*, I suggest that new mythological patterns have been created out of the tension between different cultural ideals—a tension which was underscored by the CNLR and the NCR. Although this chapter maintains that both of these movements, then, could be looked at as constituting that moment in Canadian history which those such as Dewart, Lampman, MacMechan, Brown and Frye had eagerly awaited and which they maintained would encourage a profound new epoch in Canadian literature, this chapter does not conclude that this moment was a glorious one capable of providing an easy, monolithic mythology. Rather, this chapter concludes that post-CNLR/post-NCR Canadian mythologies are evidence that attempts to justify or explore this nation’s beginnings will bear the marks of trauma, and this chapter does so because the following three patterns found in post-centenary mythologies reveal a desire to break with the past traditions of this nation and an uncertainty about how such a break can be achieved: in a superficial, stereotypical, and indisputably mythological way, land and indigene are conflated into something symbolic of the sacred; seeming heroes that are symbolic of this nation’s past or madness are sacrificed to the sacred, written off with disgust, and inevitably recognized as anti-heroes; and Canadian history emerges as a traditional mythological figure—a trickster—in a number of contemporary, Canadian mythologies which revisit the nexus between contemporary understandings of the sacred
and profane.

This chapter also supports the idea that these new mythological patterns have been shaped by the influence of the CNLR and the NCR by considering the formal characteristics which carry these new patterns. First, I argue that the language and rhetoric which govern these mythologies have been influenced by some of the characteristics of Native oral literatures which were maintained in the written literature of the CNLR. Second, I suggest that some of the formal characteristics of these mythologies, although they have been defined until this date as “postmodern” and although they have also been influenced by international types of postmodernism, might be more accurately understood as post-CNLR/post-NCR as they are indicative of the demand for new forms of social exchange in a time of social revolution.

Chapter Four, “The Backlash of Influence: A Study of the Criticism Surrounding Tomson Highway and His Work,” is an examination of the criticism which surrounds the figure of Tomson Highway, and, in tandem with Chapter Three, this chapter suggests that the CNLR and the NCR have been noteworthy influences on Canadian mythologising. As I argue, critics see Highway as a symbol of a Native revolution with which they agree, and they also use him—as a symbol—to make sense of the national trauma which must keep on being relived until old patterns and established habits of thought are broken. Although this body of criticism constructs Highway as a type of hero while post-CNLR/post-NCR mythologies rid their narratives of heroes in favour of anti-heroes, I argue that this impulse to create a hero and this impulse to destroy a hero are related. First, the construction of Highway in romantic, paternalistic and heroic terms suggests that people are intent on
attacking and arresting that part of Canada's past which cannot be forgotten. Second, the character of Highway, like Canadian history in recent Canadian mythologies, is constructed out of a re-visiting of the nexus between the sacred and profane. As well, this chapter observes that the discourses surrounding Highway have taken on some of the same characteristics and values which are found in post-CNLR Canadian mythologies and which can be traced back to the influence of the CNLR and the NCR. Finally, I suggest that it is necessary to extricate pop-cultural mythology from criticism in the scholarly study of Native literatures in order to create new and rigorous methods for analysing Native literatures.

Indeed, it should be noted at this point that literary histories can often omit significant stories since the recording of history is an act of interpretation, and, thus, it should also be understood that this study exposes the dilemmas which attend the act of interpreting history. This dissertation participates in a well-known story about Canadian mythology, and since, by its very nature, mythology must deal in stereotypes, there are certain stereotypes which inform this study and which exclude other interpretive possibilities. For instance, this discussion draws strict distinctions between aboriginal writing and Canadian writing, and it also makes neat distinctions at times between aboriginal and non-aboriginal cultures. Of course, life is not so easy to categorize. Nor should it be. And another study of this nature might dismantle these neat distinctions and search for early examples of syncretic traditions in Canada which are comparable to Handsome Lake's religious creed. It is hoped, though, that my choice to re-create the story of what I have called "Canada's search for a sacred historical mythology" and that
my choice to create two huge centres—a pan-Canadian one and a pan-Indian one—is governed by a desire to prompt my readers to consider what this story, this binary and these stereotypes exclude.

“If it can’t be shown,” says Lee Maracle in an article entitled “Oratory: Coming to Theory,” “it can’t be proven” (235). I agree. And, so, I have chosen to tell a story here. From the very beginning, I could have ripped apart the story which frames my study—the story about “Canada’s search for a sacred historical mythology.” I could have immediately destroyed it with a post-structuralist bent. It could be easily said, and proven, that there is no Canadian centre. But I have engaged here with a belief in this story and with a belief in organicist notions about Canada’s national, literary, and mythological development in order to show how this story destroys itself on its own terms. I do not necessarily wish my readers to agree with me. Rather, I wish my readers to listen to this story and to make of it what they will.
Notes: Introduction

Chapter One

Moving Towards the Head-waters of Design:
The Search for Canada's Sacred Historical Mythology

We French & English, never lost
our civil war,
endure it still,
a bloody civil bore
the wounded sirened off,
no Whitman wanted
it's only by our lack of ghosts
we're haunted
(Earle Birney, "Can. Lit." in Ghost in the Wheels 49)

Where does Canada's search for a sacred historical mythology begin? Does it begin with a search for the sacred? Does it begin with a search for an understanding of the historical? Does it begin with an examination of mythology? Or does it begin with all of these things? These questions are difficult to answer, and different interests will lead to different emphases and different responses. But the story which this chapter sets out to re-create is a story which seems to begin with the assumption that literature is the handmaiden of history.

And perhaps it is not so surprising that such an assumption would govern the beginnings of a quest which is dictated by a collective or national desire for a body of literature that speaks for this country's soul. Unlike the history of other nations, such as the Ojibway nation, the Haida nation, Greece, Egypt, and India, to name a few, Canada's history is contemporary and cannot be traced back to the equivalent of a Golden, Silver or Bronze age. There are no myths indigenous to Canada which take history out of the realm of the contemporary and put history in the care of the gods. And, so, a search for
mythology or for a national literature begins in Canada with an examination of the history which shaped this nation not so long ago. And with an eye turned towards history, then, this narrative which examines Canadian literary development begins by emphasizing such things as Canada’s colonial roots and by showing disparagement with the idea that Canada lacks a notable national past.

Writing in 1864, for example, literary critic Edward Hartley Dewart made several precocious comments about Canadian literature and the manner in which it had come to reflect Canada’s political situation. Dewart noted that there was “almost [a] universal absence of interest and faith in all indigenous literary productions” (“Selections from Canadian Poets, 1864” 14), and he linked this recognition to the idea that Canada’s “colonial position” was “not favorable to the growth of an indigenous literature” (15). What Dewart meant by indigenous literature was national literature, and he was arguing that there was no such thing yet as a national Canadian literature. More specifically, Dewart suggested that this “state of things” (14) was due to the fact that Canada’s people saw much more worth in the places they and their ancestors had left than in the regions they had come to occupy. As Dewart put it, “[n]ot only are our mental wants supplied by the brain of the Mother country . . . but the majority of persons of taste and education in Canada are emigrants from the Old Country, whose tenderest affections cling around the land they have left” (15). Of course, Dewart was writing on the eve of Confederation, and his convictions naturally reflect the frustration of a colony. But even after the Province of Canada, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick had joined together in 1867 to signify the beginnings of formal, national independence, certain Canadian critics would consistently
mourn Canada’s colonial mentality.

In 1891, for example, Canadian poet Archibald Lampman observed that most discussions of Canadian writing had taken “the form of question and answer as to whether a Canadian literature exists,” and for Lampman, the answer was simple. “Of course it does not” ("Two Canadian Poets: A Lecture, 1891" 27). Lampman believed that political exigency mobilizes nations and, thus, artistic innovation, and he lamented the case that, as of the late-nineteenth century in Canada, there had not been an event large enough to inspire any significant creations. “The time has not come for the production of any genuine national song” (38), Lampman wrote. “It is when the passion and enthusiasm of an entire people, carried away by the excitement of some great crisis, enters into the soul of one man specially gifted, that a great national poem or hymn is produced. We have yet to reach such an hour, and we may pray that it will not come too soon or too late” (38).

Of course, roughly two decades after Lampman’s proclamation, Canada would enter The Great War, and, over the course of four years, the nation would lose almost 60,000 lives overseas. This realization now gives Lampman’s assertion a haunting tone, and, retrospectively, it would seem that Canada had experienced a crisis great enough to inspire several bodies of national literature. Indeed, it was this event which would inspire Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae to write his now-famous war poem, “In Flanders Fields,” a notable national “song,” as it were, which would forever register the reality that Canada and its allies had, unfortunately, witnessed such an “hour.” However, while McCrae’s poem captured, and continues to capture, the memory of something large enough to move any nation, some notable critics of Canadian literature would suggest a
long while after McCrae's poem that Canada's authors, like her soldiers, continued to be
driven by an extrinsic, rather than an intrinsic, allegiance. And as these discussions also
suggested, this meant that Canada's own voice would take a long while to develop.

For example, when Archibald MacMechan published the first real book-length
study on Canadian writing in 1924, Headwaters of Canadian Literature, he echoed what
Dewart and Lampman had said already about Canadian literature, and he posed the
following two questions at the end of his text: "How much of the work produced in
Canada during the last century is destined to live? How much will be read or remembered
at the end of the twentieth century?" (237) MacMechan had already devoted much of this
book to arguing that, aside from such anomalies as Archibald Lampman and Sara
Jeannette Duncan, Canada had not yet produced any authors with "that fiery conviction
which alone brings forth a masterpiece" (215), and, although his questions were inevitably
recognized by his readers as rhetorical, he chose to provide a blunt response to his queries:
"The answer must be--very little. The bulk of it is ephemeral; it smells of mortality" (237).

Echoing the words of King Lear, MacMechan underscored his conviction that Canadian
literature was far too dependent on external influences, such as its British legacy, and he
indicated that not much had changed since Dewart had made his disparaging comments.

Almost twenty years later, and just a couple of years before Canada would pull her
last remaining troops out of war-torn Europe again, E.K. Brown, one of Canada's
foremost Canadian critics, would forward roughly the same arguments about Canadian
literature as those which had been made by Dewart, Lampman and MacMechan.

Although praising both Lampman and E.J. Pratt for their originality, Brown maintained
that Canada's colonialism was "deep" (19) and that its "perpetuation" was to be found "in the descendants of emigrants even to the third and fourth generation" (1943, On Canadian Poetry 15). Moreover, endorsing the claims that Lampman had made in 1891, Brown took the argument further:

There has been no moment in our history comparable with what England knew on the eve of the Elizabethan efflorescence, when the Armada approached her shores, or at the height of the Romantic achievement, when Napoleon gathered his forces at Boulogne, or in the early summer of 1940, when the salvation of the country depended upon itself alone. Nor has Canada known an internal crisis at all comparable to the War between the States. It is probable that, as Lampman supposed, a national crisis of supreme intensity would call forth emotions of such a strength and purity as to issue in a significant expression in the arts. We are probably as far, or almost as far from such a crisis in 1944 as in 1891. (20)

Although Canada had already participated in two world wars, and although Canada could look back to the Loyalist War of 1812 and claim the outcome of that event as a national victory in hindsight, Brown was suggesting that Canada's dependency on alliances could never allow for any real fruition in a national sense. And perhaps Brown's convictions are blatantly understandable. After all, both world wars had been fought in Europe and not on Canadian soil, and the War of 1812 was never a true national crisis. And, so, perhaps it is not that surprising that Brown would speak of Canada as if Canada were still a dependent collective. As Brown saw it, like any colony, Canada lacked what he called "the spiritual energy to rise above routine" and, therefore, looked for inspiration "somewhere outside its
own borders, beyond its own possibilities” (14).

But this is pure rubbish, Charles G.D. Roberts might have said to the lot of these critics. And he would have said this at a very early point in the story which this chapter is tracing. Although a study of Roberts’ life reveals that he swayed at times between advocating Canadian autonomy within the British Empire and between supporting full Canadian independence¹ and although some might be inclined, therefore, to question the purity of Roberts’ national zeal, his early enthusiasm about Canadian literature and what he considered to be its unique and national identity is pretty consistent. In his biography of Roberts, John Coldwell Adams underscores Roberts’ national pride, for example, and Adams reproduces part of Roberts’ correspondence to Bliss Carman where, as early as 1882, Roberts was recognizing that “[a] national feeling [was] awakening quietly but surely” in Canada.² As well, when Roberts delivered an Alumni Oration at the University of New Brunswick in 1883 which he called “The Beginnings of Canadian Literature,” he relied upon his national sentiments to rouse his audience after he had claimed that there were “too [many] universities in Canada rather than Canadian universities” (Selected Poetry and Critical Prose 247):

In Canada, where do we want a more vivid realization of the fact that we have a country, and are making a nation; that we have a history, and are making a literature; that we have a heroic past, and are making ready for a future that shall not be inglorious? In our universities, if they would not lose their birthright. (248)

For Roberts, such events as the War of 1812 were moving and inspirational, and in a letter published in the Halifax Herald in 1886 he maintained that “our own ancestors have left us
noble themes" (263). As he further said, "[i]n the coming of the Loyalists there is a
treasury of subjects hardly inferior to that which New England has found so rich in the
deeds of her Puritan fathers" (263). But even if we try to play devil’s advocate with
Roberts, it is possible to suggest that within Roberts’ enthusiastic proselytizing lie some
sentiments comparable to those found in the claims of Dewart, Lampman, MacMechan
and Brown. While Roberts was arguing that Canada had a history and while others were
dISCOUNTING this idea, all of these critics were underscoring the importance of history in
national literary development.

In other words, common to the story which has been traced thus far is the idea that
history guides national literatures. Dewart had pointed to emigration--to historical
moments of arrival--as the root of Canada’s colonial mentality, and, looking back at his
comments and their proximity to the Charlottetown Conference and the Québec
Conference, one could say that Dewart’s anxiety and impatience were heightened by
preparations for the historical event which would soon become known as the British North
America Act. Lampman underscored the recognition that, as he understood it, Canada
had not yet experienced a military crisis on Canadian soil, and he, too, was looking for a
historical moment to change Canada’s character. As well, like Dewart, MacMechan
showed a certain amount of despair with Canada’s colonial mentality, and he also seemed
to suggest that until history had guided Canada beyond the limits of her colonial
inheritance, Canada and this nation’s literature would not exist. Of course, pointing as he
did to the history of England, France and the United States in his discussions of what
Canada lacked, Brown also championed the role that history plays in the formation of
national literatures. To be sure, Roberts did not spend time mourning a lack of Canadian history, but, arguing as he did that this nation’s past was as good and as full of important events as the history of any other nation, Roberts was still suggesting that our “themes” (Roberts, Selected Poetry and Critical Prose 263) would be shaped by the dictates of history.

But is this to say, then, that interpretations of history have neatly shaped all perceptions of early Canadian literary development? Is this to suggest that all critics of early Canadian literature thought in the same way? I hope not. In fact, it should be noted at this point that although this chapter revisits these convictions about Canadian literature and the state of Canada’s character by forwarding what seems to be a clear, critical trajectory, it is not my intention to track the chronology of an idea which is indisputably cumulative and unwavering. A more thorough study would account for the intricacies of those arguments about Canadian literature which were formed at an early date in criticisms of Canadian culture, and it would point to numerous examples of different critics and thinkers who told different stories about Canadian writing and who interpreted the character of Canada’s thought in a much different way. For instance, one could point here to the advent of the McGill Fortnightly Review (1925-7) and its embracing of the Montreal group as well as the publication of New Provinces in 1936 and its announcing of the arrival of Canadian modernism as harbingers of national pride in Canadian letters. But looking forward as this study does to some notable convictions about Canadian literature which became prevalent during a period of official nationalism in Canada and which seem to engage with this marked sensibility that is found in the claims of those such as Dewart,
MacMechan, Lampman, Brown and, arguably, Roberts, this study tracks a shared argument more than it attempts to account for nuances in debates which differ about the state of Canada’s literary development. And, thus, it looks back to certain early critics of Canadian literature who seemed to have fueled the idea that a national literary character is, above all else, shaped by historical precedents.

Now, that said, whether or not Northrop Frye was the first critic of Canadian literature or the first mind in Canadian thought to look beyond the limitations of history or to consider the mythological implications of history to be of primary significance is not that important. But what is important to recognize is that Frye added to this story of a search for a national literature by both building on and departing from the narrative which has been outlined thus far. And his additions to this discussion of Canadian literature and its development seem to mark a theoretical turning point in a narrative which is intent on revealing the essence of a truly Canadian literature. For instance, in December 1943, four months after E.K. Brown’s first edition of On Canadian Poetry was published, Northrop Frye reviewed A.J.M. Smith’s The Book of Canadian Poetry, and although he recognized this anthology of Canadian verse to be “an important event in Canadian literature” (1943, “Canada and its Poetry,” in BG 129), Frye supported what Brown had been saying about Canadian writing. While Frye paid homage to Canada’s writers and, above all, to E.J. Pratt, he mourned the “colonial position of Canada,” what he also called “a frostbite at the roots of the Canadian imagination,” and he suggested that Canada greatly needed to get rid of “[p]rudery,” a word he let stand for a fear that impeded creativity in a number of ways (“Canada and its Poetry,” in BG 134). Here, Frye was engaging with the idea that
Canada’s colonial mentality—this nation’s historical past—had arrested the true
development of a national consciousness, but he would also encourage writers and
thinkers to begin conceiving of things in different ways.

In an essay written in 1952, Frye summed up what the real problem seemed to be
with Canadian literature: as Frye understood it from his standpoint in the mid-century,
there was “far too much accurate Canadian history . . . and far too little Canadian vision”
(“Letters in Canada,” in BG 13). While Frye, like Dewart, Lampman, MacMechan and
Brown, seemed to be saying that Canada lacked “faith” (Dewart), “passion and
enthusiasm” (Lampman), “fiery conviction” (MacMechan), and a “supreme intensity”
(Brown), unlike other critics, Frye was suggesting that literature should be freed
somewhat from the clutches of history. And as Frye would later suggest, if this were to
happen, Canadian literature would come into its own.

In 1959, for example, Frye also prophesied, as only he could, that “Canadian
poetry in the sixties [would] . . . be dealing with a fully matured culture, no longer
preoccupied with the empty unpoetics of Canadianism, but with the genuine tasks of
creative power” (“Letters in Canada,” in BG 127). Although Frye was speaking
specifically of Canadian verse, what he was suggesting in a larger sense is that, during the
next decade, Canada would be more confident and independent enough to explore its own
collective consciousness. Perhaps, as Frye suggested at the end of this same essay,

enough groundwork had been done by the writers of the 1950s to usher Canadian
literature into its own. Or perhaps Frye was anticipating the effect which Canada’s
centenary would have on this nation and its artists. For instance, when Frye wrote his
conclusion to the first edition of a Literary History of Canada in 1965, he seemed to be expanding on the seeds of an idea which can be noted in his earlier critical claims about Canada and its national literary character. Here, he observed that, as he wrote, “the centennial of Confederation in 1967 [loomed] up before the country with the moral urgency of a Day of Atonement” (in BG 224).

As one would expect of a biblical and mythological scholar, Frye recognized the weight behind ritual. Frye was not suggesting that one hundred years was an adequate amount of time for a nation to mature but that the significance of a century, the significance of a rite of passage, had a mythic appeal. And, in fact, what Frye had been suggesting in a number of ways in his criticism of Canadian literature was that a national literature could only sprout from a recognition of its own rites of passage and rituals or, in other words, from the seeds of its own indigenous mythology--from a body of mythology that somehow grows out of a pan-national consciousness. What Frye seemed to be advocating was that literature should be held at a comfortable distance from history and that it should be placed within the primary care of mythology. Writing about Canadian poetry in 1957, for instance, Frye seemed to be challenging Canadian writers and thinkers alike to recognize their own national mythologies. “As for mythology,” Frye began, “that is one of poetry’s indispensable languages” (“Letters in Canada,” in BG 74). As he saw it from his standpoint in the mid-century, “most of the major English poets, including the best poets of today, demand and expect a considerable knowledge of myth, and although Douglas LePan calls Canada a country without a mythology, the same thing is increasingly true even of Canadian poets” (74). But as Frye would also maintain, meeting
this demand for a national mythology would be an incredibly difficult literary enterprise since "the Canadian literary mind, beginning as it did so late in the cultural history of the West, was established on a basis, not of myth, but of history" (1965, "Conclusion to LHC," in BG 231).

Volumes have been written about the differences between history and myth, and it is beyond the scope of this chapter and my knowledge to define them in any authoritative way, but it is useful to revisit some basic distinctions before attempting to suggest what a historical, rather than a mythological, reliance means for a nation and for the development of its literary character. Indeed, there are many definitions of myth, but Jarold Ramsey seems to successfully unify competing understandings when he explains in his work Reading the Fire: Essays in the Traditional Indian Literatures of the Far West that "[m]yths are sacred traditional stories whose shaping function is to tell the people who know them who they are; how, through what origins and transformations, they have come to possess their particular world; and how they should live in that world, and with each other" (4). Unlike history, then, which is a strictly human enterprise, myths, because they are sacred and descend from the gods, have a spiritual vitality and, therefore, some kind of assurance which is lacking in history. History has no divine authority, and although history, like myth, is a form of cultural record, it necessarily lacks a security and certainty because it cannot see beyond the limits of human experience. Thus, it could be said that while myths can effectively bind together the soul of a collective, history can only prick at its conscience.

Indeed, these sociological reflections place literature within a complex social and
historical matrix, and as Frye makes his readers aware in the first chapter of *The Critical Path*, literature should be the focus of the literary scholar. But Frye’s following claim indicates that considerations of mythology and literature must always be complemented by an understanding of social and national development:

> Literature is conscious mythology: as society develops, its mythical stories become structural principles of storytelling, its mythical concepts, sun-gods and the like, become habits of metaphorical thought. In a fully mature literary tradition the writer enters into a structure of traditional stories and images. He often has the feeling, and says so, that he is not actively shaping his material at all, but is rather a place where a verbal structure is taking its own shape. (1965, “Conclusion to *LHC,*” in *BG* 232-3)

What Frye is saying here is that mythological remembrance or awareness is the core of national literatures. Mythology literally shapes the speaker’s articulations because, when the speaker has grown together with collective mythology, literature is organically and unconsciously borne out of its society’s mythological identity. More than this, though, it would seem that a consideration of the sacred is at the heart of Frye’s convictions. When a nation is very old, Frye seems to be saying, it can trace its past beyond history and to gods of creation or “sun-gods.” And when a nation can do this, its literature bears the marks of maturity.

To be sure, these are large, theoretical abstractions, but we might consider how history can be transcended by mythology, and we might consider, then, a notable comment made by Haida author and artist Bill Reid:
In the world today, there is a commonly held belief that, thousands of years ago, as the world today counts time, Mongolian nomads crossed the land bridge to enter the western hemisphere, and became the people now known today as the American Indians. The truth of course, is that Raven found our forefathers on the beach at Naikun . . . There is, it can be said, some scanty evidence to support the myth of the land bridge. But there is an enormous wealth of proof to confirm that the other truths are all valid. (Qtd. in Coull 9)

Here, the myth of the Bering Strait--though a powerful and long-lived myth--is swept aside by the sacred myth of Raven. Since the Haida can trace their national history back to a sacred origin, back to an old body of mythology with “sun-gods” that are indigenous to this world, their mythology--sacred as it is in its origin--is therefore capable of rendering “historical” accounts subservient to mythological authority. Thus, the Haida nation can shape a body of national literature with well-known “mythical concepts” and “metaphorical habits of thought” (Frye) which need not bow to the consistent revisions of contemporary history, though writers may choose to adapt their stories to the dictates of different epochs. And, surely, both solace and confidence attend this recognition. After all, a nation such as this need not search for a mythology, and its writers need not sift through a wealth of historical evidence to identify its nation’s “traditional stories and images” (Frye).

But what about the Canadian nation? Is there any way in which the history of Canada belongs to the realm of the sacred? That is, is there a metaphysical foundation to Canada’s history? As Mircea Eliade explains in The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature
of Religion, sacred histories are part of sacred cosmogonies. And to trace sacred history back to its origin is to trace history back to a “navel” (44) of sorts or back to a sacred origin or center which descends from the gods. But if we trace a notable Canadian historical myth such as “the last spike” back to its origin, for example, we are inevitably presented with human, and not sacred, considerations. True, Chinese-Canadians might trace this myth back to a source other than the crazed dream of Sir John A. MacDonald, and for any one who has been to Yale, British Columbia and seen the mountains which had to be blasted to make way for the railway, it becomes obvious that behind gumshan, or Gold Mountain, there had to have been many vital gods. As well, if we consider the idea that Christ or another deity gave meaning to the toil and endless swaying of picks in these rugged mountains, we may also recognize many more gods that contributed to this national dream. But even if we trace this history back to the religious inspiration of the times and even further back to the Christian zeal of some of this nation’s first arrivants, we cannot trace national dreams back to a sacred source or navel comparable to the origins which shape Haida consciousness and Haida national history. Said another way, no matter how important the history of the Canadian Pacific Railway might be in this nation’s history, Craigellachie5 does not pack the mythological weight of Raven.

What happens, then, when there are no indigenous “sun-gods” to provide the foundations of mythological awareness? What happens when there is no sacred reason or explanation behind a nation’s history? What “habits of metaphorical thought” does a nation produce? Of course, these are large questions, and this study does not attempt to account for any nation other than Canada, but, here, it seems possible to suggest that long
before Canada had even become a nation, the foundation of certain “metaphorical habits” had already been laid. For those people who could trace their histories back only so far as memories or rumours of having arrived here, North America was a “New World,” and, as the name suggests, for some people, this was a domain, then, without a history. And it was a place to which people could bring already established stories and sacred histories. And they did. For English settlers and colonizers, this New World became, because of an inherited myth of concern predicated on the Judaeo-Christian myth, Eden and paradise. It also became hell and the ends of the world when the earth would not easily yield the fruit of its labour. For those who were enticed by a mercantilist dream, the New World also became El Dorado, and because of the dissatisfaction of the working class which largely settled the Americas, the New World also became the possible entry point to a different social station. For those who were intent on spreading the word of God and suffering in fine Christian fashion, the New World also became the perfect redemptive reward for martyrdom. Indeed, these are just a few examples of what the early Canadas offered, but, in essence, they indicate that this New World meant many different things to different people.

Now, it should be noted that these imported assumptions were not specific to Canada and that they were also informants in different areas of the Americas. For example, speaking of the colonial history behind South America, Central America and North America, Ronald Wright claims in Stolen Continents: The Indian Story that the idea of the New World as a vessel awaiting the marks of civilization was no respecter of any specific national ideal: “When the Anglo-Saxon and the Iberian came to the New World,
each remained true to his traditions” (345), Wright observes. In his discussion of traditional Cherokee territories and the gradual formation of the United States, Wright notes that “America seemed a virgin land waiting for civilization” (91). In his discussion of both Canada and the United States, Wright observes that the “myth of the empty land” (123) helped to support ignorant population estimates for the pre-Columbian world. And in his discussion of Aztec, Inca and Mayan lands, Wright suggests that the desire of the “Spanish soldier of fortune” for “gold and serfs” and the “idle, domineering life” (345) was one that took full advantage of the absence of similar desires in a world that could be used as a breeding ground for different values.

That said, however, it is equally important to note here that this myth of the empty land, although a powerful one, is only one narrative that gives shape to an understanding of how people conceived of these “new” territories which had been “discovered.” There are many examples of cultural exchange in the early Americas which, in fact, undermine a belief in the idea that people conceived of the “New World” as tabula rasa. Most notably, of course, there were many military alliances formed between different Indian nations and European powers, and these, in turn, led to a host of other sophisticated networks when economic liaisons, families, and friendships naturally grew out of these confederations. Quite understandably, then, customs and beliefs were shared between different nations, and people adapted themselves to one another by learning and taking from the beliefs, rituals, and practices of their new neighbours.

Wright observes, for instance, that “Europeans were forced to adopt Amerindian protocol” (126) when they naturally recognized that the cultures they were encountering
possessed old and sophisticated practices that worked. Speaking of those Europeans who settled in present-day Canada and the United States, Wright also notes that Europeans “had to acquire a rich metaphorical language” based on Iroquois traditions and that they began “planting the tree of peace, straightening the roads, sweeping the house, stoking the council fire, and so forth” (126). As well, one might consider here Sylvia Van Kirk’s “Many Tender Ties”: Women in Fur-Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670-1870. Van Kirk begins her work by claiming that “[t]he growth of a mutual dependency between Indian and European traders at the economic level could not help but engender a significant cultural exchange as well” (3), and her discussion of early Canada counters the assertion that Canada was taken to be an empty land void of civilizations. More specifically, Van Kirk notes that some traders who left the service of the North West Company “formed a significant group known as ‘freeman’, who lived a life akin to that of the Indians” (48). Both the men of the Hudson’s Bay Company and the North West Company “universally adopted the moccasin as the most practical footwear for the wilderness” (54), and their common sense proves that there were those who embraced the ideals not of an empty land but of a land which was recognized as having been understood and traveled for many years. In addition, Van Kirk observes that “[a]t least some understanding of the native languages was required to be an effective ‘Indian trader’” (65), and she also explains that what came to be known as the “‘Canadian’ fashion” during the early nineteenth century was a name given to that style of dress worn by “mixed-blood women” who had “combined both white and Indian features” (101).

And to be sure, it was not just European peoples who appropriated the ways of
aboriginal nations. For example, in *The Feathered U.E.L.'s: An Account of the Life and Times of Certain Canadian Native People*, Delaware author Enos T. Montour explains that the Six Nations Indians of Ontario, in addition to siding with British Loyalists in the late-eighteenth century and becoming "fellows in misery" (42) in the Great Trek of the 1790s from the United States to Canada, borrowed both the tools of British warfare and religion: "The Indians soon became adept at handling the musket," Montour claims, and while they "worried about the Cross[,] . . . [they] revered the Good Book, calling it 'The Birch Bark That Talks’" (71). In particular, and although a lot of time has been devoted in the last several decades to exploring the damage which has ensued from the colonial missionary trade in the "New World," it is religion which seems to have provided one of the greatest bases of cultural exchange between Europeans and aboriginal peoples.

In *The Unjust Society: The Tragedy of Canada's Indians*, Harold Cardinal explains, for instance, that religious ideologies were borrowed from European nations by aboriginal peoples, and his comments suggest that it is necessary to consider the idea that religion was not always forced on indigenous peoples but that it was accepted because the religiously educated identified with ideals that were complementary with their own. "The Indian was the first member of the ecumenical movement," Cardinal observes. "He was willing to accept the white missionary's message of love for his fellow men, because it came as a complement to rather than a contradiction of the Indian way of life. . . . The new values brought by the white man seemed similar to their own and the Indians trusted their new teachers, put great faith in their message" (82). Admittedly, and as Cardinal also notes, "[s]lowly the Indian found the new faith perverting his ancient beliefs from a
religion of action in everyday life to a religion of thou-shalt-nots" (83). However, it is significant to remember that there is a history of cultural exchange in the Americas and that this realization leads one to consider that simplistic binaries and those distinctions which may often be drawn between the "colonizer" and the "colonized" do not adequately account for the many different types of relations which have governed aboriginal/non-aboriginal relations in Canada.

But even with these conflicting stories taken into consideration--and there are many more--it is still necessary, in a discussion of Canada's search for a sacred historical mythology, to revisit the realization that the "New World" meant many different things to different people, and it is still necessary to revisit the myth of the empty land. Although one may recognize that the "New World" meant many different things to many different people in various areas of the Americas, it is important to consider the idea that this recognition may be of particular significance in Canada. That is, if we consider, with a suspension of disbelief, that Canada never experienced a powerful and collective ritual comparable to those rituals which have traditionally created pseudo-sacred origins for other nations and their mythologies, we might also consider, then, that this lack of a traditional, national ritual is related to a tendency to propagate the myth of the empty land.

Admittedly, these last claims are large and confusing, but they can be best explained by turning again to Eliade and, more specifically, to his theories about the formation of "worlds":

What is to become 'our world' must first be 'created,' and every creation has a paradigmatic model--the creation of the universe by the gods. When the
Scandinavian colonists took possession of Island (*land-nama*) and cleared it, they regarded the enterprise neither as an original undertaking nor as human and profane work. For them, their labor was only repetition of a primordial act, the transformation of chaos into cosmos by the divine act of creation. When they tilled the desert soil, they were in fact repeating the act of the gods who had organized chaos by giving it a structure, forms, and norms.

Whether it is a case of clearing uncultivated ground or of conquering and occupying a territory already inhabited by ‘other’ human beings, ritual taking possession must always repeat the cosmogony. . . . A territory can be made ours only by creating it anew, that is, by consecrating it. (*The Sacred and Profane* 31-32)

It is interesting that Eliade both points to the Norman Conquest and underscores the importance of rebirth which ensued from the Battle of Hastings, because what Eliade is actually doing by providing the above example is showing how history--the secular--can be made sacred when a significant ritual of rebirth is performed. And his discussion of those cultures which annually perform repetitions of the creation helps to shed light on the line of reasoning which this chapter is pursuing. Speaking of the Hittites and the Egyptians who annually ritualize “*the passage from chaos to cosmos*” (77), Eliade interprets the significance of this rite and celebration:

> Since the New Year is a reactualization of the cosmogony, it implies *starting time over again at its beginning*, that is, restoration of the primordial time, the ‘pure’ time, that existed at the moment of Creation. This is why the New
Year is the occasion for 'purifications,' for the expulsion of sins, of demons, of merely a scapegoat. For it is not a matter merely of a certain temporal interval coming to its end and the beginning of another (as a modern man, for example, thinks); it is also a matter of abolishing the past year and past time. Indeed, this is the meaning of ritual 'purification'; there is more than a mere 'purification'; the sins and faults of the individual and of the community as a whole are annulled, consumed as by fire. (The Sacred and the Profane 77-78)

And if I can apply Eliade's theories about annual re-birth to Eliade's discussion of the Norman colonization of England, it becomes possible to suggest that the Battle of Hastings was a ritual comparable to those "reactualization[s] of [a] cosmogony" which abolish the past and pave a new slate for a new beginning. After all, this act provided a new moment of Creation, and everything that happened prior to 1066 was consumed by fire. So, in this sense, history began for these conquerors in 1066.

And in this sense, for those who adhere to Eliade's theories of national beginnings, history began in the United States in 1776, and history began in France in 1789. More specifically and importantly, perhaps, it was at these specific moments in history that mythological "navels" were created to which these nations could trace their beginnings. Through significant ritual acts--albeit secular in their origin--history was erased, and these nations were given metaphysical foundations. Revolution, after all, is a literal end to history. It is a moment when history stops and starts again. And it is the French Revolution which best supports the idea that something borne out of an historical event can become a ritual which abolishes the past. After all, French revolutionaries wanted to
sweep away history, the aristocracy and the crown. They wanted to put an end to time, and they did. They created a new calendar, and time began in a new beginning. The example of a new beginning is not so clear or poignant in the United States, but one can still point to a moment where time began again for a mass of people who were once guided by different myths which had interpreted history.

But in Canada—and I can only speak of Canada here—the various myths which competed at an early date to provide an understanding of the “New World” were never pre-empted and unified by a significant and collective ritual. This is not to say that this is a bad thing, and, in fact, the conclusion to this dissertation will suggest that this lack of an originary moment in Canada has created certain unique strengths. But it is to say at this point that the absence of a unifying ritual in Canada—a ritual which can become sacred and which can provide a new point for a new historical beginning—is significant when one attempts to make sense of this nation’s search for some kind of sacred historical mythology. Believers in such theories of national development can neither point to a time in history which produced the sacred beginnings for the formation of new mythologies nor point to a collective sacred origin such as that moment of national beginning when Raven created the Haida nation from the clam shells on the shores of Haida Gwaii. They cannot point to something sacred which transcends history and renders history subservient to myth. And perhaps this is what critics such as Lampman, MacMechan and Brown were actually insinuating in their discussions of history and its relation to the formation of a national body of literature. While they ostensibly embraced the historical immediacy of war, revolution or civil struggle and while they seemed to suggest that a grand, historical
moment would lead authors to create truly indigenous songs, it is really the mythological import of what such struggles as these carry which seems worthy of serious consideration. Pointing as they did to the absence of social revolution in Canada, these critics were anticipating a time when this nation would, in effect, wipe away the past and truly begin for the first time. But this would not happen in their lifetimes. And the search for a national mythology would continue, and this search would also ultimately embrace those narratives which wipe away a significant part of the past—but only a part—and which therefore seem to pave the road for the foundations of that originary moment which national mythologies traditionally demand. And one of these myths is the myth of the empty land.

It is important to note here that this myth excludes all other narratives which destroy its own ideals. That is, it is a myth which seeks for an originary moment by believing that originary moments have not been defined by others and in different ways. In essence, the myth of the empty land provides a space, or a slate, for a new beginning since, by its very nature, it is informed by an absolute desire to erase any kind of past or history. And although it will become apparent in Chapter Three that this myth is a tenuous one, it is also important to note that this myth has gained a certain kind of stability and a certain kind of following. Most importantly, it is interesting to consider the idea that its resurrection in the late-nineteenth century and its perpetuation in the twentieth century suggest that this myth is commensurate with the ideals of burgeoning nationalism.

Van Kirk's study of cultural relations during the fur-trade years helps to elucidate this last claim. At the end of Many Tender Ties, for example, Van Kirk observes that a
recognition of early cultural exchange in Canada between aboriginal and non-aboriginal populations has been forgotten:

It is unfortunate that, in terms of its racial ties, the early world of the fur trade became ‘a world we have lost.’ Even in fur-trade society, with the increasing impact of white cultural values, prejudice gained hold to such an extent that this potential for racial integration was lost. This is to be regretted, for the blending of European and Indian culture could have been an enriching human experience.

Van Kirk offers a couple of reasons for the disappearance of an awareness of cultural exchange in Canada and for the return of the myth of the empty land, and, drawing distinctions between early and late-nineteenth century Canada, Van Kirk seems to suggest that this loss of an awareness is related to the fact that relationships between aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples changed in significant ways throughout this century. Now, Van Kirk is primarily concerned with the history of Western Canada and that area of the world which was once known as Rupert’s Land, but her observations shed light on a consideration of cultural exchange in Canada as a whole. First, Van Kirk notes that the influx of European women into Rupert’s Land in the 1820s and the following decades disturbed the value which had been placed on mixed marriages and on unions between aboriginal and non-aboriginal couples. Second, she suggests that the union of the Hudson’s Bay Company and the North West Company in 1821 put an end to trade rivalry that had formerly been dependent on fostering strong alliances with Indian nations. And, third, she observes that with the settlement of Rupert’s Land came missionaries and a
desire to wash away Indian beliefs and values. One might also consider here, as Wright does, that the late-nineteenth century was also a time during which Canada did not have to worry so much about the threat of American invasion. As Wright notes, in the late-nineteenth century “Indian buffer states were no longer required” (316), and this meant that the Canadian government could begin to pursue policies that were geared more towards national expansion than Native/non-Native conciliation. As he puts it, “Canada, knowing that native nations held aboriginal title to large parts of North America, wanted to get rid of its indigenous rivals” (316). Thus, policies based on principles of absorption and assimilation were directed against aboriginal nations, and the interdependent legacies of the past were swept away to a certain degree. And what I mean to suggest here is that part of Canada’s history which had boasted strong relations between Indian and non-Indian nations became erased when settlement of Canada began in earnest.

Indeed, there seems to be a correlation between settlement, the disappearance of a recognition of cultural exchange in Canada and the perpetuation of, or return to, a belief in the myth of the empty land. And perhaps this is not so surprising. By 1905, all but one of Canada’s present-day provinces had joined Confederation, and the myth of national unification which must vie with the recognition that indigenous cultures cannot be erased attempts, at the very least, to efface the history of the past which tells stories antagonistic to the ideals of nationhood. And as the third chapter will explore more closely it, indeed, seems to have been the case that this myth of the empty land, as all noteworthy myths do, not only survived but also adapted itself to changing politics over the years. For instance, during that period of official nationalism in Canada when people were attempting to come
to terms with history and with mythology in a new way, writers would not look back to the sophisticated network of negotiations which grew out of the advent of different cultures meeting but would inadvertently resurrect this myth of the empty land by adamantly drawing attention to a native presence. By declaring that this was not an empty land but a land filled with original inhabitants and the spirits of the past, some notable authors of the late 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s were, in fact, engaging with this past myth which had assumed that this world had been tabula rasa. Indeed, this consideration is of special significance to the discussion which will ensue in Chapter Three, but, here, it is worth noting that this myth of the empty land seems related to certain trends which reveal themselves at an early date in Canadian literature and which seem to have been consistently maintained for decades.

As this chapter will go on to suggest in detail, these trends or traditions ultimately derive from British nationalism and capitalism when Britain was at the height of her empire. Now, admittedly, this is not a stunning declaration. To say the least, it has become commonplace to claim that colonialism and empire building are related to attempts to erase indigenous histories. But what I hope is new here is not so much the idea that Canada’s mythological traditions derive from a framework of imported beliefs but the idea that, in Canada, this imported framework has altered the fundamental foundation upon which mythology traditionally rests: it has affected the relationship between people and geography which traditionally boasts of an organic union between peoples and environments. As this story which searches for a sacred historical mythology suggests, this framework has allowed for a brief courting period between mythologizers
and this world, but it has never permitted the two to have a traditional marriage. At best, it has provided a simulacrum of tradition—a deceptive or shadowy likeness of tradition which speaks more for Britain than it does for a world many miles away from this imperial centre. And what is significant about this recognition is that while other ceremonies can create what this union typically provides—namely, a mythological navel—such ceremonies have not been experienced in Canada. And, so, one may stall at a recognition of the simulacrum—of that shadowy likeness of Britain. One may embrace it. One may dispute it, deny it, hate it or love it. But one will have a hard time accepting it as an archetype itself in this nation's mythology—as a narrative design which is part of this nation's mythology—for to accept it as an archetype is to accept defeat if one is looking for a mythological base similar to that which has served other nations.

The end of this chapter will make more sense of these last claims, but they are worth keeping in mind when considering the traditions, or trends, upon which the myth of the empty land may be based. And, here, then, it seems significant to note that if Canada's English literary history is traced back to such a figure as Frances Brooke and the publication of The History of Emily Montague (1769), as has consistently been the case, then a Canadian legacy of letters stems, in part, from Britain's burgeoning capitalism centuries ago. And most noteworthy in a discussion of Canadian mythology and its depictions of the "new lands" of the Americas and of its original inhabitants is the recognition that this moment of institutional and ideological change in Britain encouraged the importation of what could be called foreign philosophies of land use to the new world. And these philosophies both fed and thrived on the myth of the empty land. For example,
the notion that land could be privately possessed and, more importantly, necessarily groomed, or cultivated, was an economic precept brought to the Americas by this European power which, even more so than such colonial conquerors as Spain, Portugal, or France, was considered precocious in its progression from a past of feudalism to capitalism. And it was this capitalistic ideal that would serve to wipe away a recognition that these lands were not empty and that they were governed by different philosophies.

For example, Brooke’s character Arabella Fermor seems to embody the sentiments of the British world with which she was contemporary when she describes the French settlements of Québec in the eighteenth century as somewhat backward. Writing about Lower Canada, Fermor suggests, for instance, that, unlike the British, the French Canadians at this time lived “a good deal like the ancient patriarchs,” as “every officer became a seigneur, or lord of the manor,” and as “the lazy creatures,” she noted, left “the greatest part of their land uncultivated, only sowing as much corn of different sorts as [would] serve themselves” (61). Such treatment of the land, after all, did not accord with strategies of capital accumulation which demanded that land be cultivated for marketing purposes and personal, as opposed to civic, gain. While, indeed, no historical artifact is an untainted repository of its society’s beliefs, Brooke’s text does reflect some convictions which grew to popularity in England’s early modern era. Here, as elsewhere in early English-Canadian settler and explorer accounts, readers, for example, are presented with the notion that land, uncultivated in a Georgian sense, is waste, that one necessarily “grows weary of mere scenery” (14), that settlement, a “house embosomed in the grove” (327), is a means of taming the wilderness, what Brooke calls a “state of vegetation” (14).
On the other hand, though, there are instances in Brooke’s text when pure wilderness is praised, when the “lovely simplicity of nature” offers more promises than “seeking pleasure in vain amongst the works of art” (327). The latter emphasis finds support, of course, in the sentiments of romanticism which grew to dominate literature of the later eighteenth century, a tradition precipitated by antagonism towards Britain’s developing transformation from a feudal to capitalist economy. However, while Brooke and other like-minded individuals might have relegated wilderness to a superior, instead of inferior, position, and while this tendency might have escaped the shortcomings of showing fear for or disgust with the wilderness, such a position is equally problematic. After all, unequivocal praise for the wilderness is imbued with Rousseau’s earlier convictions which, of course, include a belief in the noble savage and which understand anything associated with the wilderness as primitive and, though to be praised, as still lacking the trappings of civilization. Thus, we might see in works such as Brooke’s conflicting attitudes toward the new world and its lands which are the result of extrinsic, cultural beliefs. The cultivated garden, or its untamed antithesis, provisos for dominant themes in much of Britain’s “enlightened” and Romantic literature, respectively, may be recognized, in other words, as having determined certain literary responses to the new world as well as the old.⁹

Of course, it should be noted that these reflections do not speak for all examples of early Canadian literature. Not at all. The attitude which has been isolated from this portion of Brooke’s text is but one take on the Americas, and to study Brooke’s text more closely would reveal that The History of Emily Montague also carries with it many more
ideologies than those which have been explored. However, if we assess the tendencies which are inherent in the attitudes which have been discussed here, we might consider how they are both inextricable with a belief in the empty land and with a tendency to ignore the markers of old civilizations which many would have recognized in their travels and travails in new lands.

For instance, the notion that civilization was a correlative of the cultivation of land and that the new world demanded both these things ignored the fact that land was, indeed, cultivated upon arrival, although in a foreign sense. Especially around coastal areas, where resources were plentiful and where access to the ocean and its tributaries was relatively unencumbered, sedentary lifestyle demanded a regulation of land, where hunting areas, dwelling sites, and places for picking berries and other foods necessarily had to be given perimeters to help deflect, amongst other things, the tension which naturally accompanies any group attempting to live together. In fact, Canada’s “tradition of gardening and landscape design” has been traced back by some experts to as early as AD 500, when “Aboriginal cultures around the Great Lakes and along St. Lawrence River gradually evolved agricultural settlements” (Buggey 254). The fact remains, though, that images of the Canadian wilderness or garden, as witnessed through the eyes of certain impulses in English-Canadian literature, have a specific basis in economic imperatives which appropriated instead of understood the land of the Americas. “To a historically informed European,” W.J. Keith writes in his book Literary Images of Ontario, “venturing into this [new] land was like returning to the way of life of the ‘dark-age’ Anglo-Saxon world, a pattern of isolated communities encircled by wilderness that was unknown and
almost certainly dangerous” (19). In order to escape this realm’s harsh geographical
dictates and its attendant lack of societal progress, then, European settlers had to fashion
this world according to modern views which had effectively stepped out of an age of past
darkness.

And there are many different ways in which this philosophy would be employed to
try to make sense of this new world and to try cultivate this world in a “civilized” way.
For example, this attempt to reform the lands of Canada and, with them, their indigenous
philosophies was poignantly underscored in the late-nineteenth century in British
Columbia, and the following examples illustrate how these Eurocentric beliefs did not
simply die in the air or at the end of a quill point but how they became informants in public
actions. Here, Premier William Smithe, one of three provincial representatives to meet a
delegation of Nisga’a and Tsimshian chiefs who had traveled down from B.C.’s northern
interior to Victoria to discuss principles of aboriginal title and self government, told the
Indian leaders the following: “When the whites first came among you, you were little
better than the wild beasts of the field” (BC, Legislature, Sessional Papers, 1887, 264; qtd.
in Tennant 58). After all, only beasts, as many British subjects understood it, would live
on uncultivated land. Indeed, the convictions which Smithe carried were rampant, and
they not only offended Native political leaders at the time, but they also served to do more
than offend their children and grandchildren. For example, Joseph Trutch, who would
later become chief commissioner of lands and works in British Columbia in 1871, wrote to
the governor in 1867 to express his dismay with the reserves which had been established
along the Lower Fraser in 1864:
The Indians regard these extensive tracts of land as their individual property; but of
by far the greater portion thereof they make no use whatever and are not likely to
do so; and thus the land, much of which is either rich pasture or available for
cultivation and greatly desired for immediate settlement, remains in an
unproductive condition—is of no real value to the Indians and utterly unprofitable
to the public interests.

I am, therefore, of the opinion that these reserves should, in almost every
case, be very materially reduced. (Qtd. in Tennant 43). 11

One cannot disregard the fact that Trutch had a specific agenda when he delivered these
words, 12 but this example is indicative of a certain height of arrogance which naturally
found fertile ground in a period when capitalists had transposed to the new world a belief
that nature could and should be controlled. Economic motives and theories of societal
progress thus combined to fashion methods of dealing with a bewildering new world and
its inhabitants. It should be recognized, then, that the new world was often understood
not in terms endemic with it but with ideologies transplanted from a different interpretive
community. 13 And it is important to note that this version of reality would produce
strange results in Canadian literature. Frye remarked, for instance, that “to begin one’s
culture by severing so many links with nature and the earlier inhabitants poses the most
formidable problems for its development” (1988, “Culture and Society in Ontario, 1784-
1984,” in Gorjup 176-77).

For instance, if, indeed, the New World was taken to be a new a place whose
landscapes were unfamiliar and whose “sun-gods and the like” (Frye, “Conclusion to
LHC,” in BG 232) were not recognized, then the stories which resulted from such outlooks would naturally register a certain amount of discomfort. After all, geography is the main informant in mythological narratives, and its position is central, therefore, to an understanding of a culture’s philosophies. When Frye commented, for example, that “[i]t is not a nation but an environment that makes an impact on poets” (1956, “Preface to an Uncollected Anthology,” in BG 164), he was really underscoring the idea that flora and fauna are incisive symbols in the formation of cultural mythologies. In other words, then, in significantly mature literary traditions, one may recognize that people and their environments have grown together and that the history of the one is always inextricable with that of the other. However, those stories which are dependent on such myths as the myth of the empty land do not suggest a mutual adaptation between voice and place but, rather, reveal a certain kind of antagonism between the stories which are told and the places in which they are told. And such stories also reveal themselves to be different from those stories which grow out of sacred histories and which hold together people, their worlds and their gods.

As Frye also said, “Canada is more than most countries a milieu in which certain preconceived literary stereotypes are likely to interpose between the imagination and the expression it achieves” (1943, “Canada and its Poetry,” in BG 132), and, indeed, this is a significant reflection, because what these attitudes toward the landscape and geography of the “new world” meant for Canadian literature is that certain images took fertile root and provided a tenuous, mythological framework for Canadian writing. This is a point which D.G. Jones would make when, reflecting on Canadian literature in 1970 in his work
Butterfly on Rock: A Study of Themes and Images in Canadian Literature, he claimed that “if we were looking for a single or archetypal pattern in terms of which Canadian literature could be placed in perspective, the pattern of the Old Testament might suit us best” (15). As Jones further maintained, “[i]f the world of Canadian literature is an Old Testament world, it is a world of Adam separated from his Creator” (15), and, here, what Jones was provocatively observing was that Canadian literature was testimony to the idea that Canadian mythology was, and would continue to be, different from other and older national mythologies because Canadian imaginations had not grown organically with the world which they were attempting to describe.

In light of Jones’s claim, I am reminded of a notable passage in Isabella Valancy Crawford’s long poem Malcolm’s Katie: A Love Story (1884), and I quote a portion of it at length here not because I can claim that it is representative of all early Canadian verse or thought but because it so clearly depicts a national soul which has not lived with the comfort of a sacred history:

Max smote the snow-weigh’d tree and lightly laugh’d.

‘See, friend,’ he cried to one that look’d and smil’d,

‘My axe and I--we do immortal tasks--

‘We build up nations--this my axe and I!’

‘O,’ said the other with a cold, short smile,

‘Nations are not immortal! Is there now

‘One nation thron’d upon the sphere of earth,

‘That walk’d with the first Gods, and saw
'The budding world unfold its slow-leav’d flow’r?

‘Nay; it is hardly theirs to leave behind

‘Ruins so eloquent that the hoary sage

‘Can lay his hand upon their stones, and say:

‘These once were thrones!’ The lean, lank lion peals

‘His midnight thunders over the lone, red plains,

‘Long-ridg’d and crested on their dusty waves

‘With fires from moons red-hearted as the sun;

‘And deep re-thunders all the earth to him.

‘For, far beneath the flame-fleck’d, shifting sands,

‘Below the roots of palms, and under stones

‘Of younger ruins, thrones, tow’rs and cities

‘Honeycomb the earth . . .

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‘Nations immortal? Where the well-trimm’d lamps

‘Of long-past ages, when Time seem’d to pause

‘On smooth, dust-blotted graves that, like the tombs

‘Of monarchs, held dead bones and sparkling gems?

‘She saw no glimmer on the hideous ring

‘Of the black clouds; no stream of sharp, clear light

‘From those great torches, pass’d into the black

‘Of deep oblivion . . .
She dream'd new Gods, and rear'd them other shrines,
Planted young nations, smote a feeble flame

'Time seem'd to pause upon forgotten graves--
'Once more a young dawn stole into her eyes--
'Again her broad wings stirr'd, and fresh, clear airs,
'Blew the great clouds apart;--again Time said,
'This is my birth--my deeds and handiwork
'Shall be immortal. Thus and so dream on
'Fool'd nations, and thus dream their dullard sons.
'Naught is immortal save immortal--Death!' (Part IV, 53-136)

Max's opening comment, which provokes a long response from Alfred, embodies a sentiment which grows out of the recognition that the new world has been plundered by the aspirations of nationalism. Though Max is "a half-breed lad" (Part II, 165) and though half of his history stems from the new world, he possesses the arrogance of the old and thinks that his axe can carve a national space. Alfred, however, claims he cannot, and Alfred also claims that time itself cannot create a nation. Nations, as well as time, are not "immortal," as he says, and the first Gods will always be older and more permanent than anything that can be seen. Those who think they can create a lasting monument in "deeds or handiwork," discourses or monuments, are at best the "dullard sons" of time. Here, Alfred, although a villain, would seem to embody an almost sensitive attitude as we
recognize, through him, the devastation that colonization has brought to the Americas. But in a discussion of national mythology, Alfred is also representative of the inability to recognize that some nations, such as the First Nations of the Americas, have, indeed, walked with the first Gods.

Certainly, portions of Crawford’s poem would seem to correct the sentiments represented by Alfred’s naiveté, especially when Crawford creates new images from old and sacred histories to describe the reality of the “New World” in which Albert, Max, Katie and Malcolm are living. That is, Crawford shows a reverence for patterns of images which are derived from aboriginal mythologies and which can inevitably be traced back to the Gods of the Western hemisphere, and, therefore, Malcolm’s Katie gives pause to the consideration that there were early Canadian writers, just as there were early Canadian settlers, who attempted to embrace the beliefs and values of the indigenous cultures they encountered and with whom they shared experiences. In this poem, for example, “the South Wind [lays] his moccasins aside” (Part II, 1) and “cast[s] / His useless wampum” (Part II, 2-3); the “North Wind” springs “[f]rom his far wigwam” (Part IV, 1); and “. . . the Sun, / Relights his Council fire in the Moon / Of Budding leaves . . .” (Part IV, 22-24). Indeed, Malcolm’s Katie is evidence that aboriginal traditions and habits of thought are embedded in Canadian literature since this poem includes aboriginal words and expressions.

However, although Crawford’s poem embraces the possibility of a different language to describe the land about which she is writing, and although it embraces the possibility of different ways of knowing, Malcolm’s Katie is ultimately predicated upon the
impulse to create new stories out of values which have been imported to the new world.

The poem, after all, ends in the following manner:

‘Oh, yes!’ Said Max, with laughter in his eyes;

‘And I do truly think that Eden bloom’d

‘Deep in the heart of tall, green maple groves,

‘With sudden scents of pine from mountain sides,

‘And prairies with their breasts against the skies.

‘And Eve was only little Katie’s height.’

‘Hoot, lad. You speak as ev’ry Adam speaks

‘About his bonne Eve; but what says Kate?’

‘O Adam had not Max’s soul,’ she said;

‘And these wild woods and plains are fairer far

‘Than Eden’s self. O bounteous mothers they!

‘Beck’ning pale starvelings with their fresh, green hands,

‘And with their ashes mellowing the earth,

‘That she may yield her increases willingly.

‘I would not change these wild and rocking woods,

‘Dotted by little homes of unbark’d trees,

‘Where dwell the fleers from the waves of want,—

‘For the smooth sward of selfish Eden bowers,

‘Nor—Max for Adam, if I knew my mind!’ (Part VII, 22-40)

Kate will not exchange her Max for Adam, but she is ultimately unable to understand her
Max without an idea of how he compares to Adam. And this recognition provides an interesting comment on Canada and its first stages of mythological ideation. That is, one could say that because this nation's history cannot be traced back to a sacred origin indigenous to these lands, Canadian mythology inevitably grows out of philosophies and concepts which have been imported from foreign worlds. And as Frye would say, this spells strange things for the literature which will come to define its collective character.

For instance, Crawford's poem, which Frye said was "[put] . . . in an Indian form," suggested to Frye that Malcolm's Katie "may have sprung from an unconscious feeling that the primitive myth expressed the imaginative impact of the country as more artificial literature could never do" (1946, "The Narrative Tradition in English-Canadian Poetry," in BG 148). While Frye's terminology is suspect today, and while such value-laden terms as "primitive" have naturally been contested in recent years, what he was astutely underscoring was the idea that the history of Canada's voice registered a discomfort with the imaginative language it had learned from England. As Frye further explained, Crawford's poem underlines a "process [that] is almost an allegory of the Canadian poetic imagination, making a tremendous effort to rouse itself and create a reborn mythology out of the abandoned Indian one, an effort still premature and collapsing before its fulfillment" (1977, "Haunted by Lack of Ghosts," in Goyup 127). In other words, and to paraphrase Frye, Malcolm's Katie underscores a desire or impulse to tell stories which derive somehow from the old world of the Americas, but it also reveals that such a desire is incredibly difficult to satisfy for those who continually search for their origins. However, what is important to note here is that although Frye recognized Crawford's poem as
failing to fulfill its ideals, he also recognized that *Malcolm's Katie* was evidence that "something new [was] on the way" (127). That is, Frye was suggesting that new mythological imaginations could actually be created.

But just how do writers recognize and embrace new mythological materials and, therefore, new mythological potential? MacMechan had already approached possible answers to these sweeping questions when he claimed, at a relatively early date, that "[a] whole generation had to be born and grow up in the new conditions before a national literature was possible" (97), and, here, it is interesting to note that MacMechan was essentially supporting what Joseph Campbell would say about national and collective mythologies after Campbell had spent a lifetime reading traditional narratives from around the world. As Campbell put it in *The Power of Myth*, "[t]he relationship of myths to cosmology and sociology has got to wait for man to become used to the new world that he is in" (139), and what Campbell, like MacMechan, was simply saying is that national mythologies take some time to develop. Frye was convinced of this idea also, and, more specifically, he maintained that "[a] mythology emerges when the mental landscape of a group of writers begin to fuse with their physical environment" (1988, "Culture and Society in Canada, 1784-1984," in Gorjup 189). For Frye, true mythmaking was the result of "the uniting of subject and object in the imaginative experience" (1965, "Conclusion to *LHC*" in *BG* 245), a fusion which could only take place when an individual was intimately connected to her or his world.

Interestingly enough, when Gwendolyn MacEwan published her apostrophe to the unknown Canadian explorer, "Dark Pines Under Water" (1965), she seemed to lend
credence to Frye's idea that national stories, or myths, must somehow organically grow out of one's connection to the surrounding landscape. This is not to say that a direct path of influence can be traced between Frye's assertions and MacEwan's verse, but it is to say that "Dark Pines," like Frye's comments about Canadian mythology, reflects a certain stage of consciousness in Canadian writing. In this poem, for example, MacEwan depicts something which is undeniably Canadian, but, here, she also portrays a landscape which eludes the understanding of even the most adventurous explorer:

This land like a mirror turns you inward

........................................

The dark pines of your mind reach downward,
You dream in the green of your time,
Your memory is a row of sinking pines.

Explorer, you tell yourself this is not what you came for
Although it is good here, and green;
You had meant to move with a kind of largeness,
You had planned a heavy grace, an anguished dream.

But the dark pines of your mind dip deeper
And you are sinking, sinking, sleeper
In an elementary world;
There is something down there and you want it told. (Shadow-Maker 50)

While MacEwan’s explorer recognizes the power of this land and the opportunity which it affords for turning minds “inward,” she/he is literally sinking into the unknown. And perhaps this is because her explorer cannot make sense of the “green” and “largeness” of this place. Here, MacEwan seems to be presenting her readers with the same sort of convictions which Ralph Gustafson’s “In the Yukon” had forwarded seven years earlier. In this poem, Gustafson’s narrator claimed that “[i]n Europe, you can’t move without going down into history” while “[h]ere, all is a beginning” (Selected Poems 89). Likewise, MacEwan depicts a world which is essentially without a history—a world which is “elementary.” And its pines remain “dark” and under water because the source of this world—the gods—cannot be tracked by the explorer who has just arrived.

However, it is important to note that although this poem registers a sense of bewilderment with the Canadian landscape, and even frustration with a lack of tradition, MacEwan, at this point, was writing out of an established literary tradition. It was not a tradition dependent on mythology, but it was a tradition dependent on a search for mythology and a desire to understand the land which held the clues to some kind of national awareness or narrative. Like Canada’s foundational poets, MacEwan was continuing a “[p]reoccupation with landscape” (E.K. Brown 143); like Canada’s “discoverers and explorers,” she was recording the phenomenon of strange lands; and like Canada’s early critics, she was asserting that much had yet to be “told.” In effect, MacEwan’s poem lends credence to the critical reflections of Robert Kroetsch who has noted that Canadian writers have consistently underscored their own inability to provide
convincing, national narratives, or something that smacks of an indigenous mythology connected to an understanding of the land. As Kroetsch has suggested, for example, “we have in Canadian history an abundance of explorers, but so far the narrative has surrendered them entirely to Thomson’s absolute and ‘empty’ landscape” (‘Reciting the Emptiness,” in LTW 39). And, really, what Kroetsch is saying is that Canada’s writers, while recording the properties of their land, were, for a long while, perplexed by what they were recording and that a large portion of Canadian literature, therefore, reveals the lack of an organic relationship between speakers and their locations.

While migrants might have carried with them those philosophies which had worked in the places of their birth, they soon found that they would still have to learn new languages to describe the worlds they encountered. Of course, Frye would maintain in 1965 that the “Canadian sensibility” is “less perplexed by the question ‘Who am I?’ than by some such riddle as ‘Where is here?’” (“Conclusion to LHC,” in BG 220), and although this conviction has already been quoted ad nauseam, it is still one of the most astute observations about Canadian culture and, most definitely, a fine starting point for a discussion of Canadian mythology. When one begins a study of Canadian literature, for example, one is inevitably directed to such texts as Tom Marshall’s The Harsh and Lovely Land, John Moss’s Patterns of Isolation in English-Canadian Fiction, and Margaret Atwood’s Survival, and what all of these works underscore, as early as their titles, is the idea that Canada’s artists have thought of Canada’s lands not as an organic part of themselves but as a potential predator—something which must be resisted—or as something that can, or must, be tamed. Now, admittedly, such texts and the theories which they pose
have been contested and understood as reductive, but it is important to recognize that these theories seem predicated on old impulses which were formed at an early date in Canadian mythological thought. And what is also important to recognize, then, is that these theories keep alive a certain amount of disparagement with the phenomenon of the new world. That is, they resist embracing the new world as a recognizable archetype in this nation’s mythological makeup and persist in attempting to revisit and re-write the past. Perhaps it is no wonder, then, that, as Kroetsch has remarked, “Canadians, from the beginning of their history, have been unwilling or slow or even unable to locate the overriding stories, the persistent and recurring narratives, that allow for the development of a national meta-narrative” (“The Veil of Knowing,” in LTW 182).

This is not to say, however, that the foundations of Canadian literature are notably void of artists and authors who have tried to forge some kind of connection between themselves and Canada’s lands. Quite the reverse, in fact. Since the beginning of Canada’s English literary history, the dominance of landscape in Canadian writing has largely defined Canadian literature as Canadian. As well, Canadian nationalism, or national consciousness, was, at an early stage, imbricated in a complex process of reading and understanding the land. This realization was recognized by MacMechan in his discussion of early Canadian literature when he posed and answered the following question: “What is the essentially Canadian in Lampman’s verse?” As MacMechan understood it, “[i]t [was] his subtle interpretation of the land he lived in” (116) that recorded the essence of this nation, and, here, MacMechan was essentially observing that if any kind of national identity were to be recognized in Canadian literature, it was to be
found within depictions of the locale which defined Canada as a political entity. Of course, E.K. Brown had also tried to make sense of the fact that Canadian literature was full of reactions to the landscape, and, to be sure, Brown spent a significant amount of time talking about depictions of Canadian geography and its importance in Canadian verse. But what Brown ultimately ended up saying about landscape and its presence in this nation's literature is very telling.

In 1943, for example, Brown observed that "[o]riginality [had] been rare in Canadian literature" and that "what originality there [had] been [was] narrowly limited" (143), and he also made the following comments:

In the early generations with whom imaginative writing began, there was a tendency, natural enough in transplanted Englishmen and Americans, to depend on English and American authors for tragedy and comedy, general history and general criticism, philosophical reflection whether in prose or verse, in short for the presentation of all general problems of human experience. Canadians were impelled to write descriptions either of the landscape round about them or of the peculiar circumstances in which they lived; these they must describe for themselves since the material was unknown to anyone else. (143)

Here, Brown pointed to the idea that the first stages of Canada's imaginative writing reveal imported paradigms of thought, and what Brown was suggesting was that no matter how Canadian the locale seems to be within early Canadian writing, there is evidence that things have been filtered with a foreign lens. Perhaps this is why Frye would take a look at Canadian modernist verse almost a decade later and note that while
Canada’s American contemporaries had made it new, Canada’s imaginative or “mythological” development had somehow been arrested. In 1954, for example, Frye began by noting that “Carman’s poetic sense told him, as it told Isabella Crawford before him and Pratt after him, that the most obvious development of a romantic landscape poet is towards the mythological, towards making his emotional impressions into a *dramatic personae* of forces at once human and natural” (1954, “Letters in Canada,” in *BG* 34-35).

But as Frye further observed, when international influences encouraged Canadian writers to start producing new mythologies, the results fell flat in a certain way. “The generation of poets growing up in the twenties encountered more urban and intellectual influences,” Frye wrote, “and found in T.S. Eliot especially a technique for adapting the old mythological themes to a human as well as a natural environment, and to ironic as well as to romantic uses” (36); however, as Frye saw it, “[t]he mythological impulse . . . simply reinforced the romantic heritage” (36). Frye’s comments seem to suggest that Canadian literature and its imaginative impulses were, for some reason, suspended in old traditions, and Frye insinuated that it would take much more than some literary great from across the border or ocean to encourage and precipitate a real national mythology.

But as Frye would also suggest, familiarity with one’s surrounding environment could never be enough, in itself, to create an arena for the making of proper myths. In fact, Frye argued that not only does a nation have to be intimately familiar with its landscape but that it also needs a social impetus to encourage a revisioning of its mythology, and, here, Frye was echoing the earlier claims of those such as Lampman, MacMechan and Brown. In his conclusion to *A Literary History of Canada*, Frye, for
example, made the following claim: “[T]here must be a period, of a certain magnitude, as Aristotle would say, in which a social imagination can take root and establish a tradition” (1965, “Conclusion to LHC,” in BG 219). However, drawing a distinction between the literature of the United States and that of Canada, Frye continued to note that while social revolution had inspired developments in American writing, Canadian literature had not been shaped by any similar impulse. As Frye said, “American literature had this period, in the north-eastern part of the country, between the Revolution and the Civil War. Canada has never had it” (68). In many ways, Frye was repeating the arguments which Lampman, MacMechan and Brown had already made, but it is significant to note that Frye was writing in 1965 and that he was not only recognizing the continuance of notable literary habits but that he was also re-iterating the idea that Canada had still not experienced some sense of national need or agency which is necessary for national mythmaking.

To revisit and underscore the interests of this chapter, then, it seems possible to suggest that three prime considerations grow out of a revisiting of this story which documents the search for a sacred historical mythology in Canada. First, one might consider that Canadian mythology is a body of literature which, unlike ancient mythologies, had to grow out of a past before it could actually begin to record the essence of the world to which it belonged. Therefore, perhaps it is understandable that certain early critics of Canadian literature looked forward to a historical moment of greatness which they thought would precipitate some notable change in the way Canada’s citizens thought of the country and themselves and that they thus anticipated a war, revolution, or noteworthy civil struggle.
Second, this search for a sacred historical mythology seems predicated on a traditional attempt to pave the slate for a new beginning. Returning as the myth of the empty land did in full force during a time when a new nation was being recognized and when the alliances of the past were forgotten, this myth seemed to anticipate the creation of that originary moment which traditionally allows significant histories to be forgotten and a new time and mythology to begin anew. The origins of this myth—embedded as they are in a colonial history which sought to conquer and erase both the inhabitants and the gods of this land—are extensions of traditional, nationalistic values which seek for an arena to erase the past and bolster the mythological underpinnings of the nation.

Third, and as this chapter has also attempted to suggest, this story which records the struggle to identify a sacred historical mythology is predicated on a belief that this story must be told. That is, central to this story is the belief that nations must—and can—justify their beginnings and that part of this justification takes place through the development of a national literature or mythology. And this seems to be what Frye was saying. Frye recognized that this nation, like any other, would have to recognize and embrace its own mythologies through an examination of its past stories, and, thus, while he would not deny the notion that a great historical moment would give shape to a new collective consciousness, he would claim that the mythological implications of history were of primary importance. Moreover, Frye would consider the idea that some manifestation of the sacred would have to be embraced by those who were intent on shaping an indigenous literature, and his theories suggest that the sacred would inevitably be found somewhere between the poles of history and mythology.
Frye realized, however, that this search would not be easy. Because this country was a colony, because it was new, and because it had its own unique past, it would take a long while for people to look deep within this nation’s history and begin sorting out the archetypes, the gods, and the signs of the sacred. And he would admit, then, that Canadian mythology had not been embraced and identified even as late as 1965. But while Frye appears to have been right on a number of accounts, and while Canadian literature reflects a kind of arrested mythological development, it is not the case that national mythologizing has forever, and until this date, been suspended in old habits. For instance, it seems possible to suggest that something new did seem to be happening in Canadian literature around Canada’s “Day of Atonement” (Frye), and it seems possible to suggest that Frye’s earlier prediction was, in fact, quite valid. Whether or not Canada’s centenary was enough to encourage a revisioning of the past and to “issue in a significant expression in the arts” (Brown 20) will be explored at greater length in the next two chapters, but, at this point, it is interesting to note that questions and desires began to surface in discussions of Canadian literature in the late 1960s and 1970s which reflect a sort of second stage in the development of Canada’s mythological ideation.

In Butterfly on Rock, for example, D.G. Jones seemed to sum up the anxiety of a nation entering a new phase of maturity when he made the following claim: “[i]t is apparent that we must now move into our own cultural house, for we are no longer at home in the houses of others” (1). Here, Jones was recognizing, like his critical predecessor E.K. Brown, that “[a] great art is fostered by artists and audience possessing in common a passionate and peculiar interest in the kind of life that exists in the country
where they live” (Brown 17), and Jones, then, like Brown, also seemed to be suggesting that Canadian authors would have to overcome their reliance on imported, colonial beliefs. Margaret Atwood would also maintain in 1972, in *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, that “[t]o know ourselves, we must know our own literature” (17), and, like Jones and Brown, Atwood was suggesting that this country had to be shaped by its own indigenous artistry. Indeed, these critical reflections are not unlike those convictions which prevailed in discussions of Canadian writing during the late- nineteenth century, but what is significantly different about these assertions is that they grew out of a time period during which people could look back on both a historical and literary past which somehow deviated from their present situation. Granted, the reality at this point was that an acknowledgment of past literary endeavors most notably entailed the recognition that Canadian authors would somehow have to “make it new” or experience some kind of renaissance. But, in essence, while Canadian literature recorded that it did not possess the markings of a settled populace and that this nation lacked a certain self-awareness, what it did not lack, interestingly enough, was a record of what had not “worked” when Canadian authors had attempted to produce some kind of contemporary mythology. And this recognition would prove to be important.

For example, it is interesting to note that when D.G. Jones looked back on Canadian literature in 1970, he employed the language of what could be called an early Canadian mythological discourse to make sense of where Canadian literature had been and where it should be going. In *Butterfly on Rock*, Jones asserted that “[t]o escape from the garrison and from the alienation it breeds, one must go into the wilderness” (166), and
while Jones was endorsing one of the two most notable stereotypes that had been bandied about in Canadian writing and discussions of Canadian literature since settlement, he was also suggesting that Canadian writers would have to deconstruct those patterns which had produced paradigms which he, himself, was ironically supporting by even making this claim. Admittedly, Jones noted that such poets as Isabella Valancy Crawford, D.C. Scott, E.J. Pratt, A.J.M. Smith, Earle Birney, Irving Layton, Jay Macpherson and John Newlove had “[a]ll, in their fashion, [abandoned] the garrison of an exclusive culture and [gone] into the wilderness, where they [experienced], not a greater sense of alienation, but a greater sense of vitality and community” (136); however, Jones was pointing to the idea that a “more inclusive view” (166) of the Canadian world had yet to be witnessed in a larger sense, or in a broader way, in Canadian literature. And the fact that Jones was relying on what William New has called a “land discourse” (1997, Land Sliding: Imagining Space, Presence and Power in Canadian Writing) to make sense of Canadian mythologizing suggests that, at the heart of Jones’s seemingly trite convictions, was the belief that Canadian writers would have to begin to create anew what could be called their “cultural landscapes.”

In her discussion of a workshop which was held in 1993 for participants from the National Capital Commission, Parks Canada, federal departments, heritage agencies and universities, geographical critic Patricia M. O’Donnell refers to a definition which the National Capital Commission (NCC) has agreed upon for “cultural landscapes,” and I reproduce the definition here because the distinctions which the NCC draw seem fitting in a discussion of Canada’s formative character:
Cultural Landscapes are geographical terrains identifiable in topographical or morphological terms, which, as a result of an authentic and tangible or intangible human interaction with the natural environment, exhibit characteristics of the way of life, the types of land management and government or organization of . . . an identifiable society. (220)

Furthermore, the NCC outlines three possible types of cultural landscapes:

1. the defined landscape designed and created intentionally; 2. the organically evolved landscape resulting from social, economic, administrative, and/or religious imperatives, developed in response to its natural environment in two subcategories as a relict (or fossil) landscape where evolutionary process [sic] have ended or a continuing landscape which retains an active social role in contemporary society; 3. the associative cultural landscape with powerful religious, artistic or cultural associations rather than material evidence. (220)

If we consider these different definitions in light of the manner in which Canada’s literary character emerged, we might see that, at an early point, this nation’s defined landscapes, while exhibiting the characteristics of identifiable societies, arrested the development of those kinds of landscapes--both literal and metaphorical--which are organic, continuing or associative. In other words, Canada’s national consciousness had been defined by colonial habits, and a reliance on these imported landscapes of thought meant that it would take a long while before the mythologically minded would search for associations which grew out of this world and which would speak of the landscapes indigenous to this world. This is a point which William New supports in Land Sliding: Imagining Space, Presence and
Power in Canadian Writing when he notes that early Canadian writers, like early Canadian settlers, used a land discourse to “garden” the Canadian realm, to shape the idea of the Canadian nation with a set of old European values. Speaking of Frederick Philip Grove and his writing, New provocatively maintains, for example, that “[c]learly in [Grove’s] prose, he does ‘garden’--not just by representing landscape as a painting but also by accepting the aesthetic priorities of a particular painting school: one that champions the necessity of foreground, the picturesque validity of the curved line, and the convention of perspective” (103). New is specific in his analysis of Grove, but what these reflections underscore is a point which New more clearly articulates in his discussion of Susanna Moodie’s Roughing it in the Bush. Here, New notes that Moodie’s “vocabulary and syntax are structurally part of a rhetoric of translation” (70) just as her reactions to the wilderness or gardens of Canada reflect the reality of imported, defined landscapes. And it is New’s reference to a “rhetoric of translation” which is especially significant, I think. As this chapter has attempted to argue, Canadian literature, at an early stage, was not unlike a body of literature that had been privy to the processes of translation. Its languages and ideologies had been imported, and, thus, perhaps it is no wonder that, after a century, authors and critics would start becoming suspect of the language and symbols they had learned from elsewhere.

But just how do citizens of a social body “un-learn” the formative ideals of their past, and just how do they create new ways of knowledge? More specifically, perhaps, just how do they reconfigure those attitudes toward land or landscape which share such an important relation with mythmaking? Interestingly, when Kroetsch commented at an
earlier date about the significance of Canadian gardens, he forwarded some of the same convictions which New would later maintain, and Kroetsch provided not really an answer to these questions but, rather, an important philosophical reflection. In Labyrinths of Voice, Kroetsch suggests, for example, that early reactions to Canada’s outer landscape produced a kind of mythological paralysis in Canadian literature and that “[t]he notions of containment, of domestication, even the versions of symmetry in a Canadian landscape garden encourage [an] impression of stasis” (1982, Neuman and Wilson 125) not unlike that which is found in Canadian literature. And, thus, as Kroetsch would also maintain, the “task” of the Canadian writer would be to “un-name” the “experiences” (“Unhiding the Hidden,” in LTW 58) which had given rise to such stasis. But just what does this mean? And is it possible to say that Canadian literature has since become proof that certain writers have learned to “un-name” the habits of the past?

These are questions which the third chapter will address and attempt to answer, but, here, it seems fitting to consider what James Reaney said in 1962 when, in an article entitled “The Canadian Poet’s Predicament,” he commented on Canadian literature and its sources of inspiration and when he noted that there was a large difference between Canadian mythology and those mythologies which were present in the Americas before European settlement. “We have Indians,” Reaney wrote. “I’ve already glanced at their poetry, but the other things they’ve accomplished—the rituals, the sculpture, the design, just themselves—have always looked suggestive of development to me. The totem poles and the mounds seem so effortlessly to come out of the country; but our culture, as yet, doesn’t” (120-21). Reaney also suggested that “[t]he idea expressed in the Indian lyrics
that a raven is the spirit of creation seems so right for this country and the way it often looks" (112), and, here, Reaney essentially insinuated what the next decade of writers would consider more closely. That is, Reaney pointed to other literary traditions in Canada which preceded the actual formation of this nation as we know it today, and he seemed to suggest that Canada would somehow have to recognize and, perhaps, even one day, know, the indigenous creators of this world. In essence, Reaney was suggesting that in order to produce any viable kind of mythology, Canada's citizens would have to look beneath the ineffectual shrines which they had created and that they would have to recognize the reality of different gods and, therefore, different ways of knowing. To do this and to recognize these gods, Reaney seemed to suggest, would change the face of Canadian mythology.

However, to know these creators would not only take a leap of faith but it would also take both an invitation and a very large social and political awakening. It would also take an ability to see beyond the limits of established modes of thinking, and, therefore, it would take teachers and literary examples to “un-name” (Kroetsch) certain habits. And it is these very phenomena which the next chapter will explore. In essence, this next chapter will try to make sense of why Frye, near the end of his career and after half a decade of reading world mythologies, would hold that native literature should be given the greatest respect within a consideration of Canadian writing and why it “forms a tradition which should be at the head-waters of our own” (1989-90, “Levels of Cultural Identity,” in Gorjup 201).
Notes: Chapter One

1. As John Coldwell Adams explains, "[b]etween 1882 and 1892, [Roberts] underwent a political metamorphosis that saw his early advocacy of complete independence for Canada transformed into the concept of autonomy within the British Empire" (56).

2. Roberts to Carman, 10 Mar. 1883, Carman Correspondence, Lorne Pierce Collection, Queen's University Archives, qtd. in Adams 28.

3. Frye asserted that "the poets of the next decade [would] have the immense advantage of the tradition set up by the poets of the last one, whose imaginative feats, as far as [he was concerned], [would be] like the less destructive efforts of Milton's Samson, 'not without wonder or delight beheld'" (1959, "Letters in Canada," in BG 127).


5. On November 7, 1885, the last iron spike was driven into the final rail of the Canadian Pacific Railway at Craigellachie, British Columbia.

6. Frye notes in The Critical Path that "[t]he myth of concern which European and American culture has inherited is, of course, the Judaeo-Christian myth as set out in the Bible, and as taught in the form of doctrine by the Christian church" (37).

7. See James Russell's After the Fifth Sun: Class and Race in North America. Russell suggests that "England and Holland transformed themselves [from feudalism] at faster rates than did Spain or Portugal" (23) and that "[a]n important part of agriculture in seventeen-century [sic] New France, like that of New Spain, remained firmly embedded in feudal customs" (38). Russell further observes that "the uneven development of European capitalism [was] reflected in the different ways that the conquerors of North America
[constructed] their colonial societies” (23).

8. See J.E. Chamberlin’s *The Harrowing of Eden: White Attitudes Toward North American Natives.* “For both the settler and the statesman of the eighteenth century,” Chamberlin writes, land “was intimately associated with the importance of private property and was a fundamental *political*, as well as economic, element” (137).

9. See W.J. Keith’s *Literary Images of Ontario* for a discussion of how early settlers judged the new world “by the presence or absence of familiar signs from their own cultural past” (8).


12. Trutch wanted to reduce acreage allotments of reserves and wanted to do so before B.C. joined Confederation. He would propose, after all, in term number 13, that the Dominion Government (who would take over such things as land claims) should continue to honour “a policy as liberal as that hitherto pursued by the British Columbia Government” (Qtd. in Tennant 43). As Tennant points out, the catch here was that Trutch was ensuring that the Dominion would continue to honour B.C.’s “power to veto reserves exceeding ten acres a family” (Tennent 44). Typically, the acreage allotment for reserves in Central Canada was eighty acres, and Trutch realized that federal officials who were cut off from a region without a transcontinental link might not consider too closely
what policies they were honouring.

13. See the first chapter of William New’s *Land Sliding: Imagining Space, Presence, and Power in Canadian Writing*, “Landing: Literature, Contact, and the Natural World,” for a detailed discussion of how explorer myths shaped attitudes toward the New World. New maintains the following: “two criteria governed what European eyes considered acceptable in the new world: usefulness and beauty. Whatever was *useable* in the old world’s terms was deemed to be of value—that is, whatever was open to cropping and therefore to economic advantage. Whatever accorded with the old world’s measures of aesthetic order, moreover, was deemed to be *beautiful*” (57).

14. Moss makes the following claim in this work: “Canada is a vast landscape and the context of innumerable regions. Its geography and climate impose an isolation of place, of many places, upon the consciousness of its populace” (125).

15. According to Atwood, “[t]he central symbol for Canada . . . is undoubtedly Survival, *la Survivance*.” As Atwood maintains, “[f]or early explorers and settlers, it meant bare survival in the face of ‘hostile’ elements and/or natives: carving out a place and a way of keeping alive.” She also states that “the word can also suggest survival of a crisis or disaster” and that “[f]or French Canada after the English took over it became cultural survival.” Lastly, Atwood suggests that “survival can be a vestige of a vanished order which has managed to persist after its time is past” (32).
Chapter Two

Canada’s Day of Atonement: The Contemporary Native Literary Renaissance and the Native Cultural Renaissance

Legend has it that the shamans, who predicted the arrival of the white man and the near-destruction of the Indian people, also foretold the resurgence of the native people seven lifetimes after Columbus. We are that seventh generation.

(Tomson Highway, qtd. in Wigston 9)

In a discussion of Canadian literature and its development, it seems significant to note that Canada’s “Day of Atonement,” or centennial, shared a space in history with the Contemporary Native Literary Renaissance (CNLR) and with the larger Native Cultural Renaissance (NCR) to which this literary movement belonged. It was during the 1960s and 1970s that an explosion of writing by First Nations and Métis authors entered the Canadian literary market and announced the arrival of not only significant individual authors but also a significant body of literature. Looked at retrospectively, this was quite a literary event. In fact, one would be hard pressed to point to any other moment in Canadian literary history when a corpus of literature, defined by a collective sensibility, offered such a wealth of diverse material to the reading public. While most criticism of this literature suggests that Native writing of the 1960s and 1970s was, in general, “protest literature,”¹ this is not at all the case. Quite simply, national literatures were surfacing at this point in history, and, as would be expected, this meant that a number of different types of writing were also surfacing simultaneously.

First, it was during these years that a number of translations of traditional stories became available in print for the first time, and, in addition to the fact that collaborative projects between non-native editors and first peoples continued to appear, such as Alex
Grisdale and Nan Shipleys *Wild Drums: Tales and Legends of the Plains Indians* (1971), James Redsky's and James R. Stevens's *Great Leader of the Ojibway: Mis-quona-queb* (1972), Norman Lerman's collection of stories from the Lower Fraser area in British Columbia, *Legends of the River People* (1976), and Randy Bouchard and Dorothy I.D. Kennedy's collection of narratives, *Shuswap Stories* (1979), a number of translations were also published which did not bear the stamp of another culture's interpretation. For example, Norval Morrisseau's *Legends of My People: The Great Ojibway* (1965), George Clutesi's *Son of Raven, Son of Deer: Fables of the Tse-shaht People* (1967), Alma Greene's *Forbidden Voice: Reflections of a Mohawk Indian* (1971), Ken Harris's *Visitors Who Never Left: The Origin of the People of Damelahamid* (1974), and Basil Johnston's *Ojibway Heritage* (1976) all recorded, in written form, stories and legends which had been handed down to, or remembered by, the tellers of these works.

Second, a significant number of political works were published during these years which not only "protested" against past and present injustices but which also, and more significantly, offered suggestions for reform. These texts were written by those trained or self taught in legal and judicial matters, and the language of litigation with which these authors were familiar should ultimately define this body of writing not as "protest" literature but as "legal" or "strategic" literature. For example, works such as Harold Cardinal’s *The Unjust Society: The Tragedy of Canada’s Indians* (1969) and *The Rebirth of Canada’s Indians* (1977), William I.C. Wuttunnee’s *Ruffled Feathers: Indians in Canadian Society* (1971), Wilfred Pelletier’s *Two Articles* (1971) and the collection of essays contained in Pelletier and D.G. Poole’s collaborative project *For Every North*
American Indian Who Begins to Disappear, I Also Begin to Disappear (1971), and Harold Adams’ Prison of Grass: Canada from the Native Point of View (1974) all documented a different side of Canadian history than that which had been formerly offered to the public, but they also suggested that specific changes be made to the political structures which governed Canada.

Third, autobiographies or life stories were also frequently published during these years, and these works gained a considerable amount of respect for aboriginal voices. Most notably, Métis author Maria Campbell published her autobiography, Half-Breed, in 1973, and in 1975 Lee Maracle published an autobiographically inspired fiction entitled Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel. During their time, these were both very popular texts, and they have subsequently been given a considerable amount of critical attention, but it is also significant to note here that, for the most part, a notable number of First Nations elders and chiefs were publishing their life stories and accounts of history at this time. The Canadian public was therefore offered a body of literature which carried the stamp of maturity and authority and which embodied the rhetoric of experienced orators. To offer a few noteworthy examples, Henry George Pennier published his life story, Chiefly Indian: The Warm and Witty Story of a British Columbia Half-Breed Logger (1972); Mary Augusta Tappage told her accounts of history to Jean E. Speare who published a rich work called The Days of Augusta (1973); Chief John Snow published These Mountains Are Our Sacred Places (1977), an outline of Stoney history which described this nation’s negotiations with the Canadian government during the making of Treaty Six and Treaty Seven; and Chief George Barker published his life history, Forty Years a Chief (1979). As
well, it is also interesting to note that like those manuscripts which had been revived and offered publication for the first time during these decades, such as Edward Ahenakew's *Voices of the Plains Cree* (1923),² Mike Mountain Horse's *My People the Bloods* (1936),³ and Will Robinson's *Men of Medeek* (1935-36),⁴ these works incorporated recollections of a past which differed greatly from the world of the mid-twentieth century. Thus, readers were consistently presented with recollections of a pre-industrial era and with a body of literature which shared an affinity more with nineteenth-century sentiments than with twentieth-century worldviews.

Fourth, during these years two other important texts appeared and signaled the recognition that First Nations artists were not only extending their separate indigenous traditions but that they were also engaging in a new literary tradition where diverse nations would be bound together in a collective manner. In 1969, for example, the first anthology of Native literature, *I am an Indian*, appeared, and in 1970 the first collection of essays by Native Canadian scholars, *The Only Good Indian*, was published. These were both works which boasted a concert of voices and which indicated that pan-Indianism would come to characterize Native literature and its criticism for a significant period of time.

Finally, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed some important government commissions which grew out of aboriginal land claims and political activities during these same decades, and these, too, should be recognized as literary milestones. Although they were not written by aboriginal peoples, such publications as the Hawthorn Report (1966-1967)⁵ and the transcripts and final report which grew out of the Berger Commission, or Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry (1975-1977), recorded the opinions and convictions of
aboriginal peoples from across Canada and from the Mackenzie Valley Delta, respectively. In particular, the volumes of records which grew out of the Berger Commission and which were given to the courts and to the Canadian public by the Dene still remain an unparalleled source of aboriginal material and history. As the presiding judge, Mr. Justice Thomas R. Berger, indicated when he embarked on his new career as adjudicator of life in the north, “[this was] a study whose magnitude [was] without precedent in the history of our country” (in O’Malley 10). Berger was right, and, today, there are literally thousands of pages filled with opinions, stories, poems, songs, and much more which record a history which had not been offered to the Canadian public until their publication in the mid-1970s.

In addition to the fact that the Contemporary Native Literary Renaissance offered an unparalleled body of literature to the Canadian public in the 1960s and 1970s, it seems safe to say that the manner in which First Nations writing came to the forefront of national attention has no counterpart elsewhere within the history of Canadian literature. Although there had been previous moments in Canadian literary history when groups had marked points of departure from literary traditions, it was not ever the case that a body of literature defined by both a shared cultural identity and a sense of political urgency suddenly “appeared” to the public. For instance, while critics had recognized, at a very early date, that French-Canadian literature was distinct from English-Canadian writing, it was not as if this awareness had ever produced any real national epiphany or pause. Archibald MacMechan had asserted at a relatively early date, for example, that “[t]he history of Canada involves the destiny of two races” (53), and French-Canadian writing and its criticism had grown quite gradually alongside the production and criticism of
English-Canadian literature. But the same is not true of First Nations writing. While Native literature of the 1960s and 1970s was not without precedent and while it was new only in the sense that it was accompanied by a fresh political awareness, First Nations writing had, for the most part, remained beyond the pale of Canadian literary criticism until this point in history. As the criticism of contemporary native literature consistently points out, its emergence made a notable impact because it seemed to grow out of a preceding “period of silence.”

For example, critics such as Grey Young-Ing and Penny Petrone have noted that between the mid-1910s and the mid-1960s in Canada, not many native authors had published literary works, and while this chapter will go on to suggest that this recognition has become a bit embellished, it is true that in comparison to the 1960s and 1970s in Canada, this time period was quite quiet. And there are several reasons for this perception. If we follow the traditional logic which has attended the criticism of Native literature in Canada thus far, it seems significant to note here, as others have also noted, that the lean years of Native publishing in this country coincided with Canada’s residential schools, institutions which destroyed cultural pride, cultural worth, first languages, and much more. One way to make sense of this period of silence, then, is to recognize that First Nations and Métis authors naturally would not seek out the opportunity to offer the Canadian public their stories and ideas during those years when they and their children had been subjected to assimilationist policies and to systems which threatened their cultural survival.

For instance, Tomson Highway’s recent work *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998) is
perhaps the most significant and powerful testimony to the fact that the residential school system should be remembered as one of Canada’s gravest mistakes, and like other works by Native authors, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is proof of how residential schools attempted to systematically destroy the voices of aboriginal peoples. In the following passage, for example, Highway underscores with humour and irony the recognition that these schools served to confuse and denigrate generations of Indian children:

‘Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with Thee; blessed art Thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus,’ recited Brother Stumbo in a sleep-inducing monotone as he paced down one aisle and up another, his large black rosary beads swinging from both hands. Identically attired in pale blue flannel pyjamas, thirty-seven newly bald Cree boys knelt beside their little beds in the junior boys’ dormitory.

‘Helly merry, mutter of cod, play for ussinees, now anat tee ower of ower beth, aw, men.’ Gabriel rattled off the non-sensical syllables as nimbly as he could, pretending he knew what they meant. But, his knees hurting from the cold, hard linoleum, he couldn’t help but wonder why the prayer included the Cree word ‘ussinees.’ What need did this mutter of cod have of a pebble? (71)

To be sure, this legacy of residential schools has become a dominant point of consideration in many works by Native authors, and it is remembered as a dark period in First Nations history. For example, in his account of life at Garnier Residential School from 1939-44 and 1947-50 (*Indian School Days* 1988), Ojibway writer and scholar Basil H. Johnston shows how generations of Indian children experienced language loss. In the
following passage, he indicates that residential learning came complete with lessons in self-hatred which could only work to destroy aboriginal cultures:

‘My gallant Henry [Webkamigad],’ Brother O’Keeffe once interrupted a classmate as he stumbled over a passage he was reading. Henry stopped, probably wondering how he had mangled the English language. ‘My dear Mr. Weeboo-kemi-gad! The word is ‘greeezee,’ not ‘gree-sea.’ Try it again.

Enunciate the word as a learned man would, and not as some illiterate might.’ (65)

This same point is also made by Micmac elder Rita Joe who speaks for those girls for whom Johnston cannot really speak, since one of the tactics of Catholic schools and the imperatives of assimilation was to keep distance between brothers and sisters:

I lost my talk
The talk you took away.
When I was a little girl
At Shubenacadie school.
You snatched it away;
I speak like you
I think like you
I create like you

The scrambled ballad, about my word. (“I Lost My Talk,” ANL 113: 1-9)

Although it is ironic that Rita Joe’s convictions are delivered with a sensibility that is unique to Rita Joe and her Micmac inheritance and although a recognition of this sensibility undermines the force that Rita Joe’s poem gives to the residential school
system, "I Lost My Talk" is but one example from numerous possibilities which suggest that the years of Canada’s residential schools tied tongues and robbed a number of potential authors of the desire to ever write for public consumption. Of course, the uncomfortable paradox here is that a notable body of literature would be borne out of this experience and that a notable number of aboriginal authors today are survivors of residential schools. But that said, the resilience of those who did choose to write can never speak for those who were silenced or for those who chose to be silent, and it is possible to suggest, then, that there is a correlation between the residential school system and a reduction in aboriginal publishing for five decades.

As well, in addition to the havoc which had been created by Canada’s residential schools, this country’s national policies and laws had, for a long while, threatened the possibility of any kind of exchange between Canadian citizens and aboriginal peoples. After all, it was not until 1960 that Canadian “Indians” were even recognized as citizens worthy of voting in federal elections, and it was not until 1951, with the revised Indian Act, that such insidious legislations as the Potlatch Law of 1884 disappeared into seeming oblivion and that Canadian Indians were lawfully permitted to engage in their artistic and religious traditions. One could argue, then, that, like residential schools, these apartheid policies created an impasse between aboriginal peoples and Canadian citizens and that one of the results was the absence of aboriginal voices in the realm of Canadian publishing.

However, one other way to make sense of this correlation between a low level of aboriginal literary production during these five decades and the dynamics of native/non-native relations is to recognize that this history of cultural separation was not simply a
governmental construct. For example, Canadian governments have had to become increasingly aware over the years that policies on Indian affairs would be best informed by directives which shape an understanding of foreign relations. The consistent fight for aboriginal self-determination and self-government is testimony to the recognition that many Indian nations have never been guided by a desire to become Canadian. Thus, we might also consider here that inclusion in this country’s literary practices was never a key desire of different aboriginal peoples who naturally identified more with their national values than with Canadian values and that this exemption of aboriginal voices from the Canadian publishing world indicates that aboriginal peoples chose to remain aloof from national practices.

Finally, Chief John Snow also forwards another explanation for this period of silence when he claims in his work *These Mountains Are Our Sacred Places* (1977) that the latter years of this time frame coincided, not surprisingly, with a period in history when the government was more concerned not with its cultural constituents but with money and economic production. “The years 1948 to 1965 are passed over quickly,” Chief John Snow asserts. “It was a period when the Indian people were forgotten because the dominant society became too involved with the economic development boom and its own growing affluence” (x). Chief Snow’s assertions are telling, and one might also consider that these years were slow years of literary production in Canada as a whole. In his article “The Canada Council’s Block Grant Program and the Construction of Canadian Literature,” Robert Lecker quotes the statistics supplied by the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences 1949-51 which indicates that
"[i]n 1947 only 34 works of ‘Fiction’ were published in Canada, compared with 1, 723 in Britain and 1, 307 in the United States (RC 228, in Lecker 447). Lecker also refers to Robert Fulford’s review of this time period9 where Fulford notes that the next year saw a sharper decline: “In 1948 there were only fourteen books of fiction published in English Canada, almost nothing was written for the theatre, music in most towns had to be performed in gymnasiums and churches, there was no system of training for artists, and no way for artists to reach an audience if they ever did get trained” (Fulford 34, in Lecker 447). Furthermore, “[o]nly six ‘General’ books were published that year” (RC 228, in Lecker 447). Thus, these years of aboriginal silence might also be understood not only in relation to suppressive governmental policies but also in relation to a larger decline in literary production across Canada.

However, despite the recognition that there are a number of possible explanations for this period of aboriginal silence in the Canadian publishing world, it is undeniable that the decades between 1910 and 1960 mark a definite contrast with the 1960s and 1970s when aboriginal culture came to center stage in Canada in both a literary and political sense. And it is important to note that the Contemporary Native Literary Renaissance occurred at a moment in Canadian history when people had begun speaking in larger terms of a Native Cultural Renaissance. This was a time period when the First Nations gained notable attention and exerted a significant influence not only in artistic circles but also in political spheres. In the early 1960s, for example, a National Indian Council had been established to represent both status and non-status Indians, though it was formally dissolved in 1967 because aboriginal leaders had recognized that the needs of the Métis
and non-registered Indians were different from those of treaty and registered Indians. Nevertheless, as Harold Cardinal explains, its creation “marked the first real attempt to break down regional and tribal barriers between native people which had been encouraged by the federal government” (109). And, then, with the creation in 1969 of the National Indian Brotherhood, it became even clearer, in Cardinal’s words, that this was “the beginning of the end of the struggle by the Indians of Canada to achieve unity” (107). As Cardinal further explains, “[i]ts founding marked a significant milestone, for in spite of the differences among Indians throughout the country and despite their centuries of isolation from each other, the Indians of Canada finally . . . succeeded in developing an organization through which they [could] talk with each other and through which they [could] negotiate from strength with the federal government” (107). And negotiate they would have to do.

After all, it was also in 1967 that the government announced that it would be creating a Task Force under the leadership of the Honourable Robert Andras to solicit opinions and advice from Indian people across the country in order to create a major policy statement. Whether or not the government actually weighed Native sentiments that carefully is, at best, suspect, but, indeed, it did follow through with a subsequent proposal. In 1969, the Liberal government, under the leadership of Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, introduced what it called The Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy, and government officials also introduced a bit of fever into public debates.

In a seeming attempt to bolster “an equality which preserves and enriches Indian identity” (Statement of the Government 6), the government suggested in this White Paper on Indian Policy that it would do six basic things: amend the British North America Act
and remove the distinction between Indians and other Canadians; repeal the Indian Act; recognize the contributions of Indian culture to Canadian society; discontinue the Indian Affairs Branch and transfer responsibilities for Indian peoples from the federal government to provincial agencies; provide economic assistance to Indian peoples; and put Indian lands within Indian control. Although these ambiguous proposals were seemingly sensitive to Native Canadians, the underlying premise of the White Paper was that aboriginal rights would not be recognized. This is a point which Prime Minister Trudeau made clear when he spoke about the White Paper in Vancouver in 1969 and when he ended his speech by outlining his deepest convictions about the state of "the Indian problem" in Canada:

But aboriginal rights--this really means saying, [sic] 'We were here before you came and you took the land from us. And perhaps you cheated us by giving us some worthless things in return for vast expanses of land and we want you to re-open this question. We want you to preserve our aboriginal rights and restore them to us.'

And our answer--and it may not be the right one and it may not be the one which is accepted, but it will be up to all of you people to make your minds up and to choose for or against it and to discuss with the Indians--our answer is no. We can't recognize aboriginal rights because no society can be built on historical might-have-beens. (Qtd. in Walsh 36)

Needless to say, Trudeau's beliefs and this governmental paper were taken to be serious problems. The National Indian Brotherhood, for example, issued the following response
to the newest policy of the Liberal government:

‘[T]he policy proposals put forward by the Minister of Indian Affairs are not acceptable to the Indian people of Canada... We view this as a policy designed to divest us of our aboriginal, residual and statutory rights. If we accept this policy, and in the process lose our rights and our lands, we become willing partners in cultural genocide. This we cannot do.’ (Qtd. in “Indian Claims in Canada: An Introductory Essay”; Indian Claims Commission 1975, 23)

In the ensuing months, Native leaders and spokespeople from across the country began campaigning against the White Paper, and the public soon became aware that there was a political body in Canada that was more than a bit uneasy with the present state of things. And when Harold Cardinal published his rebuttal to the White Paper and to Trudeau’s vision of a “just society,” The Unjust Society: The Tragedy of Canada’s Indians (1969), he carefully attacked all of the main points of the White Paper in an attempt to speak for the majority of Native Canadians who also felt the proposal was unfair. First, although Cardinal recognized that the Indian Act was “discriminatory from start to finish” (140), he suggested that to repeal it would be to remove an important symbol from public memory. “We do not want the Indian Act retained because it is a good piece of legislation,” Cardinal said. “It isn’t” (140). However, as he also put it, the Indian Act “is a lever in [Native Canadian] hands and an embarrassment to the government, as it should be” (140). As well, and reacting to the claim that special status would be taken away from aboriginal peoples, Cardinal maintained that he and others “would rather continue to live in bondage under the inequitable Indian Act than surrender [their] sacred rights” (140).
Responding to the suggestion that the richness of Indian culture should be formally recognized, Cardinal claimed that this proposal was "downright silly [and] the vaguest and most meaningless of the six points" (142). "Anyone can, of course, pay lip service to a generality" (142), Cardinal said. "The statement is hollow because it fails to point [sic] any way in which such recognition will be accomplished" (142-43). Cardinal then attacked the government's proposition to transfer Indian responsibilities from federal to provincial powers by questioning Ottawa's "thinking powers" (145): "Does the federal government really expect us to believe that by sloughing off its responsibilities onto the provincial governments, the social and economic problems of the native people will disappear?" (145). In addition, the promise of financial aid was, according to Cardinal, "a reasonable theory," but it provoked "a number of unanswered questions" (150):

[U]topian programmes to meet the needs of Indians have always evolved from Ottawa. The question that has to be asked is how much difference plans drawn up by other departments will make, especially since we have seen that these other departments are going to be filled chock full of redeployed experts from Indian Affairs, the department which has been perpetuating patterns of deprivation all along. (150)

As well, the proposal which introduced the notion that Indian treaties would finally be honoured, was, of course, something of which many Native peoples were fond, but, as Cardinal fumed, "[t]he MacDonald-Chrétien doctrine [had reached] the peak of its glory, the epitome of arrogance, doubletalk and ignorance in its fifth section" (152). Here, the government was careful to point out that treaties affected only half of the Indians of
Canada in an attempt to undermine their validity, and, for Cardinal, this part of the White Paper "[laid] bare its contempt for Indian treaties" (153).

Finally, while the White Paper suggested that land would be returned to its rightful owners, it also proposed to tax reservations for the first time, and the following excerpt from this document is almost laughable when one considers that the government was presenting this paper to the public and assuming that it would actually go through at a time when people were being forced to consider how Canada had negotiated with the First Nations in the past:

The Government believes that each band must make its own decision as to the way it wants to take control of its land and the manner in which it intends to manage it. It will take some years to complete the process of devolution.

The Government believes that full ownership implies many things. It carries with it the free choice of use, of retention or of disposition. In our society it also carries with it an obligation to pay for certain services. The Government recognizes that it may not be acceptable to put all lands into the provincial systems immediately and make them subject to taxes. When the Indian people see that the only way they can own and fully control land is to accept taxation the way other Canadians do, they will make that decision. (Statement of the Government 12)

As Cardinal explained, this decision was ironic in light of the history of Native-white relations in Canada:

Under the treaties, reserve lands were given a tax-free status, because the Indians felt that their surrender of land was full and more than sufficient compensation for
the services the Canadian government was to provide in payment. . . . In effect, the Canadian government is asking the Indians of Canada to pay twice for services that they receive. (159-60)

Needless to say, and despite the fact that there were some aboriginal people, such as Cree lawyer William I.C. Wuttunnee\textsuperscript{10} and Nisga’a leader Frank Calder,\textsuperscript{11} who supported the document, the White Paper became more of an embarrassing comment on Canada’s tradition of assimilationist policies than it did on Canada’s progression out of a not-so-commendable past.

In any event, the 1969 White Paper on Indian policy produced a colourful debate which drew attention to the need for the government to think much more carefully in the future. In June of 1970, the Indian Chiefs of Alberta and the Indian Association of Alberta presented to the Prime Minister and his government a rebuttal to the White Paper which, formally called “Citizens Plus,” became popularly known as “The Red Paper.” And, then, on November 17, 1970, the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs constructed a very different, but equally important, declaration against the government’s proposal: together with Alberta’s appeal and with the support of different lobbying groups, B.C.’s “Brown Paper” helped to ensure that the government’s plan was eventually shelved.

In essence, the debates which grew out of and around the White Paper are indicative of what was happening in Canada during those years when people began to speak of the “rebirth” of aboriginal cultures. Diverse Indian nations, despite years of historical differences, were coming together to fight for the common cause of aboriginal rights. The Canadian public was becoming much more informed about aboriginal
struggles and histories. The Canadian government and its policies on aboriginal matters were being subject to severe criticism. Indian organizations were gaining respect. As a more comprehensive picture of Native activity during this time attests to, some kind of revolution was taking place in Canada.

As Lee Maracle recalls in the epilogue to her second edition of *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* (1990), this was a time of change and inspiration:

Young Native people from all parts of the province [B.C.] and the country were coming together, tribalism, the village focus was breaking down. We are all Indians, one people with many cultures. Thinking of all sorts blossomed among us. A ground swell, a tide, everywhere in the country little groups of Red Power youth were springing up. I remember thinking what a miracle the Indian way of being was. All at once, every major city turned out Native youth who were talking about the same kinds of things. . . .

We had minds; we could think. . . . Youth everywhere were holding conferences, chiefs were meeting, everyone was talking about our rights; rights we didn’t dare to believe existed in the 1950s. (208-209)

Maracle was a member of the Native Alliance for Red Power, or NARP, an organization which came into existence in 1968 and which fashioned its political ideals on the Black Power movement in the United States. Maracle’s retrospective enthusiasm is reflective not only of the group to which she belonged but also of the time period during which Red Power came to center stage in Canada and promoted the ideals of those who refused to accept complacency as a response to past history. Like the larger American Indian
Movement, or AIM, an organization which was not specific to Canada but which embraced aboriginal participants from both north and south of the border, NARP and its advocates attested to the reality of a changing political climate in Canada.

Most notably, perhaps, during the 1960s and 1970s the Canadian nation became astutely aware that this country's lands had been violated and that Canada's one-hundred year legacy must be considered in relation to the longer histories of the First Nations. In December 1968, for example, approximately two-hundred-and-fifty to three-hundred Mohawk Indians from the St. Regis Reserve near Cornwall, Ontario blockaded an international road which ran through their reserve in order to protest the fact that they were required to pay the customs duties which had been levied on American goods brought into Canada. After all, according to the Jay Treaty of 1794, an agreement made between the United States and Britain, North American Indians were not to be governed by the dictates of the forty-ninth parallel. This treaty claimed that First Peoples should be allowed to cross the border without declaring Canadian or American citizenship and that they should not be prey to different national taxes. However, when forty-eight of the Mohawk demonstrators were arrested during this protest, it became evident to the public that the Canadian government was implicated in breaches of old contracts and that Canadian Indians were not going to accept that their homelands had been carved up by absent politicians of the past.

As well, in 1969, the Canadian public witnessed the beginning of a precedent-setting legal battle, the Nisga'a, or Calder, Case, where Nisga'a witnesses, archivist William Ireland, and anthropologist Wilson Duff attempted to prove to the British
Columbia Supreme Court, and eventually to the Supreme Court of Canada in 1973, that this First Nation had had aboriginal title to land in the pre-contact period and that their rights had been consistently violated since conquest. In their statement of claim in 1969, the Nisga’a asked that the Supreme Court of British Columbia issue “a declaration that the aboriginal title . . . of the Plaintiffs to their ancient tribal territory [had] never been lawfully extinguished” (Raunet 150). In essence, the Nisga’a were demanding recognition of their aboriginal rights, something which Prime Minister Trudeau had assiduously denied over the course of his early career and something which became especially significant during the course of the White Paper negotiations. Within a month, however, the Nisga’a claim would be denied, and in May 1970 at the appeal court of British Columbia, it would be denied again. However, and although the Nisga’a would technically lose for a third time in 1973 after they had brought their case to the Supreme Court of Canada, they would set some serious precedents.

After all, in 1973, the decision was far from unanimous. Three judges supported the Nisga’a; three judges ruled against their claim; and one judge refused to rule due to a technicality. As Daniel Raunet explains in *Without Surrender: Without Consent: A History of the Nisga’a Land Claims*, “for the first time, the highest court in the land had recognized, through the opinion of six judges, that the concept of aboriginal title was not a mere chimera; that it had existed at least up to the time of contact” (159). Most significantly, perhaps, the dissenting opinion of Mr. Justice Hall underscored the faulty reasoning that the courts had been pursuing in the Nisga’a case until this point:

In enumerating the indicia of ownership, the trial judge overlooked that possession
is of itself proof of ownership. Prima facie, therefore, the Nishgas are the owners of the lands that have been in their possession from time immemorial and, therefore the burden of establishing that their right has been extinguished rests squarely on the respondent. (Hall, qtd. in Raunet 160)

Moreover, referring to his colleague Chief Justice Davey who had claimed during the case that the Nisga’a were a primitive people at the time of settlement, Justice Hall said that “[Davey] was assessing the Indian culture of 1858 by the same standards that the Europeans applied to the Indians of North America two or more centuries before” (qtd. in Raunet 160-61). Hall therefore put into question the primitive tactics of those such as Davey and other judges who had presided over this case throughout the years. Overall, the Calder case created an awareness of First Nations rights and capabilities, and it underscored the recognition that aboriginal rights could no longer be swept away in a vision of Canadian multiculturalism. For example, although he never liked to admit that he was wrong, Prime Minister Trudeau was prompted to reconsider his convictions about aboriginal rights, and when he addressed a delegation from the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs immediately after the Supreme Court decision, he admitted, “[p]erhaps you have more legal rights than we thought you had when we did the White Paper” (qtd. in “Indian Claims in Canada: An Introductory Essay” 25).

Perhaps not so promising, however, was the outcome of another battle which began in 1971 in the James Bay area of Québec. In 1971, the Dorion Commission had been appointed by the Québec government to discover whether or not the province had been granted possession of aboriginal lands when the boundaries of Québec had been
extended in 1912, and the Commission inevitably found that the province had not extinguished title and that the Cree and Inuit were entitled to compensation. However, in the midst of negotiations between the Indians of Québec Association and the provincial government, Québec premier Robert Bourassa launched a campaign to secure the hydro power of five rivers in the James Bay area, territory which had never been ceded by the Cree and Inuit. Bourassa’s government established the James Bay Development Corporation and began making plans for the region three months before any talks on land claims had taken place between the province and the Indians of Québec Association. As well, the government began considering their options long before any environmental concerns had been weighed carefully. Needless to say, the Cree and Inuit requested an injunction to delay the project until their aboriginal title had been acknowledged, and, in November 1973, they were granted the injunction by the Québec Superior Court. The next week, however, the injunction was suspended by the Québec Court of Appeal, and, later, the Supreme Court of Canada refused to consider the case. In November 1974, the Cree and Inuit signed a treaty and received a land claim that reduced their traditional territory by a staggering amount.¹⁴ As Raunet explains, “[t]he James Bay agreement was immediately described as a sell-out by most Native groups,” but, as he also observes, Cree and Inuit negotiators “had been cornered in an impossible situation” (162). However, despite the recognition that the James Bay Agreement was perhaps more of a loss than a victory, this struggle for land and rights constituted an important event in the critical-claims activities of the late 1960s and 1970s. It drew public attention to the recognition that notable governmental leaders and their policies were not honest, that aboriginal
nations had been treated poorly and that these same nations were not going to give away their lands and rights.

Formed in 1968, The Yukon Native Brotherhood would also have a significant impact on the manner in which the government would be led to deal with aboriginal peoples in the future, and this organization would also draw attention to aboriginal rights and determination. In January 1973, the YNB issued a statement of grievances to the federal government entitled *Together Today for our Children Tomorrow*. The YNB were worried about rapid changes in the north, and they wanted to make sure that their children and future generations would be able to maintain healthy and happy lifestyles. They understood that some kind of settlement would protect their culture and way of life, and, therefore, they petitioned the government for promises. In August 1973, the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs issued a statement which was not specific to the YNB but which became a general policy on Indian and Inuit claims throughout Canada. The government offered to negotiate with aboriginal peoples in British Columbia, northern Québec, the Yukon and the Northwest territories, and, in many ways, this response to the YNB statement was a victory for aboriginal peoples. This is not to say that this governmental response was without some large problems. This promise did not include any recognition of aboriginal peoples in southern Québec and the Atlantic provinces, and there was widespread concern that the government was simply trying to buy aboriginal rights by providing compensation. However, when the government issued its response, it went beyond recognizing the history of land claims in this country and noted that “the claims are not only for money and land, but involve the loss of a way of life” (“Indian
Claims in Canada: An Introductory Essay” 27). In essence, the YNB statement and the
response it engendered added to a recognition of aboriginal rights in Canada and
prompted a revisioning of not only policies but also beliefs.

It was also on April 2, 1973 that the chiefs of approximately sixteen bands filed a
caveat in the Land Titles Office in Yellowknife claiming title to almost half of the
Northwest Territories (Frideres 110). This claim was inevitably directed to the Supreme
Court of the Northwest Territories, and, in September, Mr. Justice Morrow upheld the
caveat by recognizing, in unprecedented fashion and words, the validity of aboriginal
rights: “there is enough doubt as to whether the full aboriginal title has been extinguished,
certainly in the minds of the Indians, to justify the caveators [sic] attempt to protect the
Indian position until a final adjudication can be obtained” (qtd. in Frideres 110). This was
a large victory and the result of years of determination on the behalf of numerous
aboriginal groups, and, tellingly, it would be referred to as a legal precedent by Father
Rene Fumoleau when he testified in front of Mr. Thomas Berger during the Mackenzie
Valley Pipeline Inquiry. 15

The Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry, or Berger Commission, was established
in early 1975 in order to address the concerns and objections of the indigenous peoples
living in the Mackenzie Delta who rightly questioned what ecological and cultural
disasters would ensue if a natural gas pipeline were to be laid down from as far North as
the American Arctic to the lower regions of Southern Canada or the Northern United
States. Pitted against the financial interests of corporations and investment companies
who wanted the north’s minerals and wealth were the voices of the Dene who were
worried about what such a project would mean to themselves, their children and future generations. This was a landmark commission, and, recognizing the importance of this watershed in Canadian history, Justice Thomas Berger began the inquiry by making the following claim: "[t]he inquiry is not just about a gas pipeline; it relates to the whole future of the north" (in O'Malley 19). During the two years that he listened to people and their stories, Berger would maintain this conviction, and when he tabled his final report, he would suggest to the federal government that there be a ten-year moratorium on development in the Delta. Berger was convinced by these people’s stories and convictions, and it was inevitably their stories which suspended this project for Northern development and which underscored the recognition that cultural vitality could dominate financial interests.

Interestingly, it was also during the 1960s and 1970s that a number of significant, public rituals added to the recognition of Native rights in Canada. In 1961, for example, a group of Indian teachers paid respect to the memory of Mohawk poet Pauline Johnson, and, together, they embarked upon what has become known as the “Pauline Johnson Pilgrimage.” Traveling together from Brantford, Ontario to Johnson’s shrine in Stanley Park, Vancouver, a number of teachers from the banks of the Grand River in Ontario first gathered at Johnson’s ancestral home at Chiefswood where, according to Delaware author Enos T. Montour, “they steeped themselves in her poetry and in the Feathered lore of her times” (136). The railway car which these teachers then chartered to cross the country boasted a sign that read “Pauline Johnson Pilgrimage-Six Nations,” and this ceremony understandably gained notable, national attention. As Montour explains, this trip was “full
of racial significance,” and it “made history, since it was timely” (136).

However, perhaps not so timely or appropriate was the Canadian government’s decision to design a national flag four years later without consulting aboriginal opinions. In 1965, when the Maple Leaf was flown for the first time on Parliament Hill at an inaugural celebration, the ceremony produced a controversial debate and some significant backlash. As Huron Chief Max Gros Louis explains in First Among the Hurons (1973), the government’s decision to adopt the maple leaf as a national emblem was yet another example of unacknowledged cultural appropriation. As Chief Gros Louis put it, an “insolent maple leaf” was placed in the very centre of this national symbol, for “the leaf of the sugar-maple [was] an Indian tree, not an American one, that [Gros Louis’] ancestors [had] domesticated for thousands of years” (38). Not surprisingly, then, when Métis activist, author, and painter Duke Rebird designed a flag with “a great black Thunderbird mounted in a yellow maple leaf on a red background” (Dunn, Red on White 1971: 50) in response to this controversy, as Marty Dunn recalls in his biography of Redbird, Red on White, “[the] [n]ext day, Duke and his flag were front-page news” (50).

Interestingly enough, also front-page news was the unveiling of a statue in Regina on October 2, 1968. While Prime Minister Trudeau and his government were busy attempting to draft the findings of the Andras Report, they also decided that the time had come to recognize Louis Riel as a Canadian hero, and, in a significant ceremony, they paid homage to the Métis leader who had been commonly described in Canadian schools and historical documents as insane and as one of this country’s most notorious traitors. In essence, this ceremony and others indicated that Canadian history was being re-written by
the values of aboriginal cultures, and although these ritualistic actions are only a few notable examples from amongst many possibilities, they demonstrated that sweeping changes were taking place in Canada.

But sweeping changes were taking place not only in Canada. South of the border, the second standoff at Wounded Knee, South Dakota in 1973 led to solidarity between aboriginal peoples all across North America, and Wounded Knee has become an increasingly important symbol of aboriginal rights and determination. As well, it would seem that Canada’s new land-claims policies had followed an appropriate ten years on the heels of American precedents. For example, in 1966, American Indians, Inuit and Aleut had laid claim to almost the entire state of Alaska, and the American government had invoked a land freeze until their claims were settled. A series of bills were presented to Congress, and, then, in 1971, the Alaska Claims Settlement Act became legislation. Alaska Natives were granted substantial monetary compensation as well as forty million acres of land, and the case became well-known in the neighbouring Yukon and north of the dividing line between the United States and Canada (“Indian Claims in Canada: An Introductory Essay” 25-26).

But it was not simply the case that aboriginal rights were becoming an increasingly pressing issue. Larger changes were taking place globally. The Vietnam War heightened the world’s awareness of suppression and revolution, and aboriginal politics during the 1960s and 1970s were imbricated in a larger awareness of the need for basic human rights everywhere. For example, included in Buffy Sainte-Marie’s political vison was an awareness that there were those far away from the world of North America who were also
being threatened. Her song “The Universal Soldier” spoke out against the oppression of people in Vietnam whose world was being invaded by the United States. The Civil Rights Movement in the United States and Black Power uprisings in the Caribbean were also influential and noteworthy. As well, the Biafran or Nigerian Civil War (1966-1970) became a haunting comment on the tragedies which can ensue from civil tensions. Closer to home, the October Crisis in Montreal (1970) and the demand that the FLQ manifesto be recognized were indications that cultural rights would have to be recognized and dealt with seriously.

Perhaps it is no wonder, then, that the Native literary movement of the 1960s and 1970s would share such a strong relation with the politics of the time. While Native leaders, spokespeople and activists were banding together and fighting for recognition and legal rights, authors and writers were also banding together and encouraging a literary revolution. While diverse Indian nations were staking land claims and protesting cultural appropriation, writers and orators were staking literary claims and ensuring that their voices and stories would no longer be controlled by others. While First Peoples were engaging in new rituals to pay homage to their indigenous legacies, writers were also engaging in new literary traditions to make sure their legacies were not forgotten.

Most notably, perhaps, during the 1960s and 1970s a number of important voices began instructing people to share with the public the histories and stories of the First Nations. Ironically enough, Edward Ahenakew had written the following words in 1923 in his text *Voices of the Plains Cree*, but it was not until 1973 that they were offered to the public in his revived testimony: “The time has come in the life of my race when that which
has been like a sealed book to the masses of our Canadian compatriots--namely the view that the Indians have of certain matters affecting their lives--should be known” (23). Ahenakew’s prophecy had to wait nearly five decades before it was heard, but it is significant to note that similar claims would be re-iterated time and time again by different writers during these years. In 1965, for example, Norval Morrisseau introduced his work *Legends of My People: The Great Ojibway* with the following, comparable assertion: “I understand a lot is known of other respected tribes of North American Indians but only a little of the great Ojibway people. I believe it will require some years of study before much is known of my people. I wish to see this accomplished in my lifetime, so I am writing this book as a foundation and I am sure many more will follow” (2).

Likewise, when Chief Max Gros Louis published *First Among the Hurons* (1973), he asserted that while there was “no shortage of books about [American Indians] written by learned historians (or writers who are recognized as such!)” (10), they were to be rejected “because too often they contradict what [Native] ancestors have transmitted to [native peoples] orally, from generation to generation” (10-11). And, thus, Chief Gros Louis recorded his account of past and present Huron history. In essence, people were drawing attention to the idea that the time had come to put their histories and ideas in written form for public consumption. As James Sewid expressed to James Spradley, the recorder of Sewid’s life story, *Guests Never Leave Hungry: The Autobiography of James Sewid, A Kwakiutl Indian* (1969), if history were not told from the perspective of aboriginal peoples, and if their arts were not protected, the result would most certainly be devastating: “If we do not take a firm stand now, we shall lose our dances, carvings, etc.
to the non-Indians as well as to other Nations. These people know the great demand and value of our Arts for they have already begun to learn and produce them. Let us not lose our Arts like we did our lands, for if we do so we shall regret it” (242).

In a similar vein, Chief Dan George had already poignantly underscored assertions comparable to those which had been made by Chief Sewid when he made the following declaration in a soliloquy which he gave in the Playhouse Theatre, Vancouver, in the spring of 1968: “I am a chief but my power to make war is gone, and the only weapon left me is my speech. It is only with tongue and speech that I can fight my people’s war” (In Gooderham, I Am an Indian 18). Here, Chief Dan George was drawing attention to the fact that times had changed and that his nation and others would have to adapt to the demands of a new world, and he would make this point again in 1974 in My Heart Soars:

... we must write about our ways,
our beliefs, our customs, our morals,
how we look at things and why,
how we lived, and how we live now.
To do this, we need the old and the young.

Soon there will be many books
that will tell of our ways
and perhaps will shame even those
who think us inferior
only because we are different.
To those who believe in the power
of the written word these books
will proclaim our cultural worth.

It has been done so for other races
and their teachings.

This is how our young people
will bring to you the true image
of our native people
and destroy the distortion
of which we have been the victims
for so long.

Then we will prosper in all things. (55)

Chief Dan George, like other native writers who were contemporary with him, was
specifically underlining his conviction that history had many faces and that there were
other stories which told different histories. As well, like other writers, Chief Dan George
was also encouraging the younger generation to write, and he was also suggesting that the
First Nations would have to partake in mainstream literary traditions in order to ensure
that their voices would be heard and that their traditions would be protected. To be sure,
this should not detract from the recognition that aboriginal traditions had been assiduously
protected in both oral literatures and in inscripted sources for years, but as Chief Ken
Harris would also note in Visitors Who Never Left: The Origin of the People of
Damelahamid (1974), so many changes had taken place in the previous fifty years that it
was imperative that aboriginal peoples write: "Because of the changing times and the fact that our people are now in a transition period," Chief Harris wrote, "my choice of media, the printed word, is essential. There is no longer the time to tell the myths as we used to in the old days" (xxiii). In other words, like political activists of the time, Chief Harris and others were recognizing that silence and separation were no longer appropriate reactions to recent history and that literary endeavors, like political endeavors, would have to be governed by a desire to inform those who were not educated about aboriginal traditions.

In essence, then, it becomes apparent that during these decades aboriginal authors and spokespeople were instructing people to write for three different reasons: 1) to offer indigenous perspectives on indigenous histories and cultures and to therefore provide alternative histories; 2) to educate the uneducated; 3) to ensure indigenous ownership and control of indigenous cultures and stories. And at first glance, the 1960s and 1970s therefore reveal an adaptive stage in the development of First Nations literary history. After all, while indigenous literary traditions had formerly been characterized by what could be called cultural autonomy, and while they had remained somewhat aloof from non-aboriginal traditions, they were now transparently imbricated in an intricate process of cultural exchange. This is not to say that First Nations writing and traditions had never before carried the imprints of different cultural qualities. Rather, the literature of these decades was marked by a certain kind of political prescience and, therefore, new characteristics which were put to use.

However, within a comparative study of non-Native literature and First Nations writing, it is equally important to note that this adaptive stage ultimately exposes a
fundamental difference between the developmental history of Canadian literature and that of First Nations literature. That is, while the story which searches for a sacred historical mythology in Canada reveals that Canada’s first stages of mythological ideation were governed by a search for a notable past and by disparagement with the recognition that Canadian literature does not grow out of old and sacred mythological roots, a survey of First Nations writing in the 1960s and 1970s suggests that First Nations literature boasts an awareness of literary origins and precedents. The writing which grew out of these decades is evidence that there is no real crisis of identity which haunts contemporary indigenous literature.

This is not to undermine the reality that colonization of the Americas threatened and destroyed individual and collective lives and that different First Nations have witnessed nothing less than a holocaust, and, quite understandably, this history of colonization was consistently explored in Native writing of the 1960s and 1970s. For example, in many ways, the face of history had changed for the worst, and Chief Dan George would recognize this fact in his poetry:

No longer

   can I give you a handful of berries as a gift,

no longer

   are the roots I dig used as medicine,

no longer

   can I sing a song to lease the salmon,

no longer
does the pipe I smoke make others sit
with me in friendship,
no longer
does anyone want to walk with me to the
blue mountain to pray,
no longer
does the deer trust my footsteps... (My Heart Soars 30)

As well, aboriginal writers still underscore the fact that colonization has violently affected indigenous histories, languages, cultures and arts. In the following excerpt from her poem “Death Mummer,” for example, Okanagan author Jeannette Armstrong denigrates, with irony, the fact that aboriginal populations and cultures have been threatened and that, even today, their lives, languages and cultures are in a precarious situation:

There are some good Indians
hanging around Kings Hotel
and they are dead
preserved in alcohol
It would be neater though
to kill us all at once
Whole clans and tribes
could be dressed and stuffed
Add a fifth floor to the museum
to accommodate them (1998, BT 31: 19-28)
However, while First Nations writing naturally explored, and continues to explore, the reality of a troubled history and the reality of threatened traditions, the writing of the CNLR boasts the reality of a continuous—albeit disrupted—literary history.

For instance, there were a number of literary works published during the CNLR which drew attention to the recognition that different First Nations had very solid literary traditions and that their literary histories extended back well beyond a consideration of colonization and "conquest." At the end of his work *Smoke From Their Fires: The Life of a Kwakiutl Chief* (1968), Clellan A. Ford, for example, records the words of the teller of this history, Charles James Nowell, who describes the significance of a totem pole which still stands in his village:

That painting of Alfred now is the hok-hok on the top of that totem pole. My wife is a descendant of this man through her mother, for her mother was a Giksum, and her mother’s father was a Giksum. Her mother’s mother was a Tlowitsis. The old man called Wakias of that clan told my wife and me about this when I got married to her. And he told my wife to remember it all. At nights he used to tell that over and over again, so we would have it straight. That is the way the old people used to do in the nighttime when there is nothing else going on, so the stories won’t be forgotten. (248)

Here, Nowell emphasizes the recognition that stories have been passed down from generation to generation amongst his people, and he also underscores the reality that these stories are still known and not forgotten. These points would also be made by Walter Wright, Chief of the Grizzly Bear People of Kitselas, who, in *Men of Medeek* (1962),
explained how he became his nation’s historian:

When I was a boy my Grandfather, who was Neas Hiwas, taught me the history of Medeek. His had been the duty of carrying it through his generation.

His was the responsibility of choosing one of The Royal Blood to keep it safe after he had died.

As a lad I sat at my Grandfather’s feet.

Many times he told me the story. It is long. In the Native tongue it takes eight hours to tell.

So, several times each year, I sat at his feet and listened to our records.

I drank in the words.

In time I became word perfect. I knew all the story. I could repeat it without missing any of its parts.

So I became the historian of Medeek. (Robinson 1-2)

Likewise, those translations of traditional stories which appeared during these years, such as Norval Morriseau’s *Legends of My People* (1965), Basil Johnston’s *Ojibway Heritage* (1976), and George Clutesi’s *Son of Raven, Son of Deer* (1967), are all testimony to the recognition that Native literature of the 1960s and 1970s, no matter how “new” or “novel” it may have appeared to have been to some people, was based on some very old literary traditions. And significantly enough, sometimes these traditions, because they could be compared to and understood in terms of old European literary traditions, appeared to be very old.

For instance, when James Spradley recorded the life story of James Sewid,
Spradley spent a significant amount of time describing the tradition of *Kwakwaka’wakw* (Kwakiutl) theatre which James Sewid had told him about. As Sewid explained, “[t]he Kwakiutl were unsurpassed among North American Indians in their theatrical skill” (11), and Sewid’s following description of the *Kwakwaka’wakw*’s most popular theatrical spectacle indicates that this nation possessed very refined art forms requiring a significant amount of labour, precious materials and religious initiates:

Huge masks with moveable parts danced around the fire. Trap doors in the floor enabled dancers to mysteriously disappear. Lifelike heads carved of wood and carried on top of a dancer’s costume were skillfully cut from the body. Then a powerful shaman would revive the decapitated person to the amazement of the audience. The most important secret was the simulated nature of these dramas which the uninitiated thought to be supernaturally produced. (11)

To be sure, if one were searching for a comparable description of literary activity within European traditions, one would be inclined to look as far back as English Renaissance drama or perhaps even as far back as those medieval and morality plays which influenced Elizabethan and Jacobean art forms. And it seems that such comparisons could, in fact, be drawn. After all, Sewid notes that these theatrical spectacles were traditionally performed for neighbouring indigenous nations long before European visitors ever hit the coast, and this recognition reveals that *Kwakwaka’wakw* (Kwakiutl) theatre is, at the very least, half-a-millennium old and that it is most likely thousands of years old.

In addition to the recognition that First Nations writing was emphasizing that it had a notable and lengthy literary past, it is equally important to note here that while
people were appealing to First Nations authors to write, they were not mourning anything comparable to a lack of cultural history that must be accounted for and corrected. That is, there is no discourse in this body of literature that is comparable to the story which those such as Dewart, MacMechan, Lampman or Brown were telling when they claimed that Canadian literature did not exist and that it needed to be discovered or created. As an introduction to My Heart Soars, Chief Dan George, for example, provides the following epigraph: "My People's Memory / Reaches into the / Beginning of All Things." To those raised within and schooled by an education which grows out of a "New World" sensibility, there is something different about Chief Dan George's writing, as there is also something different about a substantial portion of native literature. Especially significant is the fact that this body of literature reveals a sense of confidence about the past and a certainty about tradition which is not to be found within the bulk of English-Canadian literature perhaps until the present day. There is nothing comparable to MacEwan's "dark pines" in this body of literature: that is, there is no dominant symbol which speaks of a confusion comparable to that confusion found in English-Canadian literature which is related to a desire to find the "sun-gods" of this world. Most notably, almost all, if not every one, of the works published during this period gave accounts of both personal and national histories, and, most often, these histories extended far back beyond the moment of "discovery." And it becomes quickly evident that First Nations authors of the 1960s and 1970s were not at all in search of their origins, a historical past or a mythological navel. In other words, one will not find in this literature a search for an originary moment which promises to provide the beginning for a body of mythology.
Thus, it could be said that while First Nations literature was announcing its entry into the Canadian publishing world during these decades, it was also assiduously underscoring its cultural difference. And perhaps the significance of this last claim is best understood by considering what writers had been saying during these years about the differences between aboriginal and non-aboriginal traditions in their discussions of governmental policies. Harold Cardinal claimed in *The Unjust Society*, for example, that “Indians have aspirations, hopes and dreams, but becoming white men is not one of them” (3), and this is an assertion which would also be echoed by Wilfred Pelletier in a small pamphlet entitled *Two Articles* (1971): “Indians don’t really want to fight for their rights,” Pelletier stated. “They really don’t want to get into the society at all.” In fact, Pelletier went even further by drawing a distinction between the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and the American Indian Movement, even though many people have recognized that Black Panther politics influenced and fueled the activities of both AIM and NARP in the 1960s and 1970s. “In this way,” Pelletier maintained, “[the American Indians] are probably different from the black people on this continent who are a much larger group, and have no choice but to fight for their rights. When they get these rights, what they are doing in essence is moving into society.” As well, Harold Adams would draw attention to the idea that assimilation had never been the goal of most First Peoples when he noted that “since natives identify themselves as separate from white mainstream society, Canadian bourgeois nationalism means very little to them because it fails to provide a meaningful native identity” (1975, *Prison of Grass* 193). Of course, Cardinal, Pelletier and Adams were all reacting against the dictates of the White Paper at this point,
and, like many others, they were reacting against this policy because the government had seemed to assume that aboriginal peoples would naturally desire to meld with the Canadian mosaic and give up Indian "status." After all, the introduction to this policy includes the following claim upon which proposals for change were inevitably based and upon which aboriginal peoples launched some significant attacks: "For many Indian people, one road does exist, the only road that has existed since Confederation and before, the road of different status, a road which had led to a blind alley of deprivation and frustration. This road, because it is a separate road, cannot lead to full participation, to equality in practice as well as in theory" (Statement of the Government 5). But in both theory and practice the government had either incorrectly read most of the signposts along the way or it had ignored them, for it seems that separate roads weren't so much the problem after all but the new potholes that were the real problem. After all, the First Nations have always seemed to want to maintain their distinctiveness from the national "centre" and govern themselves, and separate "paths" have never been a point of contention or the source of the problem. Rather, the poverty, self-deprecation, and injustice which attends paternalism and policies of assimilation are the origins of despair.

Indeed, these are sweeping generalizations, and there is always the exception to the rule, but the reason why these considerations are of utmost significance here is that they make one re-consider the act of "discovery" which attended the phenomenon of Native literary production during the 1960s and 1970s in Canada. For instance, and as this chapter will explore at greater length, there is something so distinctly "different" about First Nations writing that it makes one re-consider that period of silence which has been
spoken about so consistently in discussions of the CNLR. It makes one re-consider the actual impact which colonization had on First Nations literature, and it leads one to inevitably conclude that contemporary Native literature, during the 1960s and 1970s, was, more than anything else, underscoring its difference because it had not witnessed such a significant hiatus after all. In other words, it would be a mistake to assume that parallel artistic traditions had not been assiduously maintained during years of political turmoil and that the literature of the CNLR had grown out of an abyss of sorts. To understand indigenous literature in this way would detract from the recognition that when people began writing in the 1960s and 1970s their works embodied the characteristics of very old forms of literature which had been maintained and adapted to the demands of changing times in a continuous fashion over many years.

For instance, it seems significant to note here that when Norval Morriseau published his work *Legends of the Great Ojibway*, he was not concerned at all with discovering his lineage or legacy or with searching for a historical past. Rather, he was rightfully concerned with what Ojibway elders would have to say about the fact that he was offering the public translations of ancient and sacred histories and mythologies. “Although I am an Ojibway Indian artist and I paint the ancient forms of the Ojibway,” Morriseau began, “no Indian would ever take the step I took, for fear of the supernatural” (68). Morriseau further claimed that he had, in a way, “broken a barrier, a taboo,” despite the fact that he had “a great respect for [his] ancestral beliefs” (68), and, indeed, he was reprimanded by elders who considered it sacrilegious to have recounted the stories which he did tell. To be sure, Morriseau’s work and comments are evidence that
Ojibway traditions, including literary traditions, had been fiercely protected and that while their entry into the public literary domain made them "new" in the sense that they were translated and presented in an untraditional manner, their legacy was very old. And there are several other texts which come to mind here and which draw attention to the notion that silence is not always a comment on cultural oppression but, rather, a comment on the vitality of art forms and peoples.

For example, when James Sewid recounted the memoirs of his life to James Spradley, he remembered his life as a child on the West Coast of British Columbia, and he described very carefully how his family and others "had to be very careful about taking part in potlatches that were going on in the other villages" (41) because government officials were around at that time monitoring travel since dances and potlatches had been made illegal. Sewid further noted that when the government ordered different nations to give up their religious regalia and masks that "[t]here were only people from three villages who did what they ordered, Cape Mudge, Village Island, and Alert Bay" (54). Despite governmental injunctions, in other words, traditions were maintained, and they were maintained even more rigorously because their survival had been threatened.

As well, when George Manuel and Michael Posluns published The Fourth World: An Indian Reality (1974), they also noted that "[w]hen the potlatch had been outlawed, the Indian spiritual societies that maintained . . . traditions had largely gone underground in order to carry on their work" (118), and their later comments would reveal the significance of this statement. Manuel and Posluns would also note, for example, that while "the sixties stand out like a mountain rising above the quiet mists of the fifties" (156)
and that while this was "the decade in which [Indian people] were rediscovered," this whole process of discovery was heavily ironic: "As in the earlier discoveries of European history, we knew where we were all the time," the authors wrote. "It was the explorer who was lost" (156). Manuel and Posluns would also draw attention here to one of the earliest treaties that had been negotiated by Europeans and Indian nations and which had been recorded by the Iroquois on the Two Row Wampum Belt. As they explained, "[t]he two rows that are woven into the pattern symbolize the path of two vessels traveling on parallel paths but neither interfering with the other," and they indicate that "[i]t is only through the mutual acknowledgment of the other's reality that it is possible to travel on parallel courses and avoid collision" (8). In other words, what these reflections suggest is that there had been a long history of parallel traditions--both literary and otherwise--in the Americas, and, thus, it is important to note that the years of "silence" which led up to the CNLR were not necessarily years of unproductivity but, rather, years during which cultures remained more rigidly separate from one another.

To revisit the concerns of this chapter thus far, it is significant to note, then, that the literature which grew out of the CNLR was doing four very important things. First, it was drawing attention to the fact that different Indian nations had very old literary traditions and that contemporary indigenous literatures grew out of well-established literary histories. Second, it was revealing that authors were confident that they possessed cultural histories as well as recognizable national identities. Third, this literature was also asserting that First Peoples were culturally different from non-aborigional peoples, and, fourth, this literature was therefore underscoring the recognition that aboriginal literary
traditions, though they were now entering the world of Canadian publishing, had maintained parallel and separate lives because they were also significantly different from non-aboriginal literary traditions. Therefore, the literature which was being offered to the public by indigenous peoples during the 1960s and 1970s was, more than anything, an indication that the First Nations possessed a certain kind of authority that was not to be found within a body of national literature which could only trace its legacy back to a mythic archetype of “discovery” or “arrival.” And, interestingly enough, this mark of authority would manifest itself in two other important ways in the literature of these decades.

First, while much of this literature has been written off as “protest” literature, it seems more accurate to say that much of this literature is “heroic” or “neo-heroic,” and as the following discussion will hopefully reveal, this means that a significant portion of indigenous literature carries a certain kind of authoritative weight either because it proves itself to be derivative of ancient and consistently maintained traditions or because it embodies the machinery and expectations of a form which is grand and outside the pale of most contemporary conventions. In other words, aboriginal literature of the 1960s and 1970s revealed itself to be both old and extraordinary. And again, yet in different way, this literature underscored its longevity.

Most transparently, of course, there were a number of works during these decades which collected together stories of tricksters, culture heroes, and gods (Legends of My People: The Great Ojibway, Son of Raven, Son of Deer, Legends of the River People, Ojibway Heritage, Wild Drums, and Kwakiutl Legends), and since traditional mythology
is, by its very nature, heroic, readers of these works were presented with a recognizable form of epic literature. In his preface to *Ojibway Heritage*, for example, Basil Johnston underscored the mythological legacies of the stories which he was about to relate in the body of his text when he drew parallels between traditional Ojibway legends and those classical mythologies which originated in Europe and in the East. As he explained, “Ojibway stories are as broad and deep in meaning and mystery as are the tales, legends, and myths of Greek, Roman, Egyptian and other peoples and just as difficult to understand as are the parables in the Bible” (8). And as readers would also discover, these tales were equally full of those glorious deeds and heroic battles which also governed other heroic literatures. The story of Zhowmin and Mandamin, for example, is the story of a warrior with great strength who fights not for individual well being but for the betterment of the Anishnabeg, and as the following excerpt reveals, to find an equivalent tale of prowess and battle in the traditions of English literature, one would have to turn back to the likes of *Beowulf*:

Zhowmin glared at Mandamin, ‘I am not afraid. I will fight,’ he growled.

‘Good,’ Mandamin said, ‘Tonight we’ll fight.’ Zhowmin and Mandamin went into the forest, selected a clearing for their battle and then stripped to the waist. First they circled one another, looking for a weakness and an opening. They then grappled. Equal in determination and strength they fought on equal terms; wrestling, punching, pounding, and twisting in order to gain advantage. One moment Zhowmin would knock Mandamin to the ground; the next, Mandamin would hurl Zhowmin to the earth. So the battle went all night until
both warriors fell exhausted to the soil. Zhoumin and Mandamin, bleeding and bruised returned to the lodge to rest and sleep. They slept all day.

When they awakened, it was evening. Hungry, they made a meal and ate as if there was no enmity between them. After a smoke they went back to the forest clearing to resume their struggle. Again they fought and they fought like life-long enemies. Such was the violence of their struggle that they uprooted small trees and crushed all the grasses until only the sands remained. But in spite of all their efforts neither could overcome the other. Finally, weariness forced Zhoumin and Mandamin to suspend their mighty battle. Battered, cut, and wounded, the warriors returned to their lodge to sleep.

Weak and drawn from loss of blood, they woke up late in the afternoon, ate, and then rested to regain some strength. About midnight, they slowly made their way back to the battleground.

Once there, they fought as hard as their remaining strength enabled them. Arms were weak; legs feeble; only the knowledge that the loser was to die kept them going. Somehow, some way, during the struggle Zhoumin knocked Mandamin to the ground; and before the unfortunate stranger could rise to his feet Zhoumin struck him with his war club. As Mandamin slumped down, Zhoumin plunged his knife into Mandamin’s back. Mandamin moved no more; he was dead.

(36-37)

It is interesting to note here that Zhoumin’s fierce and courageous spirit is not only comparable to the spirit which Beowulf possesses when he seeks to slay Grendel in order
to protect his people but that the lyric lament which Zhowmin sings after having killed Mandamin is also reminiscent of the laments of Anglo-Saxon wanderers:

'I do not fear death
My time has come
I will walk the Path of Souls
Back to whence I came.' (37)

As well, in addition to the recognition that both Zhowmin and Mandamin are governed by heroic ideals, it is significant to note that there is something comparable here to the heroic paradox when we discover that Mandamin, the food of wonder, has died gloriously in battle in order to become a kernel that will forever ensure his fame amongst the Ojibway. As the storyteller's voice asserts at the end of the story, "[b]y his death, he has given life to the Anishnabeg," and both Zhowmin and Mandamin are therefore to be "rewarded for [their] obedience" (38). Indeed, there were many forms of heroic literature which surfaced during the CNLR, and this is just one example from amongst many possibilities, but it is significant to note that these traditional stories drew attention to the fact that there were those still living who remembered stories that could be traced back to the equivalent of a Germanic or Anglo-Saxon heritage.

But it was not just traditional tales such as those recorded by Johnston that offered the reading public examples of heroic literature. Interestingly enough, those stories which elders and chiefs were recounting were full of heroic accounts and deeds because these people were, in large part, guardians of old histories as well as of traditional mythologies. What this meant is that these narratives recorded the conquests of national heroes and
nations, and as is the case with any nation which tells the story of its past, its claims to fame, its stories of warfare and battle, and its leaders are always of heroic proportions. For example, in *Great Leader of the Ojibway: Mis-quona-queb* (1972), James Redsky would pass on his knowledge of Mis-quona-queb, whom he called “the greatest leader of [the Ojibway] people” (27), and, in addition to recounting those stories of the trials and tests which Mis-quona-queb had to endure in order to prove his worthiness, Redsky also told of the many battles which had been fought between the Ojibway and Sioux. And these histories possessed the rhetoric which attends the recounting of a nation’s past. For example, Redsky included in his text the following speech which had been delivered to a group of warriors by the o-gemah (leader) of the Ojibway before they were to battle the Sioux, and this passage embodies the sentiments of heroic thought and the language of a hero’s tongue:

‘A warrior must be capable and outsmart the enemy. If the enemy is more intelligent than you, you will be destroyed. As warriors of the Ojibways you are never to give yourselves up—even if you are completely surrounded. You must not fall into captivity. To be captured is a great disgrace to the Ojibway nation. So you must fight to the death or run away from the enemy.

‘There are many hardships on the trail of war. Warriors go days without water, food and sleep. An Ojibway must endure these trials or bring great shame to himself.

‘It is the responsibility of the war o-gemah to choose the very best fighting men of our people. My young brothers, you have been chosen for this patrol. I
warn you, you must not fail our people. (29)

In a similar manner, in Alex Grisdale and Nan Shipley’s work *Wild Drums: Tales and Legends of the Plains Indians* (1973), Grisdale would relay the history of Chief Great Rock, a “fine leader . . . [who was] love[d] and respected by all his own people” (9), and he would set his history in “the wild drums and bow and arrow days” (9) and give depictions of traditional activities which underscored familiar heroic qualities such as adeptness, strength and bravery. Grisdale explains, for example, that “[a]s the men carved bow strings and arrows of oak and ashwood, tipped them with flint, and made strong bows of buffalo sinew, they sat about their fires and talked of their early history and the bravery of their ancestors” (12). He also includes in this collection the story of “the wife that would not be captured” (16) and the story of “the torch woman” (29-31), narratives which both underline the tenacity and bravery of two females whose reputation for fortitude was staked “[m]any years ago before the white man came to this country” (29).

As well, in his life history *Chiefly Indian* (1972), Henry Pennier would paint a picture of a heroic past which he remembered from those stories which his step-father’s dad had told him. As he put it, these were narratives full of “brave Indian warriors and spooky dead spirits and beautiful Indian maidens” (18), and he would recall that “[t]he story [he] liked best was about the Yokoughltegaht Indians from the west coast of Vancouver Island who were known as the fiercest warriors on the whole coast of British Columbia and farther south into what is now Washington state” (18). These are just a few examples here from an impressive collection of national histories which were published during these years, but they serve to enhance the recognition that heroic qualities came to
the forefront of attention during the years of the CNLR not only because traditional stories were being re-told but also because so many different nations were writing down their national histories at the same time.

Moreover, a large portion of this literature also appeared to be heroic, in a more contemporary sense, because most readers had not experienced the worlds which these authors were describing. In fact, what is perhaps most remarkable about a large portion of this literature is that it was written by respected elders and leaders who had lived a long while and who could therefore recall when the world was quite different and when more traditional lifestyles were mainstays of life. In an essay which is included in The Only Good Indian and which is entitled “My Very Good Dear Friends . . .” (1970), Chief Dan George, for instance, begins by making the following claim: “I was born a thousand years ago . . . born in a culture of bows and arrows. But within the span of half a lifetime I was flung across the ages to the culture of the atom bomb . . . And from bows and arrows to atom bombs is a distance far beyond the flight of the moon” (184). This is a sentiment which is also found in Edward Ahenakew’s Voices of the Plains Cree. Born in 1885, for instance, Cree author Ahenakew also felt more of an affinity with the world of the nineteenth century than with the twentieth century, and he drew attention to the recognition that he felt caught between the old world of Chief Thunderbird, whose stories he recorded in the first half of his work Voices of the Plains Cree, and the world he saw changing around him when he wrote the following words in 1923:

Ours is a different life now. Is it any wonder that, confused by increasing changes and difficulties, we look back with longing to the days that our Old Men
still remember, to the familiar scenes of their youth made real to us in story and legend? For they remember the days when teepees against a prairie sky marked the Indian encampment, when buffalo were without number, when horses, carts, and our own skills served our needs.

The sun has set upon those days, but the heart of our nation still mourns for them, still weeps behind the closed door-flaps of the teepee. The council fires have gone out, the voice of the Indian is not heard, the ploughshare of the settler has long since turned the over-grown paths that the buffalo followed. (23)

With the “sun set” on a past which authors could remember but could no longer see, it is no surprise that their writing would incorporate a sense of yearning for a past which, for readers who had never seen these familiar scenes and who had never partaken in this history (and they are many), would also appear to be heroic.

After all, for the most part, these authors had been born in the late-nineteenth century or early twentieth century, and their life stories included recollections of a past which demanded very different things than a post-industrial world. For example, born at Soda Creek in the Cariboo country of British Columbia in 1888, Mary Augusta Tappage would tell her stories to Jean E. Speare (1973, The Days of Augusta), and Augusta would recall the days of the gold rush and of Western settlement. She would tell the famous story of a holdup at Hundred-and-Fifty-Mile “on the old trail” (“The Holdup” 11) when robbers stopped a stage and robbed the drivers of gold. Augusta would also recall when she was a midwife, and although she would tell her story with nonchalance, readers familiar with this area of B.C., with its cold winters and with its vast distances between
different homes and centers, would understandably consider Augusta to be somewhat outside the ken of the average person. One of this text’s accompanying pictures would also show Augusta mending a fish net, and while Speare would record another story told to her by Augusta and entitled “It’s Easy To Make A Net,” for those who know anything about gill nets and the lack of craftsmen still living who are able to create or fix them, Augusta’s abilities would again seem a bit extraordinary.

Born in 1874 on the Carry-the-Kettle Reserve in Alberta, Chief Dan Kennedy would also describe a world that had changed significantly by the time his work, *Recollections of an Assiniboine Chief* (1972), was published, and the stories which he recounts of buffalo chases and pounds also possess heroic qualities and, as the following excerpt demonstrates, the qualities of a heroic language as well:

> Often in the dead of winter the angry elements would drive the buffalo from its haunts, overnight leaving hunger and famine in its wake.

> Hence, in the struggle for survival the Indian invented the buffalo pound—his abattoir which gave him security. The buffalo pound symbolizes the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the Plains Indian.

> After he acquired the horse, from 1770-1800, he became the most expert rider in the world and the chase became his popular pursuit. Thereafter, the mystic rite of the buffalo pound was seldom invoked.

> The last buffalo pound was made by Kan-ghi-Ska, ‘White Raven,’ and it stood almost intact even after we arrived here on the Assiniboine Reserve from the Cypress Hills in 1882. (52)
It seems significant that the past described here could be traced forward to a living legacy and that Chief Kennedy could be understood in relation to a time period that was very different than the 1970s. By the time he was writing, the buffalo were virtually extinct, and Chief Kennedy, linked as he is in his narrative to a time which speaks for a different, and perhaps unrecoverable, past, becomes associated with an older age that could be understood as glorious and demanding.

And Chief George Barker, author of *Forty Years a Chief* (1979), could be seen in much the same manner. Born in 1896 on the Bloodvein Reserve on the East shore of Lake Winnipeg, Barker would begin his life story by saying that while he was now 83 years of age and that while his “old legs refus[ed] to provide transportation” for him any longer, “[i]t [gave him] plenty of time to think back to when the main road through the community was just a trail and [his] driveway was a narrow path through the woods” (1). Interestingly, Barker would also describe traditional activities which he had taken part in during his life and which were now dwindling, and he would point out that he had attended one of the last medicine dances, or mitewiwins, that was held at “Drumming Point, at the northern end of Black Island on Lake Winnipeg” (94).

As well, in his life story, *Trapping is My Life* (1970), John Tetso would also write about his experiences on the trapline in British Columbia. He would depict, in detail, the skill which was needed to trap and clean wild animals. He would recall the “good years” or “fifteen-beaver days” (30), and he would draw attention to the dangers of his trade which he was fortunate enough to survive: “Many of times I have gone to bed without supper in weather thirty below,” Tetso wrote, “not because I was bad, but I made
mistakes . . . . I have gone thus far, learned a few things through understanding, acquired a fair amount of knowledge about this kind of life, and I have the scorched pants to prove it” (13).

It seems that these authors could be understood as living heroes of a sort. Those who were writing from the west coast of Canada shared a history with the great gold miners and fortune-seekers of the nineteenth century. Those who were writing from the central plains area shared a history with the days of horse raids and buffalo chases. And those who were writing from central Canada shared a history with the children of Loyalists who could still recall stories they had heard of the Fenian Raids and of the battles their parents had fought on behalf of the British Crown.

Indeed, this is the stuff legends and heroes are made of, but it is not simply the case that these stories and their speakers could be easily romanticized and that these narratives could be understood in terms of grand literary conventions. What is especially interesting about this literature is that it was written by highly skilled rhetoricians and orators and by respected and revered elders. And there was something both different and familiar about the language they were using. It was different because the language was often very formal, elaborate and stylized and, therefore, somewhat anachronistic at this point in the Canadian publishing world, but it was also familiar because it was reminiscent of the epic spirit of heroic language. Chief Dan George, for one, was an especially gifted speaker and writer, and, as the following passage from My Heart Soars indicates, the language which he used to instruct the younger generation was appropriately formal and ceremonial:
Heed the days
when the rain flows freely,
in their greyness
lies the seed of much thought.
The sky hangs low
and paints new colors
on the earth.

After the rain
the grass will shed its moisture,
the fog will lift from the trees,
a new light will brighten the sky (14-15)

But it was not simply the case that Chief Dan George and others were using a language characterized by a strict sense of propriety. Their writing also carried with it something that can be compared to the language of the King James Bible or the language of other sacred texts. That is, there was a prophetic tone inherent in much of this writing, and there seemed to be something sacred about the language which these people were using. In his prologue to *Men of Medeek* (1962), for example, Chief Walter Wright would claim that “with the coming of the men whose skins are white like the peeled willow stick there have come many new modes of life” (Robinson 2), and he would therefore explain, with the most formal of diction, why he had chosen to write this work:

So, lest the record be lost, I tell it that it may be written down and
preserved.

Thus may the Men of Medeek, now scattered in many places, read. Thus may they learn of the deeds that are recorded on their Totem Poles.

Thus may they come to have an honest pride in their lineage, and in the deeds performed by their ancestors. (Robinson 2)

Whether these characteristics stem from the properties of first languages, the demands of formal exchange, the tools of the missionary trade, or all of these things is a decision best left to linguists and to those who can contend with the sophistication that such a study would demand. But it is interesting to consider that an elevated language (when used convincingly) carries with it an impressive degree of power. It is an indication that those who are exercising this kind of language possess the authority to do so because they hold a position of respect amongst their peers and because they have the knowledge and years behind them to speak a certain way.

In addition to the recognition that the literature of the CNLR was characterized by the language of leaders, much of this writing carried the impress of old literary traditions. And what is significant about this reflection is that like the formal language of trained speakers and elders, these vestiges of old art forms were a constant reminder that indigenous literatures bore the weight of a certain authority. For instance, the following passage from Basil Johnston’s *Ojibway Heritage* possesses what those who study oral epic forms would call the markings of “formulaic” language—intrinsic qualities which are indicative of ancient orature:

CREATION
Young and old asked:

Who gave to me
The breath of Life
My frame of flesh?
Who gave to me
The beat of heart
My vision to behold
Who?

When to Rose the gift
Of shade, of beauty
And grace of form?
When to Pine the gift
Of mystery of growth
The power to heal
When?

How to Bear the gift
Of sense of time
A place of wintering?
How to Eagle came the gift
Of glance of love
The flash of rage?
How?

Who gave to Sun
His light to burn
His path to tread?
Who gave to Earth
Her greening bounty
Cycles of her being?
Who?
Who gave to us
The gifts we do not own
But borrow and pass on?
Who made us one?
Who set the Path of Souls?
Who carved the Land of Peace?
Who? (11-12)

Here, both the poem’s repetitious quality and parallel structures are reminiscent of the mnemonic aids characteristic of traditional oral literatures, and, given that Johnston also tells his readers that these stories were once transmitted orally, it becomes very apparent that this text grows out of quite an ancient past. But these same characteristics serve not only a utilitarian but also an aesthetic purpose, and, interestingly enough, they were to be
found not only in translations of this nature but also in those more recent stories and histories which people were recounting at this time. Transferred to contemporary aboriginal texts, then, these old literary characteristics indicated that contemporary Native writing had a notable past since they perpetuated a heroic tone reflective of the dynastic legacies of the First Nations.

For example, Chief Dan George would begin My Heart Soars in the following manner, and the qualities of his writing would suggest that his work was a transitional text that incorporated the characteristics of a literature as old as those stories which Johnston was recording:

THANKS:

TO MY FATHER!

For he gave me skill, stamina

and the knowledge of my past.

TO MY MOTHER!

For she gave me the love for life

and taught me to respect it.

TO MY WIFE!

Because she shared my burden

when it threatened to slow my
pace and kept by my side when
we travelled lightly.

TO MY CHILDREN
AND THEIR CHILDREN!

Because in their eyes

I have seen myself.

THIS IS GOOD! (6)

Likewise, when Jean Speare recorded the stories of Mary Augusta Tappage, Speare also recorded the repetitious quality which is infused throughout all of Mary Augusta Tappage's stories and which is suggestive of an older and highly refined oral art form. And the following passage from the first story in The Days of Augusta, "Holdup," suggests that Tappage not only knew how to remember a story but that she also knew how to tell a story with old and remembered narrative structures:

My aunt told us. We were excited.

It was at Three-mile Creek

there at the Hundred-and-Fifty-Mile on the old trail;

well the same way you go to Ashcroft now;

well here is this creek,

they call it Three-Mile.

It was all bushy

right to the edge of the trail it was bush;

the government didn't cut right-of-ways

in those days, no--
so it was all bush.

Anyhow this place was bushy and here the robbers must have waited till the stage went by. ‘Stop!’ They told the driver to stop but he was hard-of-hearing.

The driver, he didn’t stop, no, when they told him. They shot at him above his horses. They didn’t kill a soul. They scared the horses. I think they scared everyone.

My aunt told us everyone was scared. (11-12)

That Tappage was using repetition and suspense to serve the dictates of a short narrative drama is not that surprising. But what is telling about The Days of Augusta, My Heart Soars, Ojibway Heritage and many other works from this period is that they seemed to embody the characteristics of a speaking voice which had either been preserved in translations or incorporated into a medium not antagonistic to the oral but different enough to reveal the distinct characteristics of a different kind of expression. That is, presented in written form, these oral characteristics stood out because they were infused
throughout a new body of literature which was published _en masse_ without precedent in the Canadian publishing world. And because this literature revealed both a confidence about its past and a confidence about its difference, it would prove to become a standard against which other national literatures could be measured.

This is a point which will be returned to more fully in the next chapter. However, it is important to note here that aside from the recognition that much of the literature of the CNLR was, or appeared to be, heroic, the literature of this period also indicated that both the First Nations and their respective bodies of literature had grown organically with this world. And this recognition became evident in two ways. First, in addition to the recognition that indigenous land claims and public protests were underscoring indigenous legacies in North America, the literature of this time continuously emphasized the idea that aboriginal peoples were connected to this world in a different way than those people whose histories could be traced back to a European past. In his essay “For Every North American Indian Who Begins to Disappear, I Also Begin to Disappear” (1971), Wilfred Pelletier, for one, spoke in large terms of the differences between aboriginal and non-aboriginal cultures, and he made the following claim: “I cannot forget that originally we had a very different relationship to this land and that we had evolved a society which was more closely integrated with nature, a society where the order that existed was organic rather than mechanical” (3-4). Of course, there are dangers in generalizations such as these, and, interestingly, Manuel and Posluns had correctly anticipated the simplistic dualities and deductions which could easily grow out of such comments when they noted that “[n]ature . . . is not any kinder to Indian people than to anybody else” (43). But it
was not as if readers were simply being presented with platitudes about different attitudes toward the land and about differences between aboriginal and non-aboriginal worldviews.

There were a number of works, for example, which drew attention to the fact that there were still vital rituals which were performed by certain aboriginal nations to pay homage to Mother Earth, and this awareness that the lands of North America were still reserved a place of honour in the oldest of ceremonies underscored the recognition that indigenous histories were inextricable with the physical properties of this world. To offer just a couple of noteworthy examples here, Delaware author Enos T. Montour would inform his readers that "[t]here are many . . . Longhouses belonging to different tribes. . . . [which] all have this special Awakening Ceremony for Mother Earth" (13), and Stoney author Chief John Snow would also explain that, for the Stoney nation, there were equally important rituals performed in the Rocky Mountains or what, for the Stoney, were "temples," "sanctuaries" and "resting places" (13). It would also become apparent in Chief Dan George's poetry that the Coast Salish had strong sacrio-religious ties to the actual land and that their relationship to Mother Earth differed greatly from that relationship which was governed by an economic drive. As Chief Dan George knew it, "[t]he earth and everything it contained was a gift from See-see-am," the great spirit whom Chief Dan George saw one day when he was a boy fishing with his father (37). As well, he knew that his people "For thousands of years / . . . have spoken the language of the land" (64) and that this was not a strange world but a very ancient and familiar one.

Second, the old narratives that were recorded during these years revealed that indigenous histories and mythologies had developed out of a close association with this
world and its landscape thousands of years ago. Most notably, of course, indigenous creation stories were set in this world, and people could trace the beginning of time back to a story which included the geography of this continent. But in addition to the recognition that indigenous creation stories embodied proof of aboriginal longevity, those etiological tales which were included in translations of old indigenous mythologies showed how the land is literally a record of traditional and sacred stories.

In Legends of the River People (1976), for example, Norman Lerman recorded a collection of legends from the Chilliwack Nation, and included in this compilation was a story about Cultus Lake which grows out of a history much older than that which is outlined in the pamphlets now circulated in B.C. provincial campgrounds:

At that time there was no Cultus Lake and the people lived in the basin where the lake is now. The creeks from the mountain came down into this basin and disappeared into an underground river. Koothlak went the next morning to swim in his lake as usual, but as he ran from the village, the other boys teased him again. Koothlak became angry once more and when he reached the lake he began to pull on the branches in the dike. The water had become very heavy and was ready to wash the dike right out. As soon as Koothlak pulled out the first branches, the dike broke with a sound like thunder! Koothlak started to run down the mountain, the water splashing on his legs. Below him the people heard the rumble of the water but they couldn’t run away fast enough. The water filled the basin and drowned all the people that lived there. The branches from the dike went into the underground river, stopping it up, and the lake which we call Cultus
Lake covered that place. (17)

In a similar vein, when Randy Bouchard and Dorothy I.D. Kennedy collected stories from southwestern British Columbia between 1971 and 1975 for their collection *Shuswap Stories* (1979), they also recorded a number of narratives which showed how indigenous stories are inextricable with this landscape. The Shuswap, an old and anglicized word for the Secwepemc, traditionally inhabited (and still largely do) a large area of South-central British Columbia, a land which is known for its rivers (the North and South Thompson, the Fraser and the Columbia River) and its mountains. And in their oldest stories, the Secwepemc record how their land became. For instance, in “THLEE-sa Travels the Land,” the first story of this collection and a story which belongs to the time period when only animal people, and not humans, inhabited the earth, Ike Willard relates how THLEE-sa and his brothers were entranced and “hypnotized into a deep sleep” (5) while they watched a woman dance and how, subsequently, the woman “transformed THLEE-sa and his brothers into rocks, which can still be seen today” (5). For anyone who has been in the Monte Creek area and who has seen these mountains, this is a pretty impressive land claim, and for those who would consider this area to be simply sublime, this story shows how the region is also sacred. Indeed, there are many such stories which provide explanations for the Canadian landscape and its landmarks, and the vitality of such stories is evident when one considers how they have been used in contemporary court cases, such as the Gitxsan / Wet’suwet’en trial,18 to prove aboriginal title. But what these stories also indicate within this discussion is that there is often a world of difference between aboriginal mythologies and mythologies which are informed not by sacred national origins.
but by contemporary history.

As the first chapter has revealed, early attempts to provide Canadian mythologies indicated that authors were not familiar with this world’s indigenous “sun-gods” and that these same authors had not experienced what Frye called a true “uniting of subject and object in the imaginative experience” (1965, “Conclusion to LHC,” in BG 245). These authors were reliant on imported paradigms of thought and the imaginative language they had learned from other places, and they were not part of a collectivity that had lived with the comfort of a sacred history. Thus, for a significant while, tenuous mythological frameworks came to define Canadian writing, and readers were presented with a body of literature that continued to search for indigenous mythological material. In contrast, and as this chapter has attempted to suggest, the writing which grew out of the CNLR revealed the strong organic relation between indigenous stories and the properties of this world. This body of writing also revealed that most aboriginal authors were familiar with this world’s indigenous “sun-gods” and that their histories and mythologies had grown out of an understanding of this world and its physical properties.

For instance, it soon became evident that Chief Dan George knew the gods of his land, and, thus, he could write, without sounding silly, about the sacred nature of the place in which he lived:

The beauty of the trees,

the softness of the air,

the fragrance of the grass,

speaks to me.
The summit of the mountain,
the thunder of the sky,
the rhythm of the sea,
speaks to me.

The faintness of the stars,
the freshness of the morning,
the dew drop on the flower,
speaks to me.

The strength of fire,
the taste of salmon,
the trail of the sun,
And the life that never goes away,

They speak to me.

And my heart soars. (My Heart Soars 83)

Indeed, there is a world of difference between Chief Dan George's poetry and the poetic sentiments of those such as Bliss Carman who, no matter how beautifully he put it, would wonder at the “Spirit of life or subtler thing” (“Low Tide on Grand Pré,” in Low Tide on Grand Pré 17) that is found in “the fields of Acadie” (16).

Or, to provide an example more contemporary with Chief Dan George and his writing, there is a world of difference between the verse of Chief Dan George and the poetry of Al Purdy. While Purdy’s “The Country North of Belleville” (1965) speaks for
generations of Southern Ontarians whose identity is inextricable with the "bush land" and "scrub land," Purdy's claim—"this is the country of defeat" (Cariboo Horses 74)—registers the recognition that history, though it may still be witnessed in what remains of old Wollaston, Elvezir, McClure, Marmora and Dungannon, is incapable of providing the kind of direction which the "trail of the sun" provides for the narrator of Chief Dan George's poem:

we may go back there
to the country of our defeat
Wollaston Elvezir Dungannon
and Weslemkoon lake land
where the high townships of Cashel

McClure and Marmora once were—

But it's been a long time since
and we must enquire the way

of strangers— (Purdy, Cariboo Horses 76)

This is a classic Canadian poem not only because of its beauty but also because of its comment on a history which is lost between older and younger generations when an elemental link seems to be missing. And perhaps it is Purdy's poem "A God in the Earth" (1990) that underscores a key tension that emerges when one compares the cultural positions which differentiate national spokesman such as Chief Dan George and Al Purdy:

King St. Laurent Diefenbaker Pearson Trudeau

Clark and again Trudeau
the names make little tinkles in history
they rhyme with faker and fearful and bark and no
look them up in books

Theres no time
for faker and fearful and bark and no

and that other little man
who found his friends in Washington
and lost his own country

_The earth-god does not know them_

_The god in the earth has other business_

(The Woman on the Shore 47-49)

Embedded in Purdy's pantheistic vision is the recognition that history pales in comparison to the sacred. While Purdy makes no pretense here of being able to understand the gods of this land, and while he does not make any comment on aboriginal cosmologies or aboriginal gods, his poem illuminates the recognition that there can be something greater than history in a nation's past. And speaking as it does of those "little tinkles in history" and the greater vision which is borne from the gods, "A God in the Earth" exposes a
contrast which reveals itself in a comparative study of Canadian and aboriginal literature.

In essence, while contemporary aboriginal literatures reveal that their legacies can be traced back to mythological "navels," the story which searches for Canada's sacred historical mythology reveals that such a narrative must inevitably mourn the lack of such origins.

But just why are these such important reflections here? What light do they shed on an understanding of cultural exchange in Canadian literature during the mid-to-late twentieth century? How are they related to the other observations which have been made about the literature of the CNLR? What is significant about the fact that these differences revealed themselves at a time of political and literary change in Canada? And just how do these assertions help us understand why First Nations literature holds a place of such special importance at the head-waters of Canadian writing?

In conclusion, it is significant to note that the criticism of Canadian literature and its early stages of development revealed the fact that it was national mythologies which people were intent on possessing. Colonization of the new world had created a largely unsettled populace which inevitably mourned the recognition that it did not possess a cohesive body of national stories which defined its collective spirit. More specifically, it seems to be the case that the story which searches for a sacred historical mythology pauses uncomfortably at the recognition that this nation does not possess something comparable to a traditional originary moment that allows the mythologically minded to forget history and to embrace something that justifies this nation's beginnings. Thus, notable critical voices would say that a Canadian literature did not exist (Lampman), that the "bulk" of
Canadian literature "smells of mortality" (MacMechan), and that there was "far too little Canadian vision" (Frye). As well, people would therefore look forward to a time of change when the moment for "a national song" (Lampman) would present itself and when this nation's artists would be presented with a "crisis" (Lampman and Brown) or "social impetus" (Frye) great enough to change the colonial spirit which plagued Canadian writing.

All of this sounds a bit romantic and extreme, but what is most notable about these assertions and beliefs is that they reveal an entire lack of confidence. These early discussions of Canadian literature almost incessantly turned to a consideration of what Canadian writing did not possess. It did not possess strong foundations for the making of national mythologies because its people did not possess an ancient national identity. It did not possess a continuous literary history because its people had arrived in boatloads on a politically divided shore as little as five-hundred years ago. It did not possess "sun-gods" (Frye) or indigenous "spirit[s] of creation" (Reaney) because its people had not grown up with this world for thousands of years. In essence, Canadian writers lacked everything of which First Nations writers would boast during the 1960s and 1970s.

First Nations literature quickly revealed that it had a continuous literary history; a continuous cultural history; heroes--both living and dead; indigenous "sun-gods"; narrative histories inscribed on the faces of mountains, rocks, and trees; sacred pasts; living voices that could remember stories as old as those once sung in the halls of Heorot; and voices that registered the reality of different and vital literary traditions. And for a nation which, at this point in time, considered itself to be composed of "losers and quislings" (Dennis
Lee, Civil Elegies 1972: 44), these indigenous possessions could only create humility and envy. But what would be done with these emotions is another thing. And this is what the next chapter will explore. What would Canadian authors do when, presented with the social impetus that Frye said was necessary for the making of true national mythologies, they were also presented with the stuff of great legends and great national histories—the very properties needed for national stories? Would revisionist history lead authors to produce new works which finally smacked of "faith" (Dewart), "passion and enthusiasm" (Lampman), "fiery conviction" (MacMechan) and a "supreme intensity" (E.K. Brown)? Would Canadian mythologists engage in new "habits of metaphorical thought" (Frye) and produce works which were indicative of a new phase of mythological maturity? Would Canadian literature finally indicate that national imaginations had now begun to grow organically with this world?
Notes: Chapter Two

1. Grey Young-Ing makes the following claim: Native books published during the 1960s and 1970s "tended to be characteristic of protest literature; political in content and angry in tone. This first rash of Aboriginal literature seemed to be lashing out in the face of the Canadian establishment, after years of oppression and the silencing of the Aboriginal Voice" (183). Penny Petrone also notes that the 1970s "began with books of protest and defence written from partisan motives" (113).

2. In her introduction to this text, Ruth Matheson Buck explains that while Ahenakew's text was written in 1923, "[i]t was [only] after the death of Edward Ahenakew in 1961 that the papers were found in a tattered and neglected state by his niece, Katherine Ahenakew Greyeyes, who sent them to [Buck] because of [her] own interest in western history and the long association and friendship between [their] families" (10).

3. There is no clear explanation why Mike Mountain Horse's story was not published earlier. In his introduction to this work, Hugh Dempsey explains that Mountain Horse's story was notably "prejudiced against the old-time pagan Indian," and Dempsey suggests that this was because the publishing industry was still very much prejudiced against aboriginal authors and that Mountain Horse "believed he had to satisfy [certain expectations such as these] if he expected to get his manuscript published" (x).

4. Stan Rough explains that *Men of Medeek* was written during 1935-36 but that "[i]ts author, Will Robinson, submitted the manuscript to several publishing companies, whose editors felt that its appeal was too limited" (preface to text). Then, in 1953, following the death of Mr. Robinson, his wife "endeavored again to secure its publication, but while
editors showed interest, no company was prepared to arrange for its publication.” When Stan Rough became aware of the manuscript in 1960, he “submitted it to yet another publisher, and after holding the manuscript for a year, they returned it feeling that it had a limited sales potential.” It was not until 1962 that the Kitimat Northern Sentinel Print Shop published the work.

5. As H.B. Hawthorn and N.A. Tremblay indicate on the title page to their report, “[i]n 1964 the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration asked The University of British Columbia to undertake, in conjunction with scholars in other universities, a study of the social, educational and economic situation of the Indians of Canada and to offer recommendations where it appeared that benefits could be gained.” It is also important to note here that the Hawthorn Report is not accepted by everyone as a landmark in contemporary aboriginal history. In Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School, Celia Haig-Brown, for one, claims that in this report the “Indian voices are given only through layers of European interpreters” (146).

6. Grey Young-Ing notes that “[a]fter Pauline Johnston’s untimely death in 1913, almost six decades were to pass before another Aboriginal author would be published in Canada” (182), and Penny Petrone states that “[t]he decades between the First World War and the 1969 government White Paper on Indian policy was a barren period for native writing in Canada” (95).

7. The Potlatch Law has never been formally repealed.


10. Wuttunnee’s Ruffled Feathers: Indians in Canadian Society (1971) is basically a defense of the White Paper and an attack on Cardinal’s The Unjust Society.

11. As Raunet explains, “Frank Calder was one of the few Native figures to endorse Trudeau’s suggestion, but, in fact, “his overall position differed greatly from the federal plan” (158). Raunet maintains that “[h]is approval of repeal was conditional on acceptance of the same land claims the prime minister had specifically rejected” (158).

12. Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel was first recorded on tape and then edited by Don Barnett and Rick Sterling. The first printed edition appeared in 1975, and in 1990 a revised edition of Bobbi Lee was published. The second edition includes a new introduction by Maracle where Maracle discusses the Oka Crisis; an added foreword, written by Jeannette Armstrong; and a new and extensive epilogue written by Maracle. As well, the 1990 edition does not include the photos and map which appear in the original.

13. “According to [the] seventh judge, Mr. Justice Pigeon, the Nishga could not sue the province without a ‘fiat,’ an authorization from Victoria itself” (Raunet 159).

14. “They received 13 590 square kilometres of reserve land as well as fishing, hunting, and trapping rights over a territory of 155 340 square kilometres subject to further development plans by the province. In exchange, the Quebec [sic] Cree and Inuit renounced for ever their rights to 1 035 600 square kilometres of northern Quebec [sic]--an area as large as Britain, France, and West Germany together--including the mineral resources of this country” (Raunet 162).

15. As Fumoleau explained to Justice Berger, “all testimonies indicate that due to the
culture and history of the Dene, it was a definite impossibility for them to relinquish their
rights to the land.” Furnoleau then noted that “this [had] been established in legal terms by
Mr. Justice Morrow in 1973” (O’Malley 133).

16. The name Kwakiutl is a word which came to define fifteen different nations who are
known as the Kwakwaka’wakw, “speaker of Kwakwala” (Coull 55). The word properly
refers to only one nation, the Kwagul or K-wagiulth (same as Kwakiutl) (Coull 56).

17. There is no pagination in this pamphlet.

18. Cheryl Coull provides a brief summary of this important trial: “In 1987, the Gitxsan
with their old friends and neighbours, the Wet’suwet’en, launched the boldest trial in
Canada’s history. Fifty-four chiefs seeking outright control of an area spanning 22,000
square kilometres took their case to B.C.’s Supreme Court. Cautiously opening their
ada’ox, ‘treasure boxes,’ they described, in their own languages, territories governed long
before written history. Then came the paradoxical judgement of a 100-year-old colonial
society, which, in denying their claim, summarized Gitxsan and Wet’suwet’en life as
having been at best, ‘nasty, brutish and short’” (180).
Chapter Three

Tricked by History: Tracing the Paths of Influence in The New Anti-hero, the New Trickster and New Languages

Here again is a choice...in our minds—whether Canadians as a whole want to continue treating the Indian population as something outside, a group of Canadians with which we have treaties, a group of Canadians who, as many of the Indians claim, have aboriginal rights; or whether we will say we'll forget the past and begin today. (Prime Minister Trudeau, Vancouver, August 10, 1969; qtd. in Walsh 36)

Perhaps it is no wonder that when it came time to produce a “national song” (Lampman) in Canada, Canadian writers could not avoid engaging with the history and the traditions that had been revealed during the Native Cultural Renaissance (NCR) and the Contemporary Native Literary Renaissance (CNLR). Canada’s centenary had coincided with a revolution that demanded that Canadian citizens remember an effaced part of this nation’s past. Aboriginal authorities were challenging the authority of the Canadian government and the history upon which this nation had been built. And what seemed to be an unprecedented body of Native literature suddenly appeared to the public and introduced new stories into the realm of Canadian publishing. And perhaps it is also no wonder that new myths would be created during this moment in Canadian history. As the story which searches for Canada’s sacred historical mythology reveals, until this point in time, Canada was waiting for two phenomena which traditionally provide the basis for mythological change: a social revolution and a new “mental landscape” (Frye, “Culture and Society in Ontario, 1784-1984,” in Gjupj 189) which allows for “the uniting of subject and object in the imaginative experience” (“Conclusion to Literary History,” in BG 245). Together, the CNLR and the NCR demanded that people remember the past and
reconfigure their ideas about the present in light of revolutionary changes, and aboriginal land-claims activities of the 1960s and 1970s were refashioning ideas about the literal lands of Canada, dispelling this nation's legacy of colonial ownership, and provoking Canadians to consider anew their relationship with the environment.

And, indeed, this time period in Canadian history did witness a notable increase in works which tried to engage with aboriginal history and traditions. As Russell Brown noted in 1973 in an article entitled "The Time of the Redmen," by the early 1970s, Canadian writing had become overrun by what he called "the children of Tekakwitha" (92). Brown was, of course, referring to the precedent which Leonard Cohen set when he published his novel _Beautiful Losers_ (1966), a loose tribute of sorts to the Iroquois saint Catherine Tekakwitha. "Blame it on Leonard Cohen perhaps," Brown sarcastically wrote, but "[e]very second Canadian novel now seems to have an Indian hiding behind its trees, Eskimos moving across its Arctic wastes, or--at the very least--a protagonist who, like the narrator of _Surfacing_, himself becomes a primitive thereby replacing the native gone from the land" (92). Brown drew specific attention here to Rudy Wiebe's _The Temptations of Big Bear_ (1973), Alexander Knox's _Night of the White Bear_ (1971), James Basque's _A Man of Talent_ (1972), R.D. Symon's _North by West: Two Stories from the Frontier_ (1973), Alan Fry's _The Revenge of Annie Charlie_ (1973), and Robert Kroetsch's _Gone Indian_ (1973). While Brown appreciated some of these works and criticized others mercilessly, his reviews were held together by a strong argument: "Indian material" (92) had indisputably become very attractive to non-native Canadian writers.

To be sure, Brown accurately pinpointed a new trend in Canadian writing. As
Terry Goldie has also observed, the literature of “the late sixties and early seventies” was characterized by a sort of “back-to-the-land-primitivism” (“Getting it Right” 64), or what Brown would call “the new pastoralism” (“Time of the Redmen” 92) of the times. Goldie further claimed that this characteristic was indicative of a desire “to become as though native” (“Getting it Right” 79), and Goldie appears to be quite right when one considers how critics and authors were speaking during these years. For instance, D.G. Jones, in *Butterfly on Rock* (1970), made the following claim: “it is our North American inheritance embodied here in the Indians that idles about and hides, waiting to be given a voice. . . . [T]he voice that demands to be heard is the voice of the land” (5). And sure enough, time and time again, Canadian writers would attempt to capture this voice in their works.

In addition to the novels which Brown had mentioned, Howard O’Hagan’s *Tay John*, a work which was first published in 1939, was resurrected in 1960 and enabled the reading public to truly appreciate the mythic story of a prophet of sorts who led the Shuswap, or Yellowhead, nation through the lands of the Canadian West in search of a promised land. Patrick Lane wrote “Treaty-Trip from Shulus Reservation” (1966), a poem which created a mournful portrait of a “raven woman” who “knelt in the dirt / like some aged black / supplicant bird” (*Beware the Months of Fire* 37); John Newlove created “The Pride” (1968), a monument in verse which ended up insinuating that “the grand poem / of our land” (*BNW* 109) was no less than the aboriginal populations of Canada; and Rudy Wiebe re-wrote the story of Almighty Voice in his ironic “Where is the Voice Coming From” (1972). As well, Margaret Laurence’s first instalments of the Manawaka series, *The Stone Angel* (1964), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), and *A Bird in the House*
(1970), all capitalized on the differences and antagonisms between the Métis family of
Jules Tonnerre and the surrounding values of “white” society. Later, in Laurence’s The
Diviners (1974), the protagonist, Morag Gunn, would leave her establishment husband for
her Métis lover and forge a connection between her Scottish-Canadian ancestry and an
aboriginal heritage by giving birth to a daughter with Tonnerre, or Métis, blood. As well,
Susan Musgrave’s collection of Haida-inspired verse, The Impstone (1976), included a
poem appropriately called “Lure” because it appealed to the sensibility of the times with
its depiction of a benevolent and god-like trickster Raven who “carve[d] the / bone hollow
/to help blow sickness / out” and who “[beat] / his spirit-drum, [to tap] for his / spirit
helper” (98-99). From the mid-1960s on, then, many works displayed an aboriginal
presence which was being felt in a new and large way in Canadian literature. In essence,
what Brown referred to in the early 1970s as a “contemporary sense of existing in a
Heraclitian flux” (93) seemed to be appropriately addressed by a turning to things
aboriginal.

Revisionist studies of the development of Canadian literature would also turn to a
more serious consideration of both aboriginal influences and aboriginal presences. For
instance, it was this new-felt “aboriginal presence” in Canadian literature that would make
Leslie Monkman’s A Native Heritage: Images of the Indian in English-Canadian Literature
a timely and appropriate addition to Canadian criticism upon its publication in 1981. As
Monkman indicated in his preface to this text, the early 1970s also marked a time of
change in Canadian literary scholarship since this decade seemed more open to considering
how aboriginal influences had manifested themselves in English-Canadian literature:
This book developed out of a reaction against a prevalent notion in the 1960s that the Indian’s role in English-Canadian literature written by whites was relatively insignificant. In 1970, after initial encouragement from Gordon Roper, I began documenting a long tradition of white writers incorporating images of Indian culture into their work and argued for the importance of this pattern in a doctoral dissertation for York University in 1975.

Furthermore, while Monkman went on to discuss the image of the Indian in Canadian writing from the eighteenth century to the late-twentieth century, he began by situating his study against the changing attitudes of the 1970s:

Only during the last decade has the importance of the Indian in Canadian literature been acknowledged. Limited surveys in the 1960s concluded that the role of the Indian was essentially minor. As late as 1976, the revised edition of the Literary History of Canada spoke of ‘the historical absence of an Indian presence in Canadian literature.’ Yet in 1971, Dorothy Livesay called for a renewed examination of the roles of native peoples in English-Canadian literature and argued that ‘bit by bit and almost without being aware of it, the Canadian writer has had to find himself by finding the Indian.’ Chapters in critical studies by Margaret Atwood, Elizabeth Waterston, and John Moss reflected qualified acceptance of Livesay’s argument, and increased interest in the Indian and his culture among contemporary poets, playwrights, and novelists reinforced this critical response. Surveying new publications in the spring of 1974, George Woodcock commented: ‘Indians are, this season, an even hotter topic than oil.’
Monkman would quickly move to the recognition that “[d]evelopment of this interest [in native culture] by contemporary writers and critics continues an English-Canadian literary tradition,” and he would therefore note that there was a natural line of descent between such works as Robert Rogers’ Ponteach, or The Savages of America (1766) and Robertson Davies’ “Pontiac and the Green Man” (1977) (4). But despite the fact that Monkman recognized a very long-lived tradition in Canadian literature where “white writers have illuminated their own and their readers’ worlds through reference to native cultures” (3), he still had to pause and give some kind of weight to the idea that the 1970s stood out as a climax of sorts in the narrative he was tracing.

This being the case, however, it is not my intention here to augment the cataloguing of “Indian[s] . . . behind . . . trees” (R. Brown) in Canadian literature of the late 1960s and 1970s. Together, both Monkman’s A Native Heritage and Terry Goldie’s Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand Literatures (1989) have accounted for an almost exhaustive list of Canadian literature which includes Native characters and a transparent aboriginal “presence” from the beginnings of Canada’s literary history until the mid-to-late 1980s. Rather, and if we can start from the recognition that an aboriginal influence was felt on an unprecedented level in Canadian literature from the late 1960s onward, it is more my intention to consider how aboriginal literatures and social and political actions may have shared a relation with both mythological and rhetorical innovation in certain Canadian works which were published on the heels, or in the midst, of the NCR and CNLR. As well, it is not my
intention to blame this trend on Cohen or to lament the superficiality and simplicity of those works which could understandably be attacked for a suspect sensibility. Instead, I hope to trace this phenomenon more clearly, albeit with a healthy dose of speculation, to the influence that was exerted by the CNLR and by the larger NCR.

To begin, though, it is important to recognize that there are a number of potential problems wrapped up in a study such as this one. First, and as Thomas King points out in his introduction to *The Native in Literature* (1987), a number of studies thus far have simply become an “examination of how the presence of the Native has influenced white literature” (13), and as King further notes, this tradition is, in many ways, a limited one. King asserts that “[s]uch an approach obscures the influence that white culture has had on Native oral and written literature and the influence that Native oral literature has had on contemporary Native writers” (13). King’s main complaint is that “the majority of critical studies which have considered the influence of the Indian on white writing have considered only the physical and, in some instances, the spiritual presence of Native literature” (13). But it is hoped that this chapter will mark a departure from this sort of tradition by considering the effect which both the CNLR and the larger NCR have had on the formation of a body of Canadian literature and by considering how these two movements have informed Canada’s search for a sacred historical mythology. To do so, I hope, will underscore the idea that Native traditions, and not symbolic Indians, have been a guiding force within the field of Canadian literature.

Second, this study must be governed by a very important caveat. That is, proving literary influence is an almost impossible task, and it is even more difficult to do so when
one does not have a considerable amount of hindsight. But it is important to note that this chapter is not intent on tracing direct influences—in other words, it does not attempt to show how individual authors have influenced specific writers. Rather, I want to outline how ways of thinking have been exchanged in broad ways. And what will become apparent, I hope, is that some of the questions and new directions which certain non-Native Canadian texts began to pose seem to have been borne out of a space which was shaped by values which began appearing in the public domain when the seventh generation began to fulfill, in both writing and political actions, the prophecy of cultural re-birth.

It should also be noted here that this chapter does not attempt to account for a large body of texts. Rather, by introducing my central argument with an examination of George Ryga’s The Ecstasy of Rita Joe (1969), by discussing Robert Kroetsch’s Badlands (1975) in detail, and by then measuring George Bowering’s Burning Water (1980) and Leonard Cohen’s Beautiful Losers (1966) against a template of sorts which has grown out of an analysis of Kroetsch’s text, this chapter will draw some connections between the advent of the NCR and CNLR, the emergence of new mythological patterns in Canadian literature and the appearance of a new style of writing which has, until now, simply been called postmodern. First, I wish to suggest that the CNLR and the NCR have led authors to redefine the sacred and profane—two grand informants in all traditional mythologies—and that the result is the emergence of a well-known mythological figure in Canadian mythology—the trickster. And, second, by considering how Canadian authors have possibly borrowed the rhetorical techniques and literary styles of Native writers and spokespeople, I wish to suggest that it may be very telling if, in the near future and with
more hindsight, critics of Canadian literature choose to re-visit the fact that something "new," something "the world was starting to call 'postmodernism'" (Hutcheon, Canadian Postmodern 1), began to surface in Canadian writing around the same time that a small corpus of written, indigenous literature was burgeoning into and precipitating what is now known as the Contemporary Native Literary Renaissance.

The conclusions which this chapter attempts to draw, then, are predicated on the conviction that this moment in Canadian literary history did, indeed, witness the beginning of new "habits of metaphorical thought" (Frye, "Conclusion to LHC," in BG 232), or the beginning of a new phase of mythological maturity. And it is interesting to note here that Northrop Frye was also guided by a comparable belief. Speaking of Newlove's "The Pride" in 1977, for example, Frye maintained that "the Indians symbolize[d] a primitive mythological imagination which [was] being reborn in us" ("Haunted by Lack of Ghosts," in Gorjup 131). For Frye, Newlove's poem seemed to be an indication that "the white Canadians, in their imaginations, [were] no longer immigrants but [that they were] becoming indigenous, recreating the kind of attitudes appropriate to people who really belong here" (131). What Frye seemed to be astutely suggesting is that a new kind of mythology was being born out of a revisioning of history and an embracing of aboriginal values and beliefs. In "The Pride," after all, Newlove seemed to be suggesting that it was, indeed, possible to create new stories by turning to aboriginal literatures and cosmologies.

For example, in this poem, Newlove's narrator begins by drawing attention to those indigenous histories and peoples which have been threatened and nearly destroyed--to the "... pawnees / in their earth-lodge villages" (BNW 105), to the Plains Indians
eventually gotten by “smallpox” (105), and to the Cree who fought back with “... good guns / creating terror in athabaska” (105). But the tenor of the poem soon changes. “This western country crammed / with the ghosts of indians” (106) is witness to the recognition that the “... Spirit / of the Wind ethlinga” (106), “that black joker, broken- / jawed raven” (106), “thunderbird hilunga” (106), and “kwunusela” (107) are still alive and strong:

they are all ready
to be found, the legends
and the people, or
all their ghosts and memories,
whatever is strong enough
to be remembered. (107)

And what Newlove’s narrator then suggests is that these histories, these stories, will provide fertile material for the stories of those who do not share this same history but who look on with “desire”:

Those are all stories;
the pride, the grand poem
of our land, of the earth itself,
will come, welcome, and
sought for, and found,
in a line of running verse,
sweating, our pride;
we are no longer lonely
but have roots (109)

Newlove’s poem ends with a revisioning of history that grows out of this embracing of aboriginal mythologies:

. . . the indians
aren’t composed of
the romantic stories
about them, or of the stories
they tell only, but
still ride the soil
in us, dry bones a part
of the dust in our eyes,
needed and troubling
in the glare, in
our breath, in our
ears, in our mouths,
in our bodies entire, in our minds, until at
last we become them

in our desires, our desires,
mirages, mirrors, that are theirs, hard-
riding desires, and they
become our true forebears, moulded
by the same wind or rain (111)

Here, Newlove reverses the traditional power imbalance that had grown to dominate
Canada. As Newlove's narrator maintains, "... in this land we / are their people, come /
back to life" (111).

Interestingly, it is at this point that the myth of the empty land surfaces again. The
"roots" which Newlove's narrator recognizes to be the true roots of this land--the
aboriginal histories, values, cultures and beliefs which are "... all ready / to be found"--
are discovered by the narrator with a sense of surprise. And this sense of surprise is
inevitably related to the assumption that aboriginal histories, or "roots," were waiting to
be discovered until this point. Here, Newlove attempts to revise and dispel the myth of
the empty land by forcefully drawing attention to a Native presence, but, despite the
recognition that Newlove attempts to revise the legacies of the past, it is significant that he
engages with this myth, nonetheless. In essence, it could be said that the time period
during which Newlove was writing was commensurate with a heightened consciousness
about this myth of the empty land and that one of the results of this new awareness was
the desire to fashion new myths out of old ones. While the myth of the empty land had
attended late nineteenth-century nationalism in the sense that it had accompanied a desire
to forget past history, in "The Pride" it appears again by accompanying a desire to re-write
the past.

Thus, if we understand Newlove's poem to be representative of a larger, collective
and national attempt to embrace perspectives which have grown "organically" with this world and to therefore contest such myths as the myth of the empty land, Newlove's "The Pride" seems to indicate that James Reaney's earlier prediction was, in fact, quite valid. As the first chapter has noted, Reaney had provocatively suggested in the early 1960s that Canadian writers who were intent on providing new and verifiable national mythologies would inevitably be led to embrace indigenous "spirit[s] of creation" (112) and the ravens of the Western world, as it were. However, "The Pride" is really more of a comment on the possibility of creating new myths than it is an actual attempt to create a new story, and it simply suggests there would be many attempts to embrace the true "pride" of this land in the near future. But would this "pride" and these "spirits" (Reaney) be easily embraced? And would Canadian literature become testimony to the idea that Canadian writers were beginning to "un-name" imported and colonial "experience[s]" (Kroetsch, "Unhiding the Hidden," in LTW 58) by turning to contemporary, aboriginal influences?

It is impossible to begin answering these questions without drawing immediate attention to George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. The second of Ryga's plays, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* was a response to the production demands of Canadian theatre and to funding agencies in 1967, and it was also a response to the political and social fervor of its day. Interested in promoting works which appealed to nationalism during Canada's centenary, the Canadian government offered subsidies to any theatre which would produce new plays, and Malcolm Black, then the artistic director of the Vancouver Playhouse in British Columbia, decided to respond to this demand and promise of money. As Christopher Innes explains in *Politics and the Playwright: George Ryga*, Black was
“intending to produce a whole season of Canadian works at the Vancouver Playhouse . . .
when he came across a short paragraph in a 1966 Vancouver newspaper reporting the
murder of an Indian girl, whose body had been found in a rooming house in the slum area
of the city” (29). This gave Black an idea, and he approached the Ukrainian-Canadian
writer George Ryga who, at this time, was best known for the short stories which he had
written for CBC radio during the 1960s, and Black suggested that Ryga consider writing a
play based on the news clip (Innes 30). The result was The Ecstasy of Rita Joe which was
first performed at the Playhouse Theatre in Vancouver, British Columbia on November
23, 1967 and which was then later re-staged at the official opening of the National Arts
Centre in Ottawa in 1969.

While The Ecstasy of Rita Joe is now considered to be romantic, reductive and
reliant on too many stereotypes to accurately depict any First Nations community, at the
time that it first appeared to the public, it was heralded as a forceful depiction of what
needed to be seen in 1967--the long-term effects of the colonization and suppression of
aboriginal peoples. And the inclusion of Chief Dan George in the original cast added a
vitality and authority to the play which means that it is still recognized today by many
aboriginal peoples and artists as an influential vehicle in contemporary, Native literary
history. Lee Maracle, for one, claims that The Ecstasy of Rita Joe is a “classic” and that
“it remains hauntingly true and tremendously healing for all of us, Canadian and first-
nations people alike” (“A Question of Voice” D9). Today, over thirty years after the first
production and in a world of theatre which now includes the dramatic works of Native
playwrights such as Tomson Highway, Daniel David Moses, Monique Mojica and Drew
Hayden Taylor, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* is but a cardboard representation of a history which has since been explored in much more sophisticated ways. But during its moment in Canadian history, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* was shocking and affective.

In this play, Ryga presented a portrait of West Coast Indians caught in the foreign and unwelcoming city of Vancouver, and he painted a memorable image of desperation and despair. Originally from the Cariboo country of British Columbia, Rita Joe, the play’s main character, has come to the city only to spend most of her time on the streets and in court. When the play opens, Rita Joe is being charged with vagrancy and prostitution, and she is defending herself in front of a Magistrate for the seventh time in one year. Like her childhood lover, Jamie Paul, Rita Joe feels lost in a world that does not understand her, and when she is sentenced to thirty days in prison, the Magistrate lets loose a prophecy full of hate for Rita Joe and her culture: “You’ll be back . . . always be back . . . growing older, tougher . . . filthier . . . looking more like stone and prison bars . . . the lines in your face will tell everyone who sees you about prison windows and prison food” (113). But Rita Joe will not return, although the Magistrate’s sentiments will certainly surface again. At the end of the play, Rita Joe is raped and killed, and her lover, Jamie Paul, is pushed in front of a train.

As one would expect, this play was unsettling, and while *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* was lauded in reviews for its political importance, the play’s content was understandably never lauded for generating national pride. And it certainly did not provide an evening of feel-good entertainment. Those people who saw the play during its first performance in Vancouver stepped out of the insular world of theatre onto Vancouver’s downtown strip
which is well-known for the homeless, the dislocated, the dispossessed, and they were confronted by what this play had shown them. As well, and as Joy Coghill, Malcom Black’s successor, explains, the tension within the theatre was dense and memorable:

It wasn’t the sort of dramatic event that you applauded afterwards. It was such a moving experience that people didn’t want to clap. They simply were stunned in some very basic way. The performance ended with all the actors appearing from nowhere, coming out to stand looking at the audience. And as they walked away the audience always just sat there. The cast would be out of the theatre and up at the Alcazar drinking beer together, and the audience was still sitting there. Then gradually one person would move, and another, and the theatre slowly emptied.²

In essence, The Ecstasy of Rita Joe indicated that it was time for this nation’s citizens to re-think their whole past. And for artists, it also meant that it was time to re-think their literary past and to re-consider the relationship between myth and history. As Innes points out, in 1967, “[w]ith the upsurge of cultural consciousness across Canada and the new demands on Canadian artists, it was time for myth-making” (34). But what myths could be made out of the recognition that Canadian history shared a relation with holocaust? More specifically, what myths could be made out of a recognition of holocaust when this recognition accompanied this nation’s most significant rite of passage? Indeed, this is a tricky question to answer, but The Ecstasy of Rita Joe serves to suggest that the myths which would be created out of the nexus between a celebration of this nation’s centenary and the revisiting of the history which had been exposed during the CNLR and the NCR would be unfamiliar, at the very least. In any event, they would be untraditional.
On the one hand, Canada’s centenary was an important ritual that encouraged people to think about the past and question their colonial legacies and dependencies. This was a time ripe for mythologizing. Canada had had her first real birthday. The nation was complete. All provinces had joined Confederation. And the nation could look forward to a new beginning of sorts. Or so it seemed. On the other hand, at the same time when Canada’s centenary seemed to provide a new slate for the basis of a new beginning, the NCR and the CNLR made people remember the past. Most importantly, in addition to the recognition that both of these movements made people remember a glorious and fruitful past, these movements also made people remember a devastating one. As First Nations writing and political actions recorded, and as *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* would also underscore, the last four-hundred years of aboriginal history were, amongst other things, a record of holocaust, and this history made Canadian citizens aware that their lands were not spot free and that, in fact, something very horrible had happened on pre-Canadian soil. Both public declarations and contemporary Native writing also made citizens aware that something continued to be happening. Many sources re-iterated the fact that suffering was, and continues to be, widespread and rampant. Residential schools had left their ugly marks on thousands of Indian children; languages were in danger of being entirely wiped out; the land had been taken and destroyed, and, thus, many cultures which had previously subsisted on rural living had been seriously threatened; suicide rates were, and still are, far higher for aboriginal populations than for non-aboriginal ones, and, unfortunately, the list goes on. If, before this point, Canadians had conceived of their lands as being without an “internal crisis” (E.K. Brown 20), the literature which grew out of the CNLR and the
social actions which grew out of the NCR made people rethink their naive suppositions.

And it is of utmost significance that the CNLR and the NCR sparked a significant act of remembrance, for if we consider here what Ernest Renan has to say about the formation of nations and the fundamental principle behind nation building, it would seem that the end result of this remembrance could only be untraditional and new results in those creative endeavors which would somehow try to grapple with any part of Canadian history after the advent of the CNLR and NCR. After all, Renan convincingly argues in "Qu’est-ce qu’une nation" ("What is a Nation?") that the formation of a nation is primarily dependent on the act of forgetting: “Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error,” Renan asserts, “is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation” (11). As Renan continues, “the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things” (11). Furthermore, Renan maintains that “a nation is above all a dynasty, representing an earlier conquest, one which was first of all accepted, and then forgotten by the mass of people” (12). Of course, Renan is speaking specifically of those Western European nations which had been created since the fall of the Roman Empire, or the disintegration of Charlemagne’s empire, but his assertions can still be applied, I think, to an understanding of Canada and those other nations which exist in the Americas today.

As the first chapter has shown, Lampman, MacMechan, Brown and Frye had all argued that some kind of social revolution was necessary for the creation of traditional national mythologies, and as the first chapter has also suggested, what these critics were actually anticipating was a revolution that would allow this nation to collectively forget
the past and begin again as a new entity. But as the second chapter has also revealed, while such ideas as these had governed and were continuing to govern the story which searches for Canada's sacred historical mythology, other ideas—as witnessed in the literature and the political actions of the CNLR and the NCR—were governing a different segment of the population. During the 1960s and 1970s, aboriginal writers and spokespersons were intent on providing alternative histories and on educating the uneducated because the Canadian community, in Benedict Anderson's phrase, had imagined a certain "image of... communion" (6) which could not sanely include a historical picture of its conquest. For aboriginal nations, Canada had already forgotten, and it would not be allowed to forget again.

If Canada's centenary ever had the chance to become something akin to that ritual which provides the basis for an originary moment, this pan-Indian revolution of the 1960s and 1970s quashed that possibility. And what this means in a study of mythology is that the CNLR and the NCR reminded people who chose to engage with pan-Canadian nationalism that Canada's history, and its own actions, denied Canada the possibility of that originary moment which is capable of consuming the past "as by fire" (Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane 78) and providing the basis for a traditional body of mythology. Thus, works such as The Ecstasy of Rita Joe, which not only included a picture of this past but which were also dependent on this past to provide their story, bear witness to the failure of Canada's "Day of Atonement." This ritual or rite of passage could not precipitate a traditional impulse to forget and to create a new calendar of national pride because the NCR and the CNLR urged people to remember and recognize that this nation
was a long way off from any kind of atonement. Ironically enough, then, even though *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* has been praised for "[marking] the birth of modern Canadian drama" (Innes 46) and for introducing something freshly Canadian into the world of this nation's theatre, the foundations of this play--the local matter which Brian Parker said had finally provided a mythic base for Canadian drama--grow out of revolutionary ideals which put nationalism in check. Indeed, we may praise Ryga, as Parker has, for combining "local subject matter with various experiments in spatial form" (187) and for thus putting an end to the question "is there a Canadian drama?" (Parker). But we must question whether Ryga or a larger force actually is responsible for the ingenuity behind this precocious work lauded for its formal characteristics which mirror the fragmented reality of a nation being challenged by a very notable social revolution. And we must also consider the idea that these literary characteristics reveal the untraditional nature of this mythological moment.

After significant discussion, this chapter will return at greater length to this intersection between literary innovation and social revolution. However, at this point, it is also interesting to note that more than prompting people to remember a past that had been "forgotten" for the sake of imperialism and nationalism, both the NCR and the CNLR boasted what the Canadian nation seemed to lack and what Renan claims is the second major ingredient necessary for the successful cohesion of nations:

The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a long past of endeavors, sacrifice, and devotion. Of all cults, that of the ancestors is the most legitimate, for the ancestors have made us what we are. A heroic past, great men, glory (by which I understand genuine glory), this is the social capital upon which one bases a
national idea. To have common glories in the past and to have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, to wish to perform still more—these are the essential conditions for being a people. (19)

As the second chapter has observed, both the political actions which grew out of the NCR and the literature which grew out of the CNLR carried an authoritative weight because they drew attention to proud ancestral pasts like those which Renan describes. Aboriginal spokespeople and writers underscored the recognition that ancient heroes were still living because the living could still remember them and, therefore, could still speak of them. These same people could also still remember ancient histories which were full of “common glories” and which led to a contemporary “common will” reflected in the pan-Indianism of the day. As well, there was certainly a felt desire to perform still more great deeds. Most notably, of course, this generation of aboriginal writers and spokespeople was the seventh generation, and they were fulfilling a very powerful teleology.

The CNLR and the NCR provided a striking contrast between the history of the Canadian nation and the histories of aboriginal nations. The writing and political actions which grew out of these two movements indicated that aboriginal nations possessed sacred “navels” to which they could trace their histories and contemporary writings, and by underscoring this recognition—albeit not in these terms—it became apparent that the Canadian nation did not possess a comparable metaphysical foundation which could legitimize its current history. In turn, what this contrast created, then, was a significant tension, and it is out of this tension that new Canadian myths would be borne.

For example, published in 1975 in the midst of the NCR and the CNLR, Robert
Kroetsch’s *Badlands* would record the tensions which grew out of this period in Canadian history, and it would become a new myth which would register the reality of a changing mythological climate in Canada. And I have chosen to discuss this text in detail and to use it as a road map of sorts in a discussion of aboriginal influence in post-centenary Canadian mythology for several reasons. In addition to the significance of the novel’s historical position in a study such as this one, Kroetsch’s literary career and public comments underscore the recognition that aboriginal influences have incessantly played a key role in his creative works. The fifth of Kroetsch’s novels, *Badlands* follows on the heels of *Gone Indian* (1973), a work which attempted to make use of the Indian trickster figure, and it precedes the publication of Kroetsch’s second book of poetry, *The Stone Hammer Poems* (1975), a collection which includes a section entitled “Old Man Stories.” This portion of Kroetsch’s work was, of course, influenced by Kroetsch’s exposure to traditional Blackfoot literature, and it is this influence which is also apparent in *Badlands*. But it is not only this influence which is felt in Kroetsch’s work. *Badlands* is a self-conscious attempt to provide a contemporary form of myth and, thus, it carries with it impulses that are contemporary with the time period during which *Badlands* was published.

In an attempt to expose what is contemporary in this text, then, this discussion of *Badlands* will consider why *Badlands* draws attention to itself as myth and why the sacred and the profane become defined in clear ways in Kroetsch’s text. It will also consider how different cultural stereotypes function in *Badlands* and how they become carefully allied with either the sacred or the profane. This discussion will also pay attention to how landscape serves a symbolic function in Kroetsch’s myth and how an exploration of
absence comments on the tension which Kroetsch creates between aboriginal and non-aboriginal values or cosmologies. But before exploring these intricacies, it is useful to consider how this text is shaped and how *Badlands* is composed of several narratives which work together and comment on one another.

*Badlands* is a story which is told in retrospect by Anna Dawe, a 45-year-old woman who is unmarried and living in a “winterized summer place on the shore of Georgian Bay” (3). Anna is isolated and entirely alone in Southern Ontario. Both Anna’s mother, Elisabeth, and father, William, have died, and Anna is without siblings. Although it takes nearly the entire novel to piece together a family history from the scattered pieces of information which Anna offers in her “story,” we find out the following. In 1916, William Dawe married Elisabeth Kilbourne and, then, during that same year, he left for the Alberta badlands. Dawe would be possessed by wanderlust his whole life and would spend all his time engaged in fieldwork away from his family, returning only once each autumn, and for only one evening, to his wife’s bed. In October 1926, however, Dawe would stay a third night with his wife in Ontario, and the result of this “lengthy” visit would be Elisabeth’s pregnancy and their daughter, Anna. Until Dawe returned home to visit his dying wife in October 1942, when Anna was fifteen years old, Anna and Elisabeth would know their father and husband, respectively, only through the field notes which he kept sending home to them. After the death of Anna’s mother, Dawe would not go into the field again, but for the next twenty years, and although he would remain in Ontario, he would continually hire himself out to museums and keep away from home. Then, in 1962, Dawe would plan his own death and would row out into the waters of Georgian Bay in an
old, red canoe.

Anna begins writing the story we are reading in 1972, and **Badlands** is ostensibly Anna’s attempt to recreate the story of William Dawe and his crew who, in 1916, scoured the badlands of Alberta in search of dinosaur bones. Anna relies upon Dawe’s old field notes, as well as her imagination, to weave the narrative, and we find out that Dawe’s expedition was to be a failure from the start. Indeed, Dawe and his men end up recovering almost the entire skeleton of the remains which will come to be known as Daweosaurus, but the trip is, in many ways, a disaster. Dawe is accompanied by Web, an oversexed and under-skilled deckhand who, at the end of the whole ordeal, joins the army, goes overseas and is never heard from again. He is also joined by Grizzly, a Chinese cook who speaks only when not spoken to, and Claude McBride, a skilled hand who cannot stand the leader and who ends up jumping ship. McBride is replaced by Tune, a young, fat kid who has two weeks’ experience blasting with dynamite and who blows himself up with his first explosion. A photographer, Michael Sinnott, appears from time to time taking shots of Dawe’s expedition, and it really comes as no surprise to find out later that this man has only one good eye. Anna Dawe is most interested, though, in the Blackfoot woman who follows Dawe’s crew in hopes of finding her husband who has gone off to the World War on an “iron ship” (148). This, of course, is Anna’s namesake, a woman who kept Dawe company for two weeks of the season and a woman who kept the rest of the men happy, too, as the tales go.

Although this novel is undeniably original in many ways, it forms a familiar pattern. This is because the story of **Badlands** has all the traditional makings of a folktale or myth:
this story exposes some kind of lack; it restores a loss; it involves a form of exile; it includes a rescue or transformation; it offers a reward; and it delivers a prophecy. First, Dawe and his wife lack an heir or progeny until 1916 when Dawe returns home and breaks a cycle which he has repeated throughout his life. He stays this time for three nights, and this aberration, like aberrations in many classic folktales, produces a result--Anna Dawe. Loss of a sort is restored, and Dawe imposes a type of self-exile upon himself, leaving immediately for the Alberta badlands. Here, Dawe enters into a type of Orphic quest, and he battles the harshness of the badlands with as much determination as any hero should have, although McBride--the one who disappears from the narrative--is "the only one with the ability to become a hero" (BL 45). Dawe's inept crew members--each lacking something fundamental to the success of the mission--give this folktale an almost classic, comic structure, and, indeed, Dawe is rewarded in part (and only in part because his Daweosaurus will forever lack a tail) by unearthing a nearly complete dinosaur skeleton. The story's prophesy is not clearly articulated, but it is to be found at the end of the novel in an ambiguous image. Anna Dawe has found her namesake, Anna Yellowbird, and the two have traveled not down river, as the Dawe expedition had in 1916, but upriver to the source of the Red Deer. Drunk out of their minds on gin and beer, the two women look up to the sky to see a grizzly bear dangling in a net from beneath a helicopter. The pilot is unaware that the tranquilizer has worn off and that the bear has awakened too soon: "The grizzly had stirred itself awake . . . had kicked itself loose, was foaming at the mouth, was shitting" (268). In a ritualistic manner, Anna throws her father's field notes away, and she ends her story by describing herself and her companion walking out of the mountains
Anna and I walked out of there together. We walked through the night, stumbling our way by the light of the stars; we looked at those billions of years of light, and Anna looked at the stars and then at me, and she did not mention dinosaurs or men or their discipline or their courage or their goddamned honour or their goddamned fucking fame or their goddamned fucking death-fucking death.

‘Like pissing in the ocean,’ she said; that Anna, who had never seen the ocean.

We sang together, that awful song about rolling over in the clover, because that was the only song we both remembered and could sing long enough to see us through. We walked out of there hand in hand, arm in arm, holding each other.

We walked all the way out. And we did not once look back, not once, ever. (270)

The symbolic weight of this image and of Kroetsch’s novel is defined by the last line and by the recognition that Anna and Anna refuse to look behind. But before this chapter explores the intricacies of this text and prophecy, it is important to re-emphasize the fact that Badlands draws attention to itself as myth and to the very process of storytelling itself.

In addition to relying upon a folkloric structure, this novel also underscores the process of narration in three other ways. First, the initial epigraph to Kroetsch’s novel is taken from a well-known Nez Percé story entitled “Coyote and the Shadow People”:

But suddenly a joyous impulsion seized him: the joy of having his wife again overwhelmed him. He jumped to his feet and rushed over to embrace her.
His wife cried out, ‘Stop! Stop! Coyote! Do not touch me. Stop!’ Her warning had no effect. Coyote rushed over to his wife and just as he touched her body she vanished. She disappeared—returned to the shadowland.

This story is recorded in a volume called Nez Percé Texts, a collection of tales which were told by one narrator, Way’latpu, to editor and translator Archie Phinney. In this story, Coyote is inconsolable since he greatly misses his dead wife, but he is permitted by the ghost of the “Shadow People” to see his loved one and to speak with her one more time. Coyote descends to the underworld, catches a glimpse of his wife and, as the above passage illustrates, ignores the advice which has been given him and reaches out to touch her. His wife disappears forever, and Coyote loses his chance to commune with his wife one more time. Indeed, this is a well-known legend, and by referring to a story which forms the integral core of an indigenous body of mythology, Kroetsch makes his readers aware of the importance of mythology even before they begin reading Badlands. More specifically, Kroetsch underscores the very process of mythmaking or storytelling by indicating that this story has influenced the one he is about to recount in the narrative of Badlands.

Second, this novel is reliant on stereotypes which are so much larger than life that they underscore a fictive process. When Anna begins writing her story, for example, she relies upon stereotypical conceptions which have grown out of an understanding of Canadian history and which have provided caricature-like identities for different Canadian regions. Kroetsch sets his novel in the “wild west” of Canada, after all, and Badlands endorses many stereotypes which have grown out of the contrast of the barbarous West to
the civilized East. Dawe, for instance, must unearth skeletons from the “wind-burned, wind-scoured prairies of Alberta” (25) to “grace the museums of the civilized world” (37), or Ontario. The body of Anna Yellowbird, which Dawe possesses with as much respect as he explores the badlands themselves, also provides a counterpoint “to the memory of the civilized east, his home and his wife” (195), and the anarchic behavior of an immoral crew in the middle of the bush contrasts sharply with an image of Dawe who, when home, studies expedition reports “spread out on his desk” (223). Once again, Canadian readers are presented with the familiar notion that the height of this country’s civilization is to be found in the Upper Canadian region and that anything West of this old bastion of power is necessarily less cultured.

Furthermore, when Anna Dawe ends up meeting her namesake, Anna Yellowbird, stereotypes become even more distinct. Anna Dawe, “the white woman in white, too well-dressed for either the weather or the place” (259), contrasts sharply with the “pitiful young squaw” (11) who is dressed in a “dirty blue sweater and . . . canvas shoes” (256). While Anna Dawe, epitome of Upper Canadian purity, is a middle-aged spinster and virgin, Yellowbird “doesn’t [even] know what virgin means” (263), and, here, Kroetsch underscores a stereotype which has been consistently and understandably attacked by such writers as Janice Acoose, Beatrice Culleton, Maria Campbell, Tomson Highway and many more. In effect, Yellowbird is the wild woman of the woods, a one-dimensional figure who bears the weight of what Goldie would call another culture’s “desire” and who is not, therefore, a rounded character but a symbol. After all, Anna Yellowbird is mistaken by Web for the “stump of a balsam poplar, an animal come to drink” (23). Throughout
Kroetsch's text, she is presented as a kind of animal and as one who is naturally destined to serve the sexual whims of any and every male whom she encounters. Indeed, the fact that Yellowbird is intended to be parodic does not save Kroetsch from a charge of sexism and misogyny, but she is a central part of Kroetsch's story, and the mythmaking process of Badlands plays with the figure of Anna just as much as Kroetsch plays with fire. And it is this playfulness which helps to make us acutely aware that we are reading a story or a myth in the making.

Third, as Robert Lecker shows in his ontological survey of Badlands, the teller of this tale, Anna Dawe, is a notorious liar. Anna consistently reminds her readers that she has no authority to which she can turn, and the novel of Badlands becomes a contemporary "western yarn" (45), as Anna puts it, a reflection that "[t]here are no truths, only correspondences" (45). We are consistently made aware, then, that like Web, who is "a damned big talker" (155), the narrator of Badlands is a tenuous authority, and the novel, therefore, is obviously an embellished narrative. But just what sense can be made out of the fact that Kroetsch seems to be intent on underscoring a mythmaking process in Badlands? What myth is he attempting to create? What myth is he attempting to destroy?

First, it is notable that Badlands creates a story out of the tension between history and myth. Against this backdrop of Western buffoons, civilized Ontarians and wild Injuns, Kroetsch interrogates the notion of history as factual truth, and he ultimately shows how history itself is part of a mythmaking process. For example, the novel begins with a letter written by Anna Dawe, and she makes the following claim about Canada, about the nation to which she belongs: "we are a people raised not on love letters or lyric poems or even
cries of rebellion or ecstasy or pain or regret,” Anna writes, “but rather old hoards of field
notes” (2). This claim echoes a similar claim made by Dennis Lee in Civil Elegies who
also drew attention to the idea that Canada and its citizens are defined by a lack of self-
awareness:

Many were born in Canada, and living unlived lives they died
of course but died truncated, stunted, never at
home in native space and not yet
citizens of a human body of kind. And it is Canada
that specialized in this deprivation. (1972, 33)

Sure, Canadians have their history, Lee maintains, but these “field notes” (BL 2), as it
were, are paltry, embarrassing and unable to provide any sense of collective pride and
being. The rebellion of 1837, for instance, is, at best, material for a Saturday morning
cartoon:

... I saw

regeneration twirl its blood and the rebels riding
riderless down Yonge street, plain men much
goaded by privilege--our other origin, and cried
‘Mackenzie knows a word, Mackenzie
knows a meaning!’ but it was not true. Eight hundred-odd steely Canadians
turned tail at the cabbage patch when a couple of bullets fizzed
and the loyalists, scared skinny by the sound of their own gunfire,
gawked and bolted south to the fort like rabbits,
the rebels for their most part bolting north to the pub: the first spontaneous mutual retreat in the history of warfare.

Canadians, in flight. (1972, 33-34)

Confined and confused by such a nation which lacks self-awareness, Anna Dawe can only buy her “gin by the case” and, in a drunken stupor, “[imagine] to [herself] a past, an ancestor, a legend, a vision, a fate” (3). Anna must create a myth out of incomplete accounts and an ultimately disappointing sense of national history.

And together, Anna’s personal narrative and the story which she tells about her father’s expedition in 1916 are stories which record her sense of the futility of understanding history. After all, Anna comes to the conclusion that she is “without a history” (138), and her “fiction,” as it were, embodies this same kind of realization. These adventurous men, as we find out, cannot even understand what they are looking for. They are in search of dinosaur bones, but the ancient past to which these reptiles belong cannot be comprehended. For example, when Anna has us look through the eyes of Web, the absurdity of the men’s adventure is underscored: “Seventy million years later. Whatever that meant. Seventy million, when he couldn’t grasp the notion of seventy” (166). As Anna Dawe insinuates, part of the problem here is that the history for which Dawe and his men are searching is actually pre-history which has little or no relevance to the present. Ironically, in the middle of history making, in the middle of the Great War raging in Europe, Dawe searches for a past that can never be known. “[I]n his summer of 1916, in the Badlands of the Red Deer River,” Anna imagines, “discovering the Mesozoic era, with all of Europe filling its earth with the bones of its own young—[Dawe] removed himself
But it is not as if history is eluding Dawe and his men. It is not as if they have to be removed from time to find remnants of an understandable and tangible history. They just have not been trained to recognize the history of the world they are exploring. Web's first discovery, after all, is not a dinosaur bone but a Blackfoot woman, Anna Yellowbird, who crawls out of a “mound of fresh, newly opened earth” (5) on the edge of “an Indian or Métis burial ground” (6). She knows of certain bones in the area, of “the place of the dead” (8), but Dawe and his men have no interest in what she knows. Anna Yellowbird is dismissed by Dawe when she will not offer him any information about the bones he is interested in, and he tells her, flat out, that they “have no place for women” (9). She is simply taken to be a “pitiful young squaw” (11). Dawe and his men cannot see beyond the limits of the cultural stereotypes to which they are heir. They do not recognize Anna as a person who is connected to an entire history which they are literally digging up and a history which would define the area with much more relevance than those reptiles of an ancient and unreachable past. It is no wonder that Dawe became “a man without a history” (138), then, in “that summer of his glory” (138). In fact, one could say that Dawe could never know history because he had never been properly trained to read it. Here, Dawe and his men are like Coyote when Coyote enters the shadowland. Dawe and his entourage are witless and unable to understand the world they have entered because this world is governed by forms of knowledge different than those forms which Dawe and his men possess. And this lack of knowledge is ultimately linked to the fact that Dawe and his crew cannot read the land around them.
For example, Anna imagines how Dawe and his men reacted to the surrounding landscape, and she underscores the limitations of their own knowledge or awareness:

The stiff blade of light came over the rimrock; the light grew from purple to a blue veil, from blue to red to orange; the tall and starkly outlined buttes emerged from the darkness. The buttes came as pyramids against the light; they came as mounds, as beehives, as cones. They had those forms of the past and yet they were not any landscape that Dawe had known, that Web had imagined. (21-22)

In a sense, here, again, is something that smacks of MacEwan’s “Dark Pines.” Unable to recognize that the badlands are full of history, Dawe and his men search “down there” (MacEwan), for they know there is something in this land that demands to be “told” (MacEwan). But like MacEwan’s “explorer,” these men are “sinking” in a world that they deem is “elementary” (MacEwan). The land does not reveal to them what the “dark pines” of their minds are intent on finding, because they are unable to understand that this land has never been empty and that there are layers of human history which lie on top of dinosaur bones.

But while these men cannot understand the land, there is one person in the novel who can, and this is Anna Yellowbird. Anna Dawe tells us, for instance, that her father recorded the following description of Anna Yellowbird’s uncanny powers in his journal: “Didn’t find, in all those tons of debris, one fragment of fossil that was worth collecting, after a mere slip of an Indian girl, walking ignorantly along, reaching down with her eyes shut, picked up a piece of the dental battery of a hadrosaur” (34). Here, Anna’s proclivity
for discovering the bones which Dawe and his men cannot unearth until a later point (and only in an incomplete form), contrasts sharply with the inept crew, and, inevitably, the reader discovers that Anna is, in fact, guided by the words and power of a shaman, a power which knows the land and which is turning Dawe’s hunt for bones into Anna’s own search for the land of the dead:

[D]espite the Anglican if not Christian missionaries who taught her husband submission and love, she recalled a shaman whose whereabouts she did not know but whose sacred and recollected words she knew she must heed. And she found, was found by, three strange white men and a chinaman. And she knew, had known, watching the four of them leave Tail Creek in their hurry to be away from her necessary if imitation grave, it was the hunchbacked man, not the others, who could find the way to the place of the dead. Even as she vaguely knew, vaguely and yet vividly remembered, what the shaman had said: do not eat, lie in your grave, wait for the guide.

And she had followed her guide so bravely she had preceded him to his own goal. (148)

Admittedly, Kroetsch is underscor[ing certain cultural stereotypes which have grown to be attacked within the criticism of Canadian literature. Once again, we have the symbolic Indian who is closer to nature and more adept in the wild, and Anna is undeniably “the guide, helper, or shaman” (Fee, “Romantic Nationalism” 29) whom Margery Fee gives careful consideration to in her discussion of the use of Native peoples as symbols. Even the tricksterlike Dawe who bears “some talisman of splendid good fortune” (BL 7) on his
back and who marks the route to the dead is inevitably prey to Anna’s power. But instead of attacking the superficiality of Kroetsch’s portrayal of Anna and of the manner in which he conflates “Indians,” spirituality and omniscience, we might consider that the stereotypes upon which Kroetsch is relying are indicative of mythological informants which are always, by their very nature, superficial and symbolic.

And we might begin by considering here that Kroetsch is somehow pointing to something beneath the dinosaur remains in Anna’s hand. As Frye said of the paintings of Emily Carr, “[i]n Emily Carr, . . . the real focus of vision seems to be in the depth of the forest, behind the picture as it were” (1952, “Letters in Canada,” in BG 10), and what Frye was insinuating is that Carr’s work is not so much an artistic depiction of the West Coast but a mythological comment on that which has shaped peoples’ perceptions of British Columbia. And, indeed, something similar could be said of Kroetsch’s Badlands. What is not seen, in other words, is almost as important as what is seen. One must remember that Anna Yellowbird roams the badlands of Alberta without food, relying on Grizzly to surreptitiously provide her with rations from the crew’s groceries. Granted, Anna is Blackfoot, and her nomadic lifestyle in the badlands is partially informed by historical precedent. However, Anna resides in a tipi made of bones, and any familiarity with traditional Blackfoot literature, or with historical documents, will suggest that this is extremely odd. While Bruce Butterfield has suggested that “Anna’s tipi of bones . . . puts her in a fable-like setting, a Badlands version of the magical forest retreat in which the medieval maiden awaits her lover” (203), it is really more of an iron maiden that Anna is living in. A Blackfoot story entitled “The First Marriage,” for example, collected by Clark
Wissler and D.C. Duvall in the early twentieth century, indicates that, traditionally, Blackfoot men "lived in lodges made of skin with the hair on; the women, in good lodges" (21). The skin, of course, is buffalo skin, and as the editors point out, good skin was that which was dressed, the preparation of skins being a traditional activity in which women took pride. Anna’s home, then, serves a symbolic function. Signaled here is the fact that disrespect of another culture and its land has resulted in near cultural devastation: there are no bison left to support Anna’s wandering lifestyle, and there are no skins to cover her home, and we must be aware, then, that the only bones missing here in the badlands are those of the bison—they are not spoken of, definitely not seen. In this sense, we are made aware of absence, of what has been destroyed.

We might also consider, then, that land, indigene and absence are conflated in Kroetsch’s text and, together, become symbolic of something larger than their separate parts. And I would say that they become symbolic of the sacred. In its depiction of what has been destroyed, Badlands laments the case that aboriginal histories, peoples, stories, and beliefs have been effaced by such myths as the myth of the empty land or by other ideologies which have attempted to threaten the aboriginal legacies of Canada. But it laments much more than this. That is, Badlands seems to lament the idea that the loci—the metaphysical foundations—of aboriginal cultures have been offended and threatened, and it does so by pointing to many different layers of threatened aboriginal histories and by suggesting that the very origins upon which aboriginal cultures base themselves have been attacked. Digging as deep as he can, Dawe inevitably disturbs the dead, the spirits, the very gods of this land. And what Badlands seems to be suggesting, then, is that, above all
else, the sacred has been offended.

It is interesting to note here that these comments on absence in Badlands share an affinity with memories from Kroetsch's formative years as a young boy in Alberta. In The Lovely Treachery of Words, Kroetsch describes an experience he had one day as a child in Alberta which he says produced for him his "first lesson in the idea of absence" ("The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues," in LTW 2):

I was a child—I don't know how old—when my parents took me to Spring Lake, to a picnic... a few miles from the valley of the Battle River. I was playing in a large, shallow depression in the ground, a depression that somehow wasn't natural.

... [My father] said, casually, that it was a buffalo wallow.

It's where buffalo rolled and scratched, he said...

"What buffalo"? I asked... Even at that young age I was secure in the illusion that the land my parents and grandparents homesteaded had had no prior occupants, animal or human. Ours was the ultimate tabula rasa. ("The Moment of the Discovery of America Continues," in LTW 1)

Kroetsch asserts that he was "that day on [his] way to embracing the model of archeology, against that of history" where he was first led to consider that "[t]he authorized history, the given definition of history, was betraying [people] on those prairies" (2). The notion that Kroetsch's Alberta was part of a new world without any kind of legacy, in other words, had broken down through the act of witnessing archeological evidence, and, as Kroetsch explains, he began to "learn the idea of trace" and to search for that which was "always... left behind"; therefore, he decided that he had to "[respond] to those
discoveries of absence, to that invisibility, to that silence, by knowing [he] had to make up a story” (2). More than simply creating a fiction, though, Kroetsch indicates that he was intent on telling a narrative informed by a collective identity since he poses the following question as a conclusion to his anecdote: “How do you write in a new country?” (2)

Here, Kroetsch is engaging with the myth of the empty land, and Badlands itself can be understood as a response to this myth since it is a work roughly contemporaneous with some notable comments made by Kroetsch about writing in a “new country.” In an interview with Russell Brown which was published three years before Badlands, Kroetsch suggests, for example, that “discovering . . . landscape . . . and myth” is “more intense in Canadian writing than it is in that of an older country because we don’t have models to play off against” (Kroetsch, in Brown, “Interview with Robert Kroetsch” 7). And in the same interview, Kroetsch explains that, at this time, he wanted to “explore Blackfoot and Cree folklore” because his “home was near the Battle River—so named because Blackfoot and Cree met and fought along that river” (6). Here, Kroetsch recognizes that indigenous stories can provide different and potential models for Canadian myths, and he seems to counter the myth of the empty land to some degree even while his language supports this myth. But it is as if Kroetsch is looking beyond the actual significance of stories in Badlands to the properties which shape stories in the first place. After all, in Badlands, Kroetsch makes land, indigene and absence representative of collective memories or sacred origins which have been systematically destroyed along with cultural landscapes, and the act of excavating becomes thematically linked to an attempt to exhume sacred, cultural truth from the soil.
In this sense, then, Kroetsch engages with the myth of the empty land in Badlands in order to revise this myth. By suggesting that there are different cultural truths here and that they are inextricable with the landscape, Kroetsch suggests that these truths preceded the advent of colonial "discovery" or "arrival" since they are literally inextricable with the land. Badlands, then, seems to be testimony to the idea that this is a text which was borne out of a moment when the relation between people and the literal lands of this world were being re-considered. After all, Kroetsch attempts to create a new "mental landscape" (Frye 1988, "Culture and Society in Ontario, 1784-1984," in Gorjup 189), as it were, by prompting his readers to think of the relation between ideology and environment. But Kroetsch also attempts to do much more than this.

Dawe’s “whole existence,” we are told, “was become a veritable and deliberate wager, a gamble, a bet that he could in one season find the rib or femur or skull that would insinuate to him, however grotesquely, the whole truth” (8). But for just what kind of truth does Dawe search? Dawe postulates that “the lost bones [of Dinosaurs] . . . will [immortalize] the mortal man” (36), and Anna Dawe’s fiction suggests that the “Daweosauri must be recovered in its entirety” (213) in order to somehow cure Dawe of “death” (211). Admittedly, these are ambiguous claims, but if we understand them in light of the story which searches for Canada’s sacred historical mythology, we might consider here that Dawe is really attempting to exhume some sense of sacred truth from the lands he is exploring. He is in search of immortality, and, in mythological terms, this means that he is really in search of gods. The “defined landscape” (O’Donnell 220) of the badlands offers him no solace, however, since this landscape has effaced the gods of this world;
moreover, the "associative cultural landscape" (O'Donnell 220) which carries with it "religious . . . associations" (O'Donnell 220) cannot be read by Dawe since aboriginal gods have been offended by the likes of Dawe for centuries. And, so, Dawe disturbs the "relict (or fossil) landscape" (O'Donnell 220) in a crazed attempt to find meaning.

But Dawe will die, of course, after a lifetime of digging. He could dig for eternity to the earth's core, but he could never find truth because he, like Coyote in the story "Coyote and the Shadow People," disregards the voice of the dead, or the "death spirit" (Phinney 282). Like Coyote, he reaches out to the past, but he disregards the caution which has been provided to him. More than this, Dawe's archaeological endeavors are an act of violation. He is accurately immortalized by Sinnott as one of the "Grave Robbers in the Badlands of the West" (119) because he desacrilizes the dead spirits in the land he is turning up, and such an act forecasts ultimate failure. When Coyote is permitted to see his dead wife, for example, he is told that he "may talk with her but [that he] may never touch her" (Phinney 284), but he makes a mistake and reaches out to her and, therefore, forever denies the possibility of establishing "the practice of returning from the dead" (Phinney 285). Like Coyote, Dawe must die because he not only fails to listen but because he is also unable to listen.

Indeed, Dawe is doomed because his frame of reference, his ways of knowing, are ultimately incapable of providing him with the knowledge he needs to understand truth. Dawe is too much like Coyote: Dawe is unwilling to suspend disbelief and act in accordance to the dictates of new and different authorities. As the ghost of the "Shadow People" explains to Coyote before Coyote embarks on his quest, "[h]ere we have
conditions different from those you have in the land of the living. When it gets dark here it has dawned in your land and when it dawns for us it is growing dark for you” (Phinney 283). Like Coyote, Dawe has entered a world which he does not understand, and, in a sense, he has entered a world that is entirely the opposite of his.

It is as if Kroetsch is creating a myth out of the same sort of tension which is registered in the Appendix to his travel guide, Alberta (1968). Here, for example, under the title “Historic Gravesites,” Kroetsch makes the following comment:

The prehistoric graveyard of the dinosaurs has yielded up skeletons to all the major museums of the world. The burial places of Indian peoples, and the fascinating buffalo jumps where, for thousands of years, the plains Indians killed in order to live, are now being recognized and preserved; one careless amateur, one bulldozer, or one dam can destroy centuries of our history. (216)

Indeed, as Kroetsch puts it in his article “The Exploding Porcupine,” “[a]rcheology of necessity, involves violence--the uncovering of past lives” (in LTW 111), but, as Badlands also indicates, it can also entail more than this. That is, archeology--the furious digging up of the past--can result in the dismissal of competing world views. This is a point which is underscored when one considers what Hana Samek has to say in her work The Blackfoot Confederacy 1880-1920: A Comparative Study of Canadian and U.S. Indian Policy. Here, Samek notes that traditional tensions between the Blackfoot and European settlers were compounded by the differing cosmologies of Native and European peoples, cosmologies so different from one another that, for the Europeans, the “Dawe impulse,” as it were, was an extension of a divinely ordained pattern for living but that, for Native peoples, it was
simply heretical. As Samek points out, the introduction of European agricultural techniques into traditional Blackfoot territory was most offensive not because "[n]omadic warriors and buffalo hunters such as the Blackfeet had no agricultural tradition, and consequently . . . did not find farming appealing" but because "[t]heir most basic objection was against turning Mother Earth 'wrong side up'" (57). And what Dawe does, of course, in the loci of Blackfoot lands is literally blow apart Mother Earth.

What these reflections suggest, then, is that superlatives govern Kroetsch's text. Dawe has entered the underworld from a very different world—just like Coyote—and he has performed sacrilegious acts in the foreign lands he has entered because he cannot understand the presiding gods. And in this sense, we might understand, therefore, that Badlands, like all myths, is based on grand distinctions. In turn, we might recognize a notable tension that is central to this text. Indeed, there is a very clear sense of antagonism here between what Dawe stands for and what Anna Yellowbird stands for. Dawe, associated as he is with those who have pillaged Anna's world, provides a striking contrast to what Anna Yellowbird and her world symbolizes—the sacred. And in this sense, then, Dawe can only be understood as symbolizing the profane.

It is significant, though, that Anna Dawe ends her story by throwing away her father's old field notes and by deciding to remain alone in the mountains, "where [she] can look to the east, and downward, to where it is all behind [her]" (264). Here, Anna shows disgust with the profane. She throws away something that is symbolic of the profane, and she remains in the mountains where the sacred resides in an attempt to understand the sacred or that which is opposite of the profane. To be sure, this detail offers no definitive
views about history or the past, and as Frances W. Kaye and Robert Thacker note in their article “Gone Back to Alberta: Robert Kroetsch Rewriting the Great Plains,” “Kroetsch’s postmodernism offers no clues to the solution of the question of who owns the past of either bones or stories” (175). But while this may be true, Badlands does offer a strong comment. The reader is left with an image of Anna Dawe and Anna Yellowbird looking up at that grizzly caught in the net which swings from the bottom of a helicopter. Just as Dawe and his men have violently ripped apart the badlands and traces of important history and cultural truth, so, too, has someone or something torn the grizzly out of its natural habitat and left it half alive. As Frye put it in his article “Haunted by Lack of Ghosts,” “[t]here are gods here, and we have offended them” (in Gorjup 122). And this is what Badlands seems to be ultimately arguing: by ripping apart the physical world—by digging past the “sun-gods,” the totems, the culture heroes which have grown up with this land—we have also ripped apart any story which will yield any kind of truth.

To be sure, there is potential for rebirth here, but Badlands seems to be suggesting that it is not yet time for rebirth. When that “helicopter, yellow as the sun” (BL 267), hovers at the end of Kroetsch’s myth and above the gaze of Anna and Anna, it is reminiscent of Anna Yellowbird and of the sacred weight for which she stands. But the helicopter carries a trapped animal which, though it is “about to be born into a new life” (BL 268), awakens and arrests the possibility of a renaissance moment. And this is not surprising. After all, the pilot who maneuvers the helicopter and this symbol of new potential and sacred promise is “unknowing” and “indifferent” (BL 268). Thus, this novel leaves its reader hanging between a consideration of the profane and the sacred, and it also
leaves its reader to consider what may be born out of the tension between the two. Indeed, this is one important reflection with which Badlands leaves us. But when Anna Yellowbird looks to the stars at the novel’s end and utters the words “[l]ike pissing in the ocean” (270), Kroetsch seems to be suggesting that this story, this myth he has just told, is the tip of an enormous iceberg. Anna, “who had never seen the ocean” (270), is able to recognize the absurdity of her own individualism in reference to a cultural expression whose meaning she has somehow learned without ever partaking in. And if we extend this recognition to what Kroetsch seems to be saying about national mythologies in this novel, Anna’s prophecy is powerful. Kroetsch’s Badlands might be a drop in the bucket, as were, but it does record the tension between Native and English-Canadian cultural values and narratives. More than this, the novel seems to be suggesting that there are narratives which can be born out of the tension between aboriginal and non-native traditions, out of the tension between history and myth, and out of the tension between the sacred and profane. Anna and Anna sing together, after all, “that awful song about rolling over in the clover, . . . the only song [they can] both [remember]” and the only song they can “sing long enough to see [themselves] through” (270). What is needed in their world, though, is a certain revisioning of the past and a glimpse toward new possible futures. Anna and Anna walk out of the Badlands together, and they literally turn their backs on everything that Dawe’s history-making has afforded thus far. The hope in this final image exists in the union of the two women who are symbolic of a meeting of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples and of their respective stories. However, the ultimate key to unleashing this potential seems to exist behind the women, in the land on which Anna and
Anna are walking. After all, the sacred still exists in the land although "defined landscapes" (O'Donnell 220) have forced the sacred into hiding.

This is a point which will be returned to at the end of this chapter, but, here, it is useful to re-consider some of the dominant impulses and patterns in Kroetsch's text. First, *Badlands* draws attention to itself as myth and to the process of storytelling, and this novel also underscores the tenuous authority of its narrator. Second, the historical and cultural stereotypes Kroetsch uses serve to indicate that history itself is part of a mythmaking process. Third, *Badlands* depends on the idea that there is no possibility of true history, and its characters suffer, therefore, from the recognition that they are without a national history. Fourth, there is the repetitive feeling and recognition that no kind of story exists that will yield the truth of this place because the profane has effaced the nature of truth. That is, the historical "beginning" of this nation stands in the way of any attempt to set this nation free from the past, and, therefore, the concept of truth becomes a dominant concern. And, fifth, while "truth" is evasive, it is inextricable somehow with the land and "indigene" which become symbolic of the sacred and of different cultural truths which have been charted and "pruned," as it were, almost beyond recognition. The end of this chapter will attempt to make sense of these characteristics in relation to postmodern mythmaking, but before doing so, it seems useful to consider here George Bowering's *Burning Water* which, like *Badlands*, is a new kind of exploration myth that contains some notable tensions comparable to those found in Kroetsch's text.

Published in 1980, *Burning Water* is an ironic re-writing of the voyages of Captain George Vancouver, a British explorer who charted the West Coast of current-day British
Columbia between 1792 and 1794. Like Kroetsch’s fictive rendering of the Dawe expedition, Bowering’s imagined exploration of the Canadian West is suspect from the start. While Bowering’s narrator is not necessarily a liar, he certainly is a playful participant in a questionable history. And we are most certainly aware that we are reading a story. In the prologue to this work, “George”—the author himself—claims that “[w]e are making a story, after all, as we have always been, standing and speaking together to make up a history, a real historical fiction,” and from this moment on, the process of storytelling is underscored throughout the novel. More specifically, it is this emphasis on the process of storytelling that serves to elucidate the idea that everything else—most definitely history—is also part of a fiction. Cultural stereotypes, of course, become the butt of many a joke, and as the following passage indicates, they serve to question historical “truths” which have come to define this nation:

A Yankee named Magee stepped out of the nearby copse with a donkey loaded down with supplies. He held his hand up, palm forward.

‘How!’ he said, in a deep voice.

The two Indians made their faces look patient.

‘What is this ‘How’? asked the first Indian of his companion.

‘Search me,’ said the second Indian. ‘But we may as well go along with him.’

He put his hand up in his best imitation of the skin-covered stranger.

‘Aeh, shit!’ he said.

‘Do you fellows want to buy some whiskey?’ asked Magee in his own
language, taking a bottle out of his saddlebag.

‘No thanks,’ said the second Indian in his own language.

‘Guns?’

‘No thanks.’

‘You want to trade some waterfront property for some mirrors and necklaces?’

‘I wouldn’t mind having one of those mirrors,’ said the first Indian to the second Indian.

‘Offer him a fish,’ said the second Indian. (199-200)

Like Kroetsch, who resurrects national stereotypes in order to undermine them and to comment on the process of mythologizing, Bowering plays with similar stereotypes to expose those ludicrous notions which have served to define Native peoples. And, indeed, this is funny stuff, but Bowering inevitably links such moments as these to the more serious recognition that there is some kind of price to be paid for the inability to understand other cultures.

Like Dawe and his men who cannot recognize that they have stumbled on thousands of years of history and who wish to blow apart the badlands in order to find what they think is the only veritable form of knowledge or history, Vancouver and his men have come to this world with pre-conceived ideas and questions which are impediments to any discovery of truth. In the following passage, for example, Menzies confronts his “Indian friends” (111) and attempts to glean some knowledge about cannibalism, a myth which dominated early conceptions of the new world and which served to endorse the
opinion that aborigines were barbarian and, thus, fit prey to be conquered:

'During the general run of things, in times of great hunger, or in the course of particular ceremonies, do your people ever eat a little bit of human bodies? I'm not accusing you now, you understand. It is my vocation to collect knowledge for my people, and this I do without blaming anyone for anything.'

'I have never eaten a person,' said the first Indian.

'I also am innocent of eating any person,' said the second Indian. . .

'Is there any tradition in your culture of eating people? Slaves or elders or captives, anything of that sort?'

The two Red Men looked at one another and then toward the forest where they would go if things worked out.

'It seems as if I did hear something once about our forefathers eating people long ago before the time of the Great Flood,' offered the first Indian.

'Earlier this summer we found a village that had been abandoned within the month. It was attended by heads on sticks, and human bones thrown into the fire,' said Menzies, examining the cheeks of a sockeye.

'There is a rumour, unsubstantiated, that a remnant of that ancient people-eating society survives. They are entirely isolated, of course,' said the second Indian. 'Nobody I know has ever come across them . . .'

'Uh, one more question, I pray you,' said Menzies, walking with them.

'We will do our best to supply an answer,' said the first Indian.

'Thank you,' said Menzies. 'My question is, and I know that you can only
tell me what you have heard, and I know that knowledge is sketchy in this area because the activity is so rare. But I would like to know for what purpose these elusive people-eaters eat people.’ (112-113)

Whatever truth Menzies is in search of has already been constructed by his own frame of reference, and his circular questioning serves to underscore the idea that this game of cultural exchange can, at best, end in stalemate. But what is most ironic about this story is that the outcome of this game will, of course, shape history and the textbooks which will instruct the British and Canadian nation. As the increasingly insane Captain Vancouver explains to Mr. Whidbey, these lessons will all be given to the grand disseminators of knowledge upon their arrival home:

‘Mr. Whidbey,’ he said, ‘we shall return to Britain, and we shall return not as fools but as sailors who have worked harder than any other men in the history of the sea. Do you know what we have worked so hard for? To bring detailed and correct information from around the world to lay before powerful men who live on speculations and require miracles.’ (236)

If this is the history we are left with, and if this is the history upon which the Canadian nation has been built, then God help us one and all, Bowering seems to be saying. If madmen and pirates and those without a conscience have been responsible for interpreting history and for delivering accounts of the past to the present which they claim to be objective records of uncontested truth, then those who believe these histories—students in schools, political leaders, scholars and general readers—will inevitably be enticed to live by the dictates of the same immoral code which Vancouver and his men embraced.
But Bowering’s history lesson does not only serve to provide a new-world comedy. For Bowering’s *Burning Water*, like Kroetsch’s *Badlands*, exposes the violence upon which the foundations of this nation have been laid. Taken aback by a convoy of six canoes they initially deem to be a friendly group but whom they quickly understand to be a “thieving party” (218), Vancouver and his men fire on those Indians who, “without any address to the white men” (219), begin helping themselves to English property. And the narrator’s description of the aftermath of this confrontation underscores, yet ironically undermines, the violence which history books have so often evaded in their depictions of Canada’s great explorers:

When it was all over there were two wounded sailors, and eight dead Indians, some of them probably sons of the gang’s leader. Vancouver had slumped onto the wobbly stool made for him by the late carpenter’s mate. The last dying Indian was brought to him and dumped at his feet. Menzies looked him over and signalled that he was through.

‘What was this all about?’ Vancouver asked the teeth-gritting man in Tlingit.

‘You Russians!’ grated the man.

‘No, we are not Russians.’

‘You Yankees, you Russians and you Yankees! You make us go to war with our sacred enemies, the Tsetsaut, and then you take all our sea otter furs and give us muskets that do not function. You rabbit fuckers!’

Whereupon saying, he died.
‘I am really getting sick of all this,’ said Vancouver. He ordered the eight bodies to be carried to the edge of a defile and dumped over. (219-20)

As in Badlands, readers are made aware of what has been destroyed, and, interestingly enough, in this depiction of destruction, Vancouver is equated with those he thinks less civilized than the imperious brutes. On the one hand, this passage suggests that in the face of death and holocaust it little matters what nationality defines a perpetrator. And on the other hand, this novel seems to suggest that nationalities do not deserve remembrance when they have been involved in such a pitiful past.

In fact, it is with the erasure of history and trace that this novel ends. While Vancouver actually died in London in May 1798 (Wainright 88), Bowering’s Vancouver is shot by Menzies at the novel’s end and is consumed by the Pacific Ocean: “Vancouver pulled himself to his feet, and then full of pain, leaned upon the rail. A gust of wind punched into the mainsail, and every man took a little shuffling step to stay erect, save their captain who seemed to be lifted by some strength unwitnessed, over the rail and into the unsolicitous sea” (258). Here, it seems significant to note that Bowering re-writes history so that Vancouver becomes prey to that which he attempted to chart and to discover without any understanding. Like Tune, who is literally buried under tonnes of prairie dirt and symbolically buried under the trail of carnage which Dawe leaves behind him, Vancouver is cast, by some unknown and undefinable source, into the waters which he has pioneered for his dinosaurs of a sort. Indeed, this is poetic justice, but this ending may also be indicative of some kind of mythological pattern which is an understandable response to the history with which Burning Water is dealing.
Most notably, *Burning Water*, like *Badlands*, suggests that to confront such myths as the myth of the empty land—a myth which allowed a space for the erasure of aboriginal histories and for the crimes of colonization—is to confront the implications or philosophies behind this myth. And in turn, Bowering’s text, like Kroetsch’s, suggests that a recognition of these philosophies leads to a desire to erase Canadian history or to engage with it in such a way that it is significantly re-written. But what pattern reveals itself in these desires and attempts to re-write history? What mythological need is being represented here? And how do these reflections suggest that both Bowering and Kroetsch are responding to a contemporary anxiety with a notable aboriginal influence? To be sure, these are large questions, but it seems possible to broach them by first considering here the grandfather of such works as *Badlands* and *Burning Water*: Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers*.

Published in 1966, *Beautiful Losers* can be considered precedent-setting for a couple of important reasons. After all, not only is this novel the source of the children of Tekakwitha, but it is also the source to which a number of critics have traced Canadian postmodernism or “postmodern metafiction”—that style of writing pioneered in the 1960s which has come to define the works of those such as Kroetsch and Bowering. And perhaps it is no wonder, then, that *Beautiful Losers*, like *Badlands* and *Burning Water*, is also a notable comment on mythmaking, history making, and the nature of truth. After all, Cohen’s text begins in the following manner:

Catherine Tekakwitha, who are you? Are you (1656-1680)? Is that enough? Are you the Iroquois Virgin? Are you the Lily of the Shores of the Mohawk River?
Can I love you in my own way? I am an old scholar, better-looking now than when I was young. That’s what sitting on your ass does to your face. I’ve come after you, Catherine Tekakwitha. I want to know what goes on under that rosy blanket. Do I have any right? I fell in love with a religious picture of you. You were standing among birch trees, my favorite trees. God knows how far up your moccasins were laced. There was a river behind you, no doubt the Mohawk River. Two birds in the left foreground would be delighted if you tickled their white throats or even if you used them as an example of something or other in a parable. Do I have any right to come after you with my dusty mind full of the junk of maybe five thousand books? (3)

Almost immediately, Beautiful Losers, like Badlands and Burning Water, makes its readers aware that history is part of a mythmaking process. Having come to this story to “rescue [Catherine] from the Jesuits” (5), having come to rescue her from a process of interpretation which has been clouded by missionary zeal and dogma, the narrator of Beautiful Losers attempts to remove this Iroquois saint from historical misrepresentation. But the narrator is confused and unsure how he will re-write her history. He defines Catherine Tekakwitha by historical dates--1656-1680; he defines her by her sexuality--“are you the Iroquois virgin?”; he defines her by adapting the language of the King James Bible or the world of nineteenth-century romance to the world in which Catherine grew up--“Are you the Lily of the Shores of the Mohawk River?”; he defines her by a sexuality which he perhaps imagines was denied to her and which he himself creates and supposes has gone on under her “rosy blanket”; and he defines her by an iconic image which exists
of this saint but to which he attaches his own desires. In essence, Cohen’s text, which, as Linda Hutcheon points out, is a “portrayal of Edouard Lecompt’s 1927 Jesuit textual inscription of [Catherine Tekakwitha] in his Une Vierge Iroquoise Catherine Tekakwitha: Le Lis des Bords de la Mohawk et du St. Laurent (1656-1680)” (Canadian Postmodern 14), begins by drawing attention to the recognition that it is more a comment on the process behind mythmaking and historical interpretation than it is any verifiable account of Tekakwitha’s life.

More than this, though, the narrator questions whether he even has a right to provide yet another interpretation of Catherine. “I am a well-known folklorist, an authority on the A----s, a tribe I have no intention of disgracing by my own interest” (5), this English-Canadian historian asserts. And, then, he immediately assumes this right and ironically undermines his decision by going on to disgrace her in many ways. After all, Catherine will share a space in this narrative with Edith, the narrator’s wife, who, before she commits suicide under an elevator (an act entirely removed from any conception of sainthood), spends hours in a hotel with the narrator’s best-friend, F., engaging in every form of sexual act which has been condemned by the Catholic church. She shares a space with F. who eventually goes crazy from syphilis and dies slowly in an insane asylum while he has his hand shoved up the skirt of a nearby nurse. And she is given new breath by a narrator who, when confronted by the limitations of his profession, conflates his knowledge into ironic, sometimes funny, and almost always troubling stereotypes which serve to question this whole business of writing history. Attempting to depict seventeenth-century Canada and the strange network of relations which grew out of the
meeting of different cultures, different religions, and unspeakable brutalities, this narrator, for example, determines the following: “Lots of priests got killed and eaten and so forth. Micmacs, Abénaquis, Montagnais, Attikamègues, Hurons: the Company of Jesus had their way with them. Lots of semen in the forest, I’ll bet” (18-19). And he also reduces Catherine Tekakwitha to nothing more than a joke by undermining her rape: “[s]he was taken captive in an Iroquois raid, which was probably the best lay she ever had” (19).

In fact, it is violence which is at the heart of Beautiful Losers. More specifically, it is the violence of Canada’s past to which this novel turns time and time again. As we find out, the beautiful Indian maiden whom this narrator constructed out of his own desires never existed in such a form. Catherine Tekakwitha, like the rest of her family, was a victim of smallpox, and perhaps it is understandable, then, that she becomes symbolic of this nation’s desire to forget the past or to shape the past in such a way that national desire, instead of truth, is served. This narrator curses the plague when it “invades [the] pages of [his] research” (28). His “erection topples” (28) because he realizes that Catherine, the only one of her family to have survived, has “the price of admission gouged in her face” (28): “Catherine Tekakwitha is not pretty! Now I want to run from my books and dreams. I don’t want to fuck a pig. Can I yearn after pimples and pock marks?” (28)

As in Badlands and Burning Water, the violence of the past becomes inextricable with a questioning of truth. “I’ve lost my erection,” the narrator mourns again at a later point in Cohen’s novel, because, as he says to Catherine in an apostrophe, “I fear you smell of the Plague” (43). And ultimately, he poses the following question: “Is it because I’ve stumbled on the truth about Canada?” (43)
Cohen seems to be asking “is there really any truth to Canada?” or “is there any real truth in this nation’s history?” Midway through the first half of Beautiful Losers, “The History of Them All,” the narrator stops and tells his readers the following: “I have been writing these true happenings for some time now” (my emphasis, 121). But, then, he also poses the following question: “Am I any closer to Kateri Tekakwitha?” (121). The reader, of course, is inevitably led to determine that this narrator is not. Several pages later, he will fabricate a story about Catherine Tekakwitha spilling wine at a high table during a great feast in Québec (123-25), and he will give it all kinds of significance. Later, in another apostrophe to Catherine, he will admit that this narrative has been created from his own fancy, that, in fact, he “find[s] no mention of this feast in any of the standard biographers” (126). Thus, Beautiful Losers becomes a sort of game, and readers are not so much left to determine what is true in this quasi-historical account as they are left to ponder the nature of truth and the relation which truth shares with history making. “To discover the truth in anything that is alien, first dispense with the indispensable in your own vision” (107), the narrator admonishes.

Is that why, then, everything in our line of vision disappears at the end of this novel into some strange, cinematic process or mythological symbol? Is that why an English-Canadian, a Québécois, a Canadian-Indian, and an Indian—what would seem to be the indispensable properties of the Canadian nation—disappear? As Hutcheon questions, “[w]hat sense can be made of the complex tale of a nameless English-Canadian historian, his Québécois friend known simply, if evocatively, as F., and his Canadian-Indian wife, Edith, especially when, at the end, all the male characters merge and transform into a Ray
Charles movie projected against the sky, and all the female characters’ identities (including that of a verifiable historical saint, Catherine Tekakwitha) blur to form a composite mythical Isis figure?” (Canadian Postmodern 28). For Hutcheon, this image “allegorically acts out . . . the history and political destiny of the Canadian nation: of its successive conquests (mirrored in the deaths of the Indian, Edith, and then of the Frenchman, F.) and perhaps also its future fate (turning into an American fiction)” (Canadian Postmodern 28-29). But more than simply acting out Canada’s past or future, I would argue that this novel, like Kroetsch’s Badlands and like Bowering’s Burning Water, is acting out a mythological need that is based not so much on past or future history as it is related to an impulse that grew out of the history or time period during which Beautiful Losers was written.

As the second chapter has observed, the national pause which Canada’s centenary inspired coincided with the seventh generation bringing to the national table, as it were, different stories and some very strong articulations. Both the NCR and the CNLR forced people to remember the past. They also forced people to recognize that indigenous gods and indigenous authorities were both very strong and very alive in this place now being celebrated as Canada. In comparison to those whose ancestry could be traced back to colonizers and to a European past, aboriginal peoples possessed cultural histories of which they could be proud, old and familiar stories with which they were familiar, heroes of magnitude and longevity, and leaders with authority and sacred voices. In contrast, however, and as this discussion has shown, those peoples who were ultimately led to trace their legacies back to a non-indigenous past were also led to position their stories in
relation to a tenuous authority. George Ryga would leave for dead two potential Indian heroes who had been prey to the dictates of the Canadian courtroom. Robert Kroetsch would drag up a number of absurd stereotypes which have grown out of popular interpretations of Canadian history and leave his readers with partial heroes of which no citizen could ever be proud. Bowering would throw a famous Canadian explorer over the side of his ship with poetic justice and wipe his hands of the whole messy legend. And Cohen would make a joke out of the recognition that an English-Canadian historian and a Québécois madman could never revive the spirit of Catherine Tekakwitha. In one sense, these are very basic recognitions, and they do not lead to any groundbreaking discoveries. But if we consider more closely here what is happening in a mythological sense in these works--if we consider here what kinds of patterns and characters are emerging out of this discomfort with a tenuous history--it seems possible to suggest that these works encourage some very interesting considerations.

When Cohen ended his text by turning all of his characters into a projection beam and mythological symbol what he was really doing was removing any kind of potential hero from the community which he had created in his narrative fiction. He kept alive a belief in the process of transmitting knowledge or telling stories, but he literally sacrificed any kind of potential hero to dust and light. Likewise, and dealing with the same kind of history which is found in Beautiful Losers, Robert Kroetsch made sure there were no heroes left at his novel’s end, although he, too, kept alive a belief in storytelling. To be sure, there is something heroic about that last image of Anna and Anna who together, alone and female in a man’s world, defy the path of history and travel the river bed their
own way throwing out the letters which have threatened to encase them in Dawe’s twisted legacy. But there is no promise of resurrection. Drunk out of their minds, Anna and Anna will not re-write the history they have uncovered for their readers. Anna Dawe will simply remain alone in the mountains, and if there was ever a hope in hell for Dawe to become the hero of this legend, Kroetsch has taken care of that by sacrificing him in Georgian Bay. Moreover, McBride, the only one who could ever hope to be the hero of this narrative, walks out of the story moments after it has begun. As well, and in Bowering’s *Burning Water*, George Vancouver is simply thrown by some unknown force into Pacific waters, and, like all the other potential heroes described thus far, he is rendered impotent and unpromising. Bowering’s Vancouver will not survive the trip back home as did his namesake, and he, too, will be sacrificed in some kind of ceremonial act.

Perhaps this seems too contrived here. To be sure, there are at least thirteen different ways of looking at endings and of revealing patterns, but what is notable is that this removal of potential heroes is inextricable with the fact that these “heroes” grow out of a history which reveals madness and sickness. And what I mean here is that these heroes grow out of a national history which has tried to deny a holocaust—the height of madness, the worst example of how consciences can be isolated from a community of humanitarian values, and an ideological disease that spreads just as quickly as smallpox on wool blankets and takes just as many lives. More than this, though, these are not tragic heroes. They are anti-heroes. While it is not surprising that heroes die in these worlds since heroes traditionally die in mythologies, it is significant that these ones are written off with disgust. Associated with a sick past, the protagonists of these myths—seeming
heroes--become symbolic of everything a hero should not represent. The past which Renan said had to be “forgotten” in order for a nation to successfully grow has not only been remembered in these texts, but it has also become a larger-than-life force with which no one can sanely reckon. And perhaps that is why these postmodern works must record madness to the extent that they do. That is, perhaps that is why these texts depict individuals who are unable to function in their societies with humane sense. There is absolutely nothing sane about the fact that Dawe sends a young man with two weeks’ experience into the badlands with dynamite, and, in fact, there is nothing sane about Dawe at all. Dawe is an appendage of a larger force which has taken Anna Yellowbird’s husband away on an iron ship and which continues to destroy her homeland. Of course, there is nothing sane about George Vancouver and the history to which he is connected. This story of exploration comes complete with the rape of an Indian corpse and with the pre-meditated murder of an old Indian woman who leads an expedition intent on getting back the goods which the British have stolen from her people, and it is understandable that Vancouver is tossed overboard at the novel’s end like a worthless mackerel. And there is obviously nothing sane about F., although there is something sane about the fact that he tells his nameless friend to connect nothing. As he knows, sitting in an asylum, to connect the history of Edith to the history of Catherine, to connect the narrator’s knowledge that “the forests of Québec are mutilated and sold to America” to his awareness of the “Church’s victory over the Medicine Man” (73), leads only to madness. Inevitably, everything in this new world is linked to its insane beginnings, and, so, he leaves the following advice to his friend: “[y]ou mustn’t meddle any longer in this shit. Avoid even
the circumstances of Catherine Tekakwitha’s death and the ensuing documented miracles” (237).

These works are therefore testimony to the idea that to recognize this nation’s beginnings and to attempt to provide some kind of myth from this insane history inevitably leads to the removal of the hero—the very locus of community in myth—from the center of madness and to the creation of anti-heroes. And it is interesting to note that unlike Native authors of this time period who had revived cultural heroes in new ways and who had posited a strong connection between a heroic past and a heroic present, these Canadian authors were sending their heroes away to the past because the present was not worthy of them. It becomes possible to suggest here, then, that when authors turned to indigenous history and literature for new material or for the stuff of mythology, the confidence and authority they confronted at the time in indigenous literature and social activism prompted a certain degree of introspection which lent itself to the creation of myths which, strangely enough, could only be without heroes. As James Clifford has argued, there is, indeed, “no master narrative that can reconcile the tragic and comic plots of global cultural history” (Predicament of Culture 15), and this is a recognition which becomes apparent here. In fact, it seems possible to suggest that this stage of Canadian mythological ideation, as seen in those works discussed in this chapter, is arrested in the re-living of a national trauma which must keep on being re-lived until new patterns of thought and actions are established.

What I mean is that these texts do not mark an end to history. Not at all. While these texts grow out of a moment in Canadian history which was ripe for mythologizing,
and while Canada's centenary may have seemed to promise that this nation would be able to experience an originary moment—a time when history could be swept away and when this nation could begin again from a new slate—these texts register the reality that this slate could not, and perhaps never will, be created. Yes, these writers were led to re-examine history in light of revisionist history, and social revolution—a necessary ingredient for the revisioning of national mythologies—seemed to provide some sense of a new beginning. But this beginning turned out to be a strange one. Writers were now recognizing the myths which history had produced. They were recognizing that the myth of the empty land, for example, was not factual truth, and they were attempting to create new myths out of this awareness. But these new mythologies would falter, pause and stall at a recognition of past myths. And they would do so because the history which these myths recorded was traumatic and because, like an individual who suffers from trauma, this nation would be forced to relive the past. But even though this re-visiting of the past does not promise resurrection or re-birth, it does lead to an interesting comment on contemporary mythmaking in Canada.

What is perhaps most interesting is that these writers were recording, with all the stereotypical and superficial informants of mythology, the profane and, in the process of doing so, recognizing the presence of the sacred. To return to Kroetsch's Badlands, for a moment, it is significant to note that Anna is first found in a grave to which she has been led by the wisdom of a shaman. Dawe and his men will inevitably recognize her as potential chattel and as a potential guide through the badlands, but Kroetsch's text will turn time and time again to the notion that there is something "down there," to use the
words of Gwendolyn MacEwan, that there is something in the land that is divine. Indeed, in that last image of Anna and Anna, where readers are left with the notion that this pack of humans are fallible, the only constant source of truth that remains is the land. *Badlands* seems predicated on the idea that truth is somehow inextricable with the landscape, although truth is a long way off when dynamite and picks are destroying the vestiges of old dynasties. To be sure, a recognition of the sacred does not manifest itself in the same way in Bowering’s and Cohen’s texts, but this act of sacrifice, if it can be called that, is indicative of a belief in the sacred. Bowering and Cohen, like Kroetsch, are recording history’s profanities because the sacred has been offended. And they are sacrificing symbols of this profanity in different ways, but they are sacrificing them, nonetheless.

What I mean to suggest here is that these are all conscious attempts to cast away old mythologies and to create new ones. And in essence it could be said, then, that these writers were attempting to clear the ground of cultural garbage and bury the dead. But it is most significant to note that their texts inevitably ended up suggesting that the time had not yet come for the creation of new myths. And perhaps that is why these myths, unlike most myths, are without gods. To be sure, it would be rather difficult to create a governing god for these narratives or to borrow indigenous gods when recent history had clearly exposed a past which this nation hoped would be forgotten. After all, the history which Canadian writers turned to when it came time to produce a “national song” (Lampman) was, in many ways, a brutal one. And while indigenous sun-gods might have been recognized as existing, they were off limits. That is, when these writers who have been discussed in this chapter write with a mythological bent and sacrifice their anti-
heroes, they are ultimately deferring to the idea that there is something sacred out there. But they can never inscribe the sacred with any conviction comparable to that found in Chief Dan George’s My Heart Soars, for example, because Chief Dan George bears the weight of a different past which lends itself to different sentiments. This is not any kind of support for biological determinism. It is not the re-inscribing of the dangerous notion that Indian and non-Indian minds think differently. But it is the recognition that different cultural positions are related to different literary traditions and articulations.

This is not to say, however, that this nation is still waiting for a moment of “passion and enthusiasm” (Lampman 38) and a notable change of “expression in the arts” (E.K. Brown 20). The stereotypical nature of much of the literature of the late 1960s and 1970s is, in fact, an indication that something profound did take place in Canadian literature around Canada’s “Day of Atonement.” And interestingly enough, this “new pastoralism” (R. Brown, “Time of the Redmen” 92), or “back-to-the-land-primitivism” (Goldie, “Getting it Right” 64), coupled with this re-examination of the sacred and the profane, are really indicative of a new attempt to identify and define the archetypes of this nation’s mythology. To be sure, this is not to say that these attempts are without their problems, and the conflation of “Indian” and the “sacred” attests to a superficiality which threatens a true recognition of the sophistication of human experience, to say the least. But it must be recognized that by separating the profane and sacred into opposite camps and by interrogating what these camps mean in light of colonial history, these texts provided the means to understand the past in a less homogenous way than the past had formerly been understood and that they prompted readers to consider different cultural
viewpoints more carefully.

As well, by separating the profane and sacred as these texts and others did, these texts paved the road for an important mythological figure which allows for the examination of the past and the present in a sophisticated manner. What I mean here is that these texts, by registering the recognition that it would be impossible to appropriate Native histories, cultures and figures to justify pan-Canadian nationalism, created a strong binary between aboriginal and non-aboriginal cultures and reduced these two camps into symbols. The “Canadian nation” became the profane. The First Nations became the sacred. This is reductive and stereotypical, but the division can also be understood in a mythological way. And it is very important to emphasize the recognition that in these texts the profane—inscribed in a new and forceful way because of social need—met the sacred head-on. And what normally happens in traditional mythologies is that when the sacred and the profane meet, a certain and well-known type of character emerges: the trickster. As Carl Jung claims in “On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure,” “the trickster haunts the mythology of all ages” (in Radin 200), and so it seems that the trickster has come to take its haunt in Canadian mythology.

Indeed, what does seem telling here is the manner in which Canadian history has taken on a persona. In all of the works which have been discussed in this chapter—and despite the fact that history might enter one narrative as a buffoon, another as a villain, and, even another, as a saint—it is significant to note that history always enters as a character. In essence, Canadian history itself has become a kind of trickster, and it seems as if it will one day be given a face, a nose, and, perhaps, even a Coyote’s tail. But what is
important to recognize here is that, unlike Nanabush, unlike Weesageechak, unlike Raven, Old Man and Glooscap, Canadian history sits at the edge of the sacred and is not part of a collective body of stories which include both trickster tales and sacred histories. That is, this new trickster does not grow out of a wide collection of old myths which can be traced back to a sacred origin or metaphysical foundation. For example, unlike Nanabush stories which share a space in a larger collection of Ojibway myths and sacred histories and which can inevitably be traced back to Kitchi-Manitou, these Canadian trickster stories are not governed by an indigenous deity. This Canadian trickster cannot be pre-empted by a sacred origin comparable to Kitchi Manitou who can dominate Nanabush and the profanity he delights in from time to time. And, thus, the bay, the ocean, the camera can, at any moment, consume history, because history is only partially sacred and a hell of a lot profane. That is why, perhaps, Dawe dies in the waters of Georgian Bay. That is why George Vancouver is thrown “by some strength unwitnessed” (258) into the sea. That is why all certain stereotypical symbols of national identity—an English-Canadian historian, a Québécois, a Canadian-Indian and an Indian—disappear in a symbol of human processing.

Perhaps that is why, to offer another example here, Donal Keneally, the founder of the Colony of Truth in Jack Hodgins’ The Invention of the World (1977), is corkscrewed into the earth in an attempt “to redeem his mythic beginning” (7), as Jan C. Horner puts it. After all, and while this is but one detail in a complicated narrative, the British Columbian dystopia which Keneally has founded neighbours the site of an old gallows where, in the first trial in this colony, two Indians were hanged for the murder of one Peter Brown. And while Julius Champney supposes that this historical event cannot be compared to anything
that happened on the prairies “where one incident like that is hardly remembered” (226), Hodgins ends up drawing his readers’ attention to the recognition that B.C.’s history—as traced back to its judicial beginnings—is incredibly suspect. Therefore, the Colony of Truth is more of an ironic comment on the inability to create a satisfying myth out of this history than it is a symbol of any kind of truth at all. For instance, the young man who befriends Julius snorts and sardonically wonders whether “the jury was all Indians” (226), a possibility that both this young man and Hodgins’ readers realize to be ridiculous since the history of this province registers, like any other Canadian region, the reality of a racist past. And perhaps it is no wonder, then, that Donal Keneally, the would-be hero who is part god and part madman and who attempts to preside over this Irish-Canadian stronghold of “truth,” invites the earth to swallow him as it had swallowed his mother before him. After all, this world’s history does not lend itself to the creation of a satisfying myth any more than the province of the wanton Irish does.

And perhaps it is also understandable, therefore, that the narrator of Margaret Atwood’s Surfacing (1972) turns mad and becomes part of the bush and scrub at the end of Atwood’s novel. While Carol Anne Howells observes that Atwood “began by representing wilderness to Canadians as their own distinctive national space” (21) in Surfacing as well as in Survival (1972) and The Journals of Susanna Moodie (1970), it also seems that Atwood was saying something different about the wilderness or lands of Canada in Surfacing. True, Surfacing does show dismay about American influence and encroachment on Canadian beliefs, culture and soil, and it can accurately be described as a “product of cultural nationalism” (23), as it has been by Howells. However, Atwood also
draws a distinction in this novel between English and French-Canadian history and aboriginal histories, and Surfacing, as William Closson James points out in Locations of the Sacred: Essays, Religion, Literature and Canadian Culture, seems to be fashioned as a sort of "Amerindian vision quest" (71). The novel begins, for example, with the narrator remembering her father's claim that "there was nothing in the North but the past and not much of that either" (9). The irony of this comment is revealed much later in the novel, of course, when the same man is discovered to have drowned while searching for one of the North's ancient petroglyphs, or Indian rock carvings. The fact that the lands of Canada are literally records of an old and indigenous history is underscored here, and like Kroetsch, Bowering, Cohen and Hodgins, Atwood also points to the idea that this world has seen its share of destruction. And when the narrator becomes one with the land at the novel's end--when she removes herself from her community and from the history of the French, the English and Canada's Southern neighbour--it is as if she has turned her back on history in an attempt to create something new out of a sacred force which she feels but which she cannot yet define.

"[W]e may march behind [Riel’s] hearse into the wilderness perhaps for generations" (128), Sir. John A. MacDonald declared at the end of John Coulter's Riel (1972). Perhaps he was right. That is, perhaps MacDonald's sentiment is indicative of the recognition that while this nation may have collectively experienced that social impetus or "period of a certain magnitude" (Frye, "Conclusion to LHC," in Gorjup 68) which Frye had claimed was necessary for the creation of a national mythology, the mythological reaction to this impetus could only be governed by a recognition of aboriginal authority
and, thus, by a symbolic act which rendered this nation’s collective self subservient to that authority.

In essence, I wish to suggest here that it may very well be the case that this mythological pattern is the first indication that these texts are examples of what Jarold Ramsey would call “mythropoesis,” a term which Ramsey defines when he makes the following observations about the influence which Biblical myths have had on Western Indian creation narratives:

In general, looking from Scripture to the native texts, I propose that there are three main kinds of assimilation—really, three broad and no doubt overlapping degrees of Bible-story derivations. First, there is simple incorporation: a story is taken in and recited with simple alterations, generally centering on details of setting. Second is adaptation: a story is adapted more or less drastically, often so as to fit into a pre-existing native cycle or scheme, and often with dislocation of narrative order and alteration of motives and meanings. Third, we might see a kind of mythpoesis, in which, through what looks like a genuine free play of imagination over the convergence of native and Christian traditions, ‘something new’ is created. (Reading the Fire 172)

While Ramsey is speaking specifically here of religiously-inflected narrative exchanges, and while his theoretical conclusions are drawn from a consideration of how Christian influences have affected aboriginal stories and traditions, it seems fitting to extend his definitions to this discussion here. After all, this chapter has set out, in large part, to consider how a post-centenary, postmodernist impulse may be indicative of the fact that
literary innovation, or "mythpoesis," grew out of the influence which was exerted by the CNLR and the NCR. And it seems that a certain confrontation with recent history and social revolution is somehow related to the fact that Canadian history has become so problematized that it has taken on the shape of a kind of trickster figure in Badlands, Burning Water and Beautiful Losers. As well, it seems that a new recognition of aboriginal authority has led authors who trace their nation's authority back to an inglorious past to create anti-heroes who are sacrificed to a wilderness or process which is symbolic of a recognition of a belief in the sacred.

With that said, however, it must also be recognized that this "new-felt authority" does not merely connect to the emergence of a composite trickster figure in three Canadian texts. As well, it must be understood that the recognition of "mythpoesis" in Canadian literature and the recognition of native influences in non-native Canadian writing is no new thing. As Leslie Monkmarn points out in A Native Heritage, since the beginning of Canada's literary history, "white writers" have turned to Indian myths and legends and have found "a new understanding of the landscape and its gods and [have discovered] rhythms, images, and structures that enable them to communicate in a new and powerful idiom" (5). Likewise, when Frye spoke of the influence which native traditions had had on Canadian literature after 1960, he spoke of "absorption" (1989-90, "Levels of Cultural Identity," in Gorjup 201), a process which could be defined in Ramsey's terms as either "incorporation" or "mythpoesis." But what I would like to consider more closely here are those formal characteristics which have carried this mythological impulse in those postmodern texts discussed in this chapter. I would like to suggest that there is something
similar between these postmodern techniques which have made a trickster out of Canadian history and the nature of both the political exchanges of the NCR and the literary characteristics of the body of literature which grew out of the CNLR. And I would also like to suggest that it is at this intersection of postmodern literary innovation and social and literary revolution that some new speculations may be able to be made.

Most notably, and as the discussion of Badlands has revealed at greater length, Kroetsch and others were deconstructing and problematizing the whole notion of history. They were pointing to the idea that national history had been composed of a string of stories which had to be re-created somehow, and they were developing what have been called postmodern techniques to do so. And, here, it is useful to re-consider how Hutcheon has defined postmodern fiction. Hutcheon has defined this genre as one which, "[u]nlike the art or literature of modernism . . .[,] uses its tendency towards self-reference as a way both of engaging with its own past, usually through irony and parody, and also of engaging with its audience" (Canadian Postmodern xi). "[R]eaders of the postmodern novel (like the modernist one)," she continues, "must participate, even if we do not identify" (Canadian Postmodern 27). While Hutcheon aptly recognizes a "continuity between the modernist and the postmodernist," what she says "distinguishes them" is the use of post-modernism's "self-consciousness" to foster a "new engagement with the social and the historical world . . . in such a way as to challenge (though not destroy) our traditional humanist beliefs about the function of art in society" (Canadian Postmodern 1-2). Therefore, postmodern texts might be seen to challenge those conditions upon which writing had seemed to formerly depend: postmodern texts are largely "fiction about
fiction” (Canadian Postmodern 205); they challenge realist conventions like the “linearity
of print” (206); they “[invite] self-conscious play” (207); and, above all, they question
“how and why we read” (208). In postmodern works, “narrative unity, reliable point of
view, coherent character presentation” are all, in one way or another, made suspect, and
what was once “‘transparent’” in the earlier traditions of realist literature is now
“‘opaque’” (21).

Thus, in the works of “Mr. Canadian Postmodern,” as Robert Kroetsch has been
affectionately dubbed by Hutcheon (Canadian Postmodern 160), one might find, as this
study has found in its reading of Badlands, a notable awareness of and emphasis on the
process of storytelling, a suspect and playful narrator, a reliance on historical and cultural
stereotypes to create play and to indicate that history and traditional beliefs must be
challenged, and a questioning of the nature of truth via a challenging of literary
conventions. But are these simply the markers of postmodernism? Can these
characteristics only be understood in terms of a large, international movement which built
upon the anterior traditions of modernism? Or are they indicative of some other kind of
influence as well?

Interestingly, these characteristics, which, more than anything, invoke virtual types
of social exchange through what may be called transitive artifice, are reminiscent of the
demand for new relationships and new forms of exchange in times of social tension. In
addition, they are reminiscent of the formal characteristics of some oral literatures. These
characteristics, then, may point to social revolution and Native traditions as possible
informants in their design. And perhaps these last claims can best be explained by
considering the rhetorical and narrative techniques which surfaced in the literature of the CNLR.

"I write this for all of you, to tell you what it is like to be a Halfbreed woman in our country," Maria Campbell began her autobiography, *Half-Breed* (1973: 2). "I want to tell you about the joys and sorrows, the oppressing poverty, the frustrations and the dreams" (2). Here, we have a work and a beginning that is not postmodern. *Half-Breed*, like Lee Maracle's *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* (1975) and like so many other autobiographies which were published during the years of the CNLR, did not attempt to deconstruct speech and play with intent. These works were written by authors who were intent on creating an awareness of new and diverse cultural voices in Canada's public domain. These works recorded a history that had been played with in dangerous ways by others for many years, and misinterpretation could not be invited. But what is notable about Campbell's beginning address is that it invokes participation and invites an audience to listen in a very self-reflexive way. And in many ways, *Half-Breed* is representative of some strong values which grew out of the literature of the CNLR and out of the political and social actions of the NCR. Together, both of these movements were doing at least three things: they were demanding an audience; they were encouraging people to examine their own positions in relation to Canada's history; and they were making suspect the nature of political, historical and cultural truth.

What I mean to suggest here is that it would be understandable if, when non-Native writers chose to respond to Canadian and aboriginal history in a formal way after the CNLR and NCR, they were led to render tenuous those conventions which had shared
a part in the problems of which authors such as Campbell and Maracle were speaking. It would also be understandable if these formal responses to such a history became highly self-reflexive. And it would also be understandable if truth and history became dominant concerns in a new or, rather, fresh, way, especially if history had recently been made suspect through social revolution. The characteristics which dominate Badlands, Burning Water and Beautiful Losers, in other words, might be seen as characteristics which have been shaped by the demands of a time period where social revolution dictated that people begin challenging their world views and the languages and rhetorical techniques which carried their beliefs. Campbell is but one of the speakers who were adding their voices, in both writing and formal addresses, to a new type of writing, and Campbell, like other Native writers of this time period, was encouraging a new kind of participation and re-establishing a belief in the relation between speaker and audience. And, indeed, there were a number of people who responded to this invitation: the publishing world attests to the recognition that many non-Native writers could not avoid engaging with aboriginal history, values and voices in the 1960s and 1970s. But as I wish to suggest very clearly here, non-Native writers were not simply beginning to engage in a new dialogue. They were also shaping their responses to recent history with new rhetorical and innovative tools which this social revolution both demanded and defined.

For instance, it is equally important to consider the aesthetic characteristics which grew out of those traditional narratives which were being transcribed for the first time in years during the CNLR, which were being used in court cases to prove land title, and which were being used in public addresses and political meetings. One might consider, for
instance, that what Robert Pelton--an authority on oral literatures--would call "sacred histories" and oral "literature[s] of the imagination" (19) both share devices which ensure that speaker and listener are connected and working together in a narrative exchange. Paula Gunn Allen, for one, claims that Native stories which share a relation with orature "hold the listener's attention so that they can experience a sense of belonging to a sturdy and strong tradition" (Spider Woman's Granddaughters 4), and various critics of different bodies of oral literatures which are connected to a lengthy oral heritage note that these literatures embody precise rhetorical techniques to foster a relation between audience and listener. "If any single feature sets oral performance apart from conventional literary genres," Viv Edwards and Thomas J. Sienkewicz claim in their work Oral Cultures Past and Present: Rappin' and Homer, "it is probably [the] tendency to include rather than exclude, to draw the audience and the community at large into the performance by means of referential elements, to incorporate a variety of traditional forms into the fibre of the performance" (190). Now, these referential elements will differ greatly as one moves from one body of national stories to another, but the purpose behind them remains the same. In essence, oral literatures and "postmodern" works are characterized by an emphatic foregrounding of the speaker and by techniques which demand that there is an active engagement between speaker and listener.

As well, it is interesting that authors who write out of an oral tradition, as well as critics of their literatures, draw attention to the way that oral narratives often embody other strategies to challenge listeners to participate and, as well, that they do so by commenting on the nature of the medium which they are using. First, we might consider
that many oral literatures do not have conventional conclusions and that their meanings are not overtly apparent but must be determined by the receiver of the story. In her preface to *Sojourner's Truth* (1990), for example, Maracle explains that "[m]ost of [her culture's] stories don't have orthodox 'conclusions' [and that] that is left to the listeners, who [are entrusted to] draw useful lessons from the story—not necessarily the lessons we wish them to draw, but all conclusions are considered valid" (11-12). Granted, oral literatures, in one sense, could be said to be more imperial and totalitarian than written literatures, given the fact that their spiritual or factual nature often necessitates that one have blind faith in their prophecies and revelations and in those people who have been trained as group historians or spiritual guides. Certainly this is the case if one is dealing with "sacred histories" or "oral histories" (Pelton). On the other hand, though, "oral literatures of the imagination" (Pelton), such as those old man stories which frame Kroetsch's text, are often dependent on a certain amount of ambiguity and malleability not only to provoke a listener's participation but also to draw attention to the machinery of storytelling and to the important role it plays in the questioning of truth.

For example, characteristics such as digression and riddling—ubiquitous features of many diverse bodies of oral literatures—almost always deflect authority away from the teller of the tale and invest responsibility in the listener. Interestingly, these same characteristics also serve to question truth or, rather, the manner in which truths are disseminated. These aspects of oral storytelling circle truth, as it were, and, spun as they originally were and still are on the lips of a performer, truth may thus also be seen to evade the author. And if there is one major thing that ties postmodern texts and oral literatures
together, it is the fact that the questioning of truth has been given formal structures. Paradoxes which do not merge, emphases on elusive processes instead of empirical structures, reservations instead of conclusions--these are all the marks of postmodernism, and they share an affinity with the provocative speculations of some oral narratives.

Frye, of course, once remarked that "empathy between poet and listening audience . . . is broken by the rise of a writing culture" (1968, "Silence in the Sea" in BG 187). However, when cultures writing out of solid oral traditions become a focal point of national consideration, the desirous gaze of writers from outside this tradition may either inadvertently resurrect, through a kind of public osmosis, or wittily appropriate not only the beliefs but also the structures inherent in those literatures which are dependent on both speaker and listener. And I would suggest that this is what such authors as Kroetsch, Bowering, Cohen and others have done.

This is not to say that Canadian postmodernism owes its origins entirely to Native literatures and their influences. And perhaps postmodernism is not the word that best describes that type of writing which seems to have been born when non-Native writers borrowed from aboriginal rhetorical techniques and oral traditions and inscribed new literary characteristics in their recent confrontations with history. In her article "Circling the Downspout of Empire," Hutcheon, for example, has deliberately separated the defining characteristics of post-colonial writing and post-modernist writing by separating the politics belonging to these different types of writing. And, here, we might consider that contemporary Native literatures are not unlike post-colonial literatures. As Hutcheon's distinctions indicate, the social imperatives of post-colonial writing are distinct from those
of postmodernist works since the latter share no specific affinity with “the Right and the Left” and since they render post-modernism a “politically ambivalent” form of art (Hutcheon, “Circling the Downspout” 130). But that taken into account, there is still something to be said for the recognition that the texts discussed in this chapter are reliant on formal characteristics common to both postmodernism and oral literatures and that the result is the emergence of a mythological character which dominates ancient sorts of mythologies and which has grabbed the attention of both creative writers and critics in a new and forceful way since the advent of the CNLR and larger NCR. Admittedly, whatever words we choose to define the influence which aboriginal writing has had on Canadian literature will probably be better chosen in the years to come. But if we can learn more about the old traditions on which contemporary Native literatures are based, we might be able to separate strands in Canadian postmodernism which render this form distinct from other forms of postmodernism and which point to the idea that the newness of Canadian literature during the late 1960s was not simply a result of international, postmodernist influences.

In conclusion, then, these three texts which have been discussed at length in this chapter, although they do not prove literary influence, show the emergence of a potential mythological figure—albeit embryonic—out of a fuzzy intersection between postmodernism and the possible vestiges of orature. And I think it is equally telling that this figure emerges at a time when a transparent and perhaps superficial aboriginal “presence” is felt in a new way throughout the larger body of Canadian literature and at a point when a simplistic confusion and conflation of the indigene (as symbol) with the land or landscape
leads to a composite depiction of the sacred. And if we can consider Kroetsch’s text to be a prime indication of how things conflate into an awkward sentiment, we might, with more hindsight and more critical forays, be able to separate certain things given time.

Understood as a response to a prescient aboriginal authority, Badlands does four important things: it remembers and foregrounds an uncomfortable history; it locates the source of the sacred in the land (which is representative of threatened cultural truths); it posits a faith in alterity while recognizing that it cannot embrace that alterity; and it uses a new language influenced by oral traditions (called postmodernism) to do so. In light of the concerns of the first chapter, then, Badlands might be understood as corresponding to a pattern of literary development: it indicates that its author has engaged with a history of crisis and with a moment of national significance; it indicates that its author is also engaging with an “associative cultural landscape” (O’Donnell 220) that is borne not out of a colonial past but out of a reaction to the historical present; it indicates that its author has recognized the possibility that new “habits of metaphorical thought” (Frye) exist; and it indicates that imported paradigms have been challenged by a new literary process of formal deconstruction. In light of the concerns of the second chapter, Badlands might be understood as possessing the marks of influence: it indicates that this nation has been forced to remember; it registers the reality of the sacred while realizing that another’s gods cannot be borrowed; it defers to a ubiquitous authority; and it possesses some of the formal characteristics of oral literatures.

Admittedly, when these two sets of developments are conflated, we are left to ponder those two phenomenons of “desire” and “appropriation” which so many critics
have spoken of when they discuss non-Native literature and its “borrowing” of Native mythological material. However, this conflation may also be understood in terms of traditional, mythological development. To be sure, there are dangers here. This conflation is imbricated in a complex process of romanticizing and stereotyping, but in a discussion of mythologizing, one should question whether or not there is a mythological history behind all of this. That is, although there is a danger in stereotyping and a strict return to cultural separation through romanticization, are there mythological traditions behind something which can only represent a force as symbolic?

In Reading the Fire: Essays in the Traditional Indian Literatures of the Far West, Ramsey traces the influence of non-Native mythology on Salishan literature:

Several Salishan-speaking Indian tribes of interior British Columbia have oral-historical records of their apparently unanticipated encounters with Simon Fraser’s canoe expedition as it struggled down the rugged Fraser towards its Pacific mouth in the summer of 1808. . . . One of these stories, from the Lillooet tribe, gives a quite detailed and literal account of “the drifters,” as the Lilloets nicknamed the visitors who suddenly appeared on their stretch of the river, literal that is, except for one gnomical detail. The expedition’s headman, presumably Fraser, is said to have had “a tattoo of the sun on his forehead and a tattoo of the moon on his chest.”

Now there is no reason to suppose that Fraser was so ornamented (the Lilloets did practice tattooing themselves), yet he is vividly identified with the sun and the moon in the oral tradition of another native group, The Thompson River
Indians (or *Nlaka’pamux*). When the party reached the Thompsons’ country immediately above the Lilloets, they suffered a spectacular canoe-capsizing some miles below the present-day town of Lytton, and when James Teit transcribed the Thompsons’ oral literature for Franz Boas a full century later, he recorded . . . three accounts of the accident. . . . Taken together with Simon Fraser’s own journal narrative of the event, they offer a rare illustration, a paradigm in fact, of the working process of adaptive myth-making. (123)

This example supports James Clifford’s assertion that “what one sees in a coherent ethnographic account, the imaged construct of the other, is connected in a continuous double structure with what one understands” (“On Ethnographic Allegory,” in WC 101). Here, Fraser is tattooed because the tattoos appropriately define him in terms of what the storyteller’s world knows. And if I can extend this example to a consideration of those texts which have been discussed in this chapter, what I would argue is that just as the Salishan Fraser wears a sun and moon on his forehead, so, too, has Canadian literature begun to wear the imprint of different symbols. But it wears these symbols much as a band-aid would be worn on a gunshot wound. After all, while the sacred is recognized as being, it glaringly sits on top of a history that is not borne out of the source of this sacred material. This is not to say that the process is either good or bad or filled with “fear or temptation” (Goldie)—these are points which belong to an equally important, but different, discussion. Rather, it is a reminder that, as Otto Rank underscores in “The Myth of the Birth of the Hero,” “appropriation of mythological contents always represents at the same time an independent mythological construction; because only that can be retained
permanently which corresponds to the borrower’s stage of mythological ideation” (in Segal 4).

So what has been retained here, then? What constructions tell of a new stage of mythological ideation in Canada? Anti-heroes, new and forceful inscriptions of the sacred and the profane, an inability to move beyond a recognition of violence, and a new trickster. Of course, these new mythological patterns did not suggest any easy future for the making of Canadian mythology when they surfaced several decades ago, and texts such as Badlands, Burning Water, and Beautiful Losers indicated that this new trickster they were carrying might never be able to make us laugh without cringing. But like any trickster, the character which Canadian history has become will continue to record tensions and the birthmarks of a “Heraclitian flux” (R. Brown, “Time of the Redmen” 92). And this is not a bad thing. Although our trickster stories will probably never make absolute sense of this world, they will lead us to recognize that more sense can be made out of tensions than a world of absolutes.
Notes: Chapter Three


4. In her introduction to The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction, Hutcheon makes the following claim: “something new began to appear in the seventies and eighties [in Canada]. What the rest of the world was starting to call ‘postmodernism’ had arrived in Canada—-but the form it took was a distinctly Canadian one” (1).

5. Toronto Telegram 5 December 1967; Edmonton Journal 24 November 1967; Vancouver Province 25 November 1967; and unpublished interview with Christopher Innes, 25 March 1983; qtd. in Innes 51.

6. Parker claims that during Canada’s early years, “[t]he very situation of Canada was inimical to drama” (23). In addition to the fact that “the country was too big and too sparsely populated for a medium that is essentially an art of developed cities,” Parker claims that Canada lacked “an imaginative myth of itself, any ideal such as the ‘American Dream’ or the ‘frontier’ or even ‘democracy’” (153).

7. See Chapter Four of Peter Thomas’s Robert Kroetsch, “The Far Interior: Gone Indian; Badlands,” and Ann Mandel’s article “Uninventing Structures: Cultural Criticism and the
Novels of Robert Kroetsch” for a discussion of the Orphic descent in *Badlands*.

8. See Janice Acoose’s (Misko-Kisikawihkwe’s) *Iskwewak—Kah’Ki Yaw Ni Wahkomakanak: Neither Indian Princesses Nor Easy Squaws* for a detailed discussion of how Indian women have consistently been portrayed as either princesses or squaws in creative works by non-Native authors.

9. Goldie claims that “[i]ndigenous peoples in literature are not a reflection of themselves but of the needs of the white culture which created that literature” (“Fear and Temptation,” in King, *The Native in Literature* 78).


11. In her article “The White Inuit Speaks: Contamination as Literary Strategy,” Diana Brydon strongly disagrees with Hutcheon’s explanation of postmodernism. As Brydon sees it, “[t]he authority of the post-modernist text comes from [its] ambivalence, this ability to see all sides, to defer judgement and to refuse agency” (137). Moreover, Brydon understands this ambivalence to be inextricable with a political agenda: “In effect, then, ambivalence works to maintain the status quo. It updates the ambiguity so favoured by the New Critics, shifting their formalist analysis of the text’s unity into a psychoanalysis of its fissures, and their isolation of text from world into a worldliness that cynically discounts the effectiveness of any action for social change” (137).

12. Desire and appropriation can be understood to be separate from one another, but the two are often imbricated in a complex process. In her article “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance,” bell hooks, speaking of white desire for black culture in the United
States, claims that white desire for blackness leads to appropriation and the commodification of black culture: "[w]ithin commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (181). bell hooks goes further than problematizing the relation between desire and appropriation, however, and claims that it is necessary to create an open space for the discussion of desire so that desire does not lead to a consumerist appropriation and commodification of culture. She speaks from the viewpoint of a teacher, and she provides the following anecdote and reflections: "After weeks of debating with one another about the distinction between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation, students in my introductory course on black literature were convinced that something radical was happening, that these issues were 'coming out in the open.' Within a context where desire for contact with those who are different or deemed Other is not considered bad, politically incorrect, or wrong-minded, we can begin to conceptualize and identify ways that desire informs our political choices and affiliations. Acknowledging ways the desire for pleasure, and that includes erotic longings, informs our politics, our understanding of difference, we may know better how desire disrupts, subverts, and makes resistance possible" (200).

Chapter Four

The Backlash of Influence: A Study of the Criticism Surrounding Tomson Highway and His Work

Where have all the good men gone,
And where are all the gods?
Where’s the street-wise Hercules
To fight the rising odds?

I need a hero,
I’m holding out for a hero ‘til the end of the night
He’s gotta be sure
And it’s gotta be soon
And he’s gotta be larger than life.
(Bonnie Tyler, “I’m Holding out for a Hero”)

In tandem, the last three chapters have traced the story which searches for Canada’s sacred historical mythology from its beginnings to its climax—to the late 1960s and 1970s when, as I have suggested, a new stage of mythological ideation seemed to appear in Canada. Here was that moment in time which those such as Edward Hartley Dewart, Archibald Lampman, Archibald MacMechan, E.K. Brown and Northrop Frye had anticipated; however, here, too, was a social and literary revolution that thwarted Frye’s expectation that Canada’s “Day of Atonement” would usher in something comparable to a traditional mythological moment. Together, both the Contemporary Native Literary Renaissance (CNLR) and the Native Cultural Renaissance (NCR) prompted a collective act of remembrance and, consequently, traumatic reactions to that act of remembrance: in post-centenary mythologies that attempted to address and redress Canadian history, national heroes or representatives became allied with the profane, and anti-heroes were sacrificed in rituals that recognized the holocaust of the past but which promised no
respite or new answers; gods became a hopeless possibility in these same mythologies which re-visited Canada's implication in holocaust; and a new trickster appeared that re-visited the nexus between the sacred and profane but which seemed to provide little solace in this national vigil. What I mean to emphasize here is that the CNLR and the NCR intervened in this story which searches for Canada's sacred historical mythology and changed the narrative possibilities which traditionally attend the creation of national mythologies. But if this is the case, and if we can recognize the climax in the narrative which this dissertation has traced thus far, what lies beyond the height of this exchange in Canadian literary history?

This is a large question, and it will take years of hindsight—perhaps centuries—to determine how the CNLR and the NCR have affected Canadian literature, mythology and thought. But this chapter attempts to consider how a new stage of mythological ideation in Canada can be identified by considering narratives which follow on the heels of the 1960s and 1970s by several decades. As well, this chapter also looks beyond the world of fiction and at different types of articulations. In many ways, the world of fiction is distinct from different types of narratives, though it naturally communes with, and responds to, literature in general. Thus, if one is to recognize or suggest that the CNLR and the NCR, or late-twentieth century aboriginal literature and activism in general, have had a profound effect on Canadian mythologizing and ideologies, then one has to consider not only those narratives which grow out of a time period which is divorced somewhat from the climax of this story but also different types of cultural expressions.

Thus, this chapter considers the world of literary criticism, and, in particular, the
body of criticism which surrounds Cree author Tomson Highway, in order to support the
notion that post-centenary Canadian mythologizing embodies the markers of, and an
anxiety with, contemporary, aboriginal influences. And I have chosen to specifically focus
on Highway and the reactions he has engendered within Canadian journalism and
scholarship for the following reasons. First, although another study might attempt to
account for a number of aboriginal authors and the critical voices which try to make sense
of these artists and their work, I am convinced that something peculiar looms in the
background of Highway criticism more than it does in the criticism of any other aboriginal
artist living and writing in Canada today. As this chapter will suggest, Highway has been
constructed as some kind of mythological hero in the criticism of his work, and, thus, I
have chosen to provide a case study of Highway because the hero worship which
surrounds Highway shares a number of telling characteristics with those postmodern
mythologies which have been discussed in the last chapter. Second, in order to fully
assess what Highway has come to represent and in order to suggest that Highway has
become symbolic of something large than life, it is necessary to look in detail at an
exhaustive body of criticism which surrounds this author; therefore, since the body of
criticism surrounding Highway is vast, it is not possible to account for any other aboriginal
artist within the space and scope of this study.

To begin, then, it is important to note that this chapter takes as its premise that, for
every reaction, there is a counter reaction. And within the story which this dissertation is
tracing—and it is, admittedly, a humanist and tenuous one—what I mean here is that when
heroes begin disappearing in national mythologies which are dependent on humanist
ideologies, they necessarily begin to surface elsewhere in equally humanist spaces. That is, heroes, in a structuralist and humanist sense, cannot simply vanish. The needs they serve are thought to be universal, and, thus, they must exist if pan-national mythologies exist, for humanist mythologies, by their very nature, need heroes to survive. But what happens when the mythologically minded cannot use national heroes to supply this need? What happens when one’s nation has become symbolically associated with the profane and can no longer afford heroes? What happens when heroes are dead or when dead, national heroes can no longer serve a heroic function? As this chapter will suggest by considering how Highway has become a living mythological hero who serves certain needs and desires not unlike those which have been spoken of in the last chapter, it is people who are associated with superficial understandings of the contemporary sacred who can become heroes and, sometimes, gods. And this is what Highway has become. A hero. A symbol of the sacred. And a promise of redemption.

To be sure, this chapter does not praise what Highway has become. Therefore, and as I will also suggest, Highway criticism not only exposes certain post-centenary, mythological desires, but it also exposes the need for scholastic integrity in the criticism of Native literatures. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is twofold: 1) to support the arguments which have been made in Chapter Three and to lend credence to the idea that contemporary, aboriginal literature and thought have shaped—either subtly or forcefully—the themes and structures of certain, contemporary Canadian mythologies; and 2) to suggest that the criticism of First Nations writing should, at this moment in time, be guided by an interest in aesthetics. But while this chapter does attempt, more than
anything else, to question and de-stabilize the illusions which are infused in the cultist worship, or blind praise, of Highway, it does not so much denigrate these illusions as it does try to understand them. And, thus, this chapter attempts to answer the following questions: What can Highway criticism tell us about contemporary, “Canadian” mythological desires? Why is it that Highway becomes associated with an essentialist, Native world that does not, in fact, exist? Why do people attempt to protect Highway or that which he has come to represent? Why do critics use Highway as a medium through which they attempt to disassociate themselves from a problematic, national history? Why are critics reticent to criticize Highway, and why do they believe everything he says? Why do critics begin using a self-reflexive and didactic kind of rhetoric in their critical responses to Highway, and why does this rhetoric smack of the language which authors such as Robert Kroetsch, George Bowering and Leonard Cohen use in their postmodern mythologies? Why do critics then abandon this rhetoric when reactive sentiments to the CNLR and the NCR begin to wane, and why do they begin adopting impenetrable, theoretical jargon to discuss Highway and his art? Above all else, though, this chapter asks, time and time again, why has Highway become a mythological hero?

Thus, this chapter will begin by providing a biography of Tomson Highway, and it will do so for two reasons. First, because there is not yet any full-length book dedicated to Highway, and, as well, no extensive biography of this author’s life, I feel it is necessary to re-produce the story of Highway’s life so that I can situate responses to Highway’s work in relation to his different achievements. 1 Second, I take the liberty of re-creating the story of Highway’s life here in order to provide a healthy check against those
responses to Highway which seem to suggest that the story of Highway's life naturally lends itself to a mythologizing enterprise.

This chapter will then examine those critical voices which first announced the arrival of Tomson Highway on the literary scene and which seem to speak most clearly of national or collective desires: reviews, profiles and interviews. As I will argue, in these types of critical responses which are dependent on romantic sensibilities and paternalistic impulses, Highway becomes symbolic of a glorious age and indicative of a desire to keep alive or revitalize that part of the past which colonization threatened and attempted to destroy. Moreover, I will suggest that Highway is used by reviewers to purge themselves of guilt and to remove themselves from implication in an ugly history. And as I will inevitably argue, these two characteristics suggest that early Highway criticism, like those postmodern works discussed in the last chapter, is indicative of a post-CNLR/post-NCR sensibility.

Next, this chapter will examine those critical articles on Highway's work which are found in literary journals and which constitute a more scholarly response to Highway than that which is found in pop-culture journalism. However, I will claim that in this type of analysis, one might also notice certain desires and patterns which dominate reviews. Although different impulses and characteristics also surface in this corpus of criticism, as I will argue, along with reviews, profiles and interviews, these critical articles perpetuate a number of mythological desires not unlike those which are found in postmodern, Eurocentric Canadian mythologies. And as I will suggest, then, it is necessary to separate the world of pop-cultural mythology from the world of literary criticism and to interrogate
this new “mythpoeisis” (Ramsey, Reading the Fire 172) which has surfaced in post-
centenary, Canadian mythology in order to create new critical tools which are capable of
assessing First Nations literature.

But just how do we extricate criticism from mythology when speaking about
Tomson Highway? That is, how do we resist the urge to speak of this man in grand,
mythological terms when mythology seems to be so inviting? For instance, I find it
impossible to begin re-creating the story of Highway’s life without drawing immediate
attention to the program notes which introduced Native Earth Performing Arts and The
Rez Sisters at the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland in 1988: “When Captain James Cook
arrived on Canada’s West Coast in 1778, he found Nootka Indians using masks, props,
trapdoors, lighting and smoke effects in their religious dramas. But between 1884 and
1951 performing many theatrical celebrations was punishable under the Criminal Code.
Changes to the Code marked the beginning of a renaissance” (Qtd. in Ross, Evening
News, Edinburgh 16 August 1988). Here, this program was referring to the Revised
Indian Act of 1951 which removed any mention of such legislations as the Potlatch Law of
1884 from the national record and which “permitted” Canadian Indians to engage again in
their traditional practices. This program, then, was framing this production of The Rez
Sisters by suggesting that Highway’s play was a product of cultural re-birth and that it
should be understood as such. But if one were to consider this program even more
closely, one might recognize that these notes were also providing fuel for a great legend.
While Scottish critics consistently quoted this material in their reviews of The Rez Sisters
and while they underscored the claim that the year 1951 spelled the beginning of cultural
re-birth in Canada, they could not anticipate the potential for myth-making that their program guide allowed: not only is 1951 one of several popular dates which, in Canada, now marks the birth of the Native Cultural Renaissance, but it is also the same year in which Cree dramatist Tomson Highway was born on his father's trapline on an island in remote Maria Lake in Northern Manitoba. One of the greatest cultural revivals in Canada begins, then, with the birth of Tomson Highway, and, for the mythologically minded, Highway could thus be understood as a prophet or savior or as the harbinger of the Native Cultural Renaissance itself.

And it becomes even more enticing to understand Highway in these terms when we consider how Highway's creative work adds a mythic or mystic edge to the moment of his birth:

'And K'si mantou, the Great Spirit, held the baby boy by his big toe and dropped him from the stars...'

*Poof!* He went on his bum, smack into the most exquisite mound of snow in the entire forest, making crystals of silver spray shoot up to join the stars. He disappeared into the mound and would have stayed down there indefinitely if it hadn't been for his bouncy baby flesh and his supple new-born bones...

The tent interior glowed golden warm from the kerosene lamp. Moaning and whimpering and crying softly, Mariesis Okimasis lay on a bed of spruce boughs, a minuscule and very ancient woman hovering over her like the branch of an old pine tree: Misty Marie Gazandlaree, Chipewyan, ninety-three years of age and one of the most respected midwives in the north at that time. The silver baby
scooted under the old woman’s left arm, took a little hop, two small skips, one
dive and half a pirouette, and landed square on top of Mariesis Okimasis’s firm
round belly: 5:00 A.M., Saturday, December 1, 1951. (KFQ 19-21)

Dropped from the sky by the great Ojibway spirit K’si Mantou, this silver child promises a
renewal or second coming. Surely some revelation is at hand here, and, surely, this child
will be a leader of his nation. Indeed, if Scottish critics had had this information at their
disposal in 1988, they might very well have said that Great Birnam Wood had arrived at
Dunsinane Hill at last and that Highway was no less than Canada’s Macduff. But of
course, this mythic parallel would not be available for another decade, and, as well, the
silver child that may very well have been burning in Highway’s mind as early as 1988 was
a fictive apparition: after all, the above passage is an excerpt from Highway’s most recent
work and first novel, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998), and the birth being described is that of
the novel’s protagonist, Jeremiah Okimasis.

Now, I have chosen to introduce Highway by deliberately underscoring the fictive
process inherent in my own writing because both the Edinburgh program guide and *Kiss
of the Fur Queen* are excellent examples of the mythological fodder which is available to
Highway critics. And, in particular, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is an extremely poignant
example of how Highway’s biography can be twisted to create mythology. Indeed,
Highway’s work occasionally provides the means for understanding his life in
mythological terms, and, as this chapter will go on to explore, many critics have not been
able to resist the temptation to create portraits of this artist which are dependent on
mythological desires. But more specifically, I wish to underscore three important and
different considerations here. First, my decision to draw a parallel between the birth of Highway and the birth of the Native Cultural Renaissance leads one to consider how critics may be enticed to shape artists in a certain way because of their own desires and pre-determined agendas. Second, and considering how *Kiss of the Fur Queen* seems to endorse the parallels which are drawn here between Highway and a culture hero, one might also consider that artists sometimes consciously or unconsciously contribute to their public personas. And, third, considering that the Edinburgh program guide and *Kiss of the Fur Queen* enable one to understand Highway in relation to either social revolution or autobiographically inspired fiction, one might consider that there are always competing stories which constitute the history and depiction of any individual. To be sure, it is difficult at times to determine where the critics’ desires end and where responsible criticism begins and where fiction ends and where autobiography begins (and vice versa). As well, it is equally difficult to identify the most appropriate frameworks for interpreting an author. And as this chapter will go on to suggest, it seems to be an incredibly difficult task to separate competing narratives when one attempts to construct an understanding of Highway.

With all of these caveats taken into consideration, then, I begin re-creating the story of Highway’s life by self-consciously romanticizing Highway’s early years. And I take my cue from what Highway has said about his childhood. As Highway has explained in a number of interviews and public speeches, he grew up in one of the most beautiful and magical places on earth—Northwestern Manitoba. As a young child, he and his younger brother fished with their father in the most pristine of lakes and trapped with him on the
most spectacular of plains. For Highway, this childhood world was truly beautiful, and for anyone who has traveled in this area of Canada or for anyone who has seen Tomson Highway: Native Voice, the CBC television special on Highway, which capitalizes on the lakes and woods of Highway’s youth, it would be hard to argue against this man.

Granted, there were hardships which attend living in an isolated, rural community, and the Highway family was no exception to tragedy. Before Highway was born, “[s]ix of [his] brothers and sisters died” (Highway, qtd. in T. Ferguson, Imperial Oil Review, Winter 1989: 21), and, today, Highway is one of only four siblings who have survived out of the original twelve children born into the Highway family. But Highway was loved immensely since his parents were loving and kind and since they were one of those couples who enjoy a near lifetime together. Joseph and Philomene Highway would spend fifty-nine years together until Joseph’s death in 1988 (Highway, qtd. in T. Ferguson 21). Highway was fortunate to have as his first language the most beautiful, humorous and dancing tongue he has ever known—Cree. He was born into a family and culture rich in music and storytelling traditions, and he was obviously given many gifts.

Indeed, I have constructed an idyllic vision of Highway’s early childhood here. But why not? After all, it seems appropriate to romanticize Highway’s early years, especially when one understands what it is like to look back on a past like this after having been separated from a rural setting and after having lived in a city for an extended period of time. Highway now lives in downtown Toronto, and while he speaks about Toronto in a positive way, he also speaks about his home and early childhood as many people do when they have been separated for a while from the people and places that made them. As
well, and considering the particulars of Highway’s life, there is naturally even more room

to romanticize these early years since Highway’s adolescence was spent in a place which
provides a striking contrast to his childhood.

After all, these early years were ripped out from under Highway’s feet. At an early
age, both he and his brother Rene were sent to a Catholic boarding school in The Pas,
Manitoba, and in accordance with the systematic intents of the Catholic Church and the
Canadian government, Highway was denied the right to speak his own language, denied
the right to worship his own gods, and denied human dignity. For anyone who has read
Highway’s account of residential school in Kiss of the Fur Queen, Basil Johnston’s
account in Indian School Days, or any other notable and comparable history, it becomes
apparent that such a lifestyle could only have been less-than-idyllic. Politely called
“cultural assimilation,” the policy which governed the residential-school system was
calculated to exterminate Indian cultures, and it certainly wreaked havoc in the lives of
many aboriginal peoples. As well, other governmental policies served to make these years
especially trying. For example, it was only five years before Highway moved to Winnipeg
to begin high school, at the age of fifteen, that the Canadian government decided that
Indians should be given the right to vote federally. At an early point in Highway’s life
story, then, we might note that superlatives could easily govern depictions of Highway’s
life. Against the idyllic background of his childhood, after all, we are led to consider those
dark years at the residential school, and the distinctions between Highway’s childhood and
adolescence are, indeed, comparable to the differences between day and night. But there
is much more here to the story of Highway’s life, and such absolutes fade into the
background when we consider a fuller picture of this man and his achievements.

After graduating from Winnipeg High School, Highway was admitted to the University of Manitoba’s faculty of music where he met a teacher by the name of William Aide who was quick to recognize Highway’s talent and promise. This was in 1971, and only one year later, Highway accompanied Aide and his family to London, England when Aide was granted a sabbatical leave. Here, Highway was introduced to the leading artists and musicians of the time, and he seemed to have a promising musical career ahead of him. However, upon returning to the University of Manitoba, and after completing another year of studies, Highway decided, at the age of 23, to “quit music. Cold turkey” (Highway, qtd. in Hannon 37). Highway did eventually follow Aide to the University of Western Ontario where he ended up graduating with an honors in music and a degree in English in 1975, but for almost a decade, he dedicated his life to helping Canada’s aboriginal peoples. Highway laboured in various native organizations such as The Native Peoples’ Resource Centre in London, Ontario; The Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres in Toronto; and the Community Branch of the Ministry of Culture and Recreation in Toronto (Hannon 38). Highway exchanged a future with Chopin and Bach for a future of social service.

Highway did not, however, forego the desire and need publicly to perform an art or arts. Perhaps this is because Highway knows that public art shares a close relation with social action—that art can do something. Instead, he continued to acquire knowledge and to work as a humanitarian, and, then, he began to execute a sophisticated vision in a dramatic way. Within ten years, Highway would be recognized as one of “the two or
three most exciting dramatists writing in Canada” (Wasserman, UTQ 60.1, 1990: 69), as “the most important new Canadian playwright to emerge in the latter half of the 1980s” (D. Johnston 254), and, quite simply, as “one of Canada’s best-known playwrights” (Tompkins and Male 13). He would also be called, at the age of forty, “one of the elders” of the contemporary Native “movement” (Loucks 10).

In 1982, Highway, together with his brother Rene--by this time a respected dancer and choreographer--funded and produced New Song . . . New Dance at Harbourfront in Toronto. This was a “theatre piece,” not really a play, that “incorporated music and poetry in both English and Cree” (Highway, qtd. in Hannon 41). It would eventually be revived in 1988, after Highway had established a name for himself, but, in 1982, using only $8 000 and the Highway wits, Tomson and Rene offered the public their first spectacle (Hannon 41). During this same year, Highway helped stage his next production, The Sage, The Dancer and the Fool, and, again, Highway financed the entire show. Furthermore, he was not only one of the actors but also the playwright, the composer, the piano player and the producer (Hannon 81).

Along with Makka Kleist, Doris Linklater, and Monique Mojica, Highway then took part in a clowning techniques workshop, and the performance that resulted from this meeting, Clown’s Trickster’s Workshop, was produced at the Native Canadian Friendship Centre in September 1984 by Native Earth Performing Arts (Preston, TDR 1992: 137-38). Founded in 1982 and incorporated in 1983, NEPA was the first aboriginal theatre company in Ontario, and it would later play a significant role in Highway’s artistic career. Between December 13, 1984 and January 24, 1985, Highway tried his hand at acting and
joined the cast in *Give Them a Carrot for as Long as the Sun is Green*, a "reworking of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*" (Preston 139). One year later, in 1985, a drug and alcohol group commissioned Highway to write a piece which he called *Jukebox Lady* and which he was quick to label a failure; however, this assertion did nothing to slow Highway down. In 1986, Highway was hired as artistic director of Native Earth Performing Arts, a position which would later make Highway's name virtually synonymous with the company, and, then, during that same year and while living at the West Bay Reserve in Manitoulin Island, Ontario, Highway began to write, and, then, completed within three months, the first draft of his now-famous and canonical play *The Rez Sisters*.

*The Rez Sisters* was workshopped at the De-ba-jeh-mu-jig Theatre Company on Manitoulin Island between February 21 and March 2, 1986, and, then, Highway brought the play to Toronto where it opened at the Native Canadian Friendship Centre on Spadina Road on November 26. Co-produced by Act IV and Native Earth Performing Arts, this production was an immediate success. On the first night, *The Rez Sisters* was sold out, and it continued to attract large audiences for its entire run. After a glowing review by Henry Mietkiewicz in the *Toronto Star*, crowds flooded the Native Canadian Friendship Centre to see what Mietkiewicz called "[o]ne of the most touching, exuberant, cleverly crafted and utterly entrancing plays in Toronto" (28 November 1986: D24). As Highway recalls, over 200 people were turned away on the last Sunday, and the run would have continued if Muriel Miguel, one of the lead roles, did not have prior engagements (qtd. in Pennington, *Toronto Star* 8 March 1987: 55). Highway was then awarded the 1986-87 Dora Mavor Moore Award for best Canadian play for *The Rez Sisters*, and this play also
became a runner-up for the Floyd S. Chalmers Award. Then, in 1988, *The Rez Sisters* was published by Fifth House Publishers in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

Between March 3 and March 22, 1987, Highway's next drama, *Aria*, played at the Annex Theatre in Toronto, and it was subsequently nominated for a Dora Mavor Moore Award for Best Production by a Small Theatre Company. This was a piece which Highway had written for Makka Kleist, an Inuit woman from Greenland who performed all of the different female roles which constituted Highway's depiction of woman.6 *Aria* represented Canada at the Asia Pacific Festival in Vancouver between June 20 and July 2, 1987, and it was also presented in Southern Greenland at the Aasivak Festival in late July.

Three months later, *The Rez Sisters* began its national tour, and it played from October 6, 1987 to January 31, 1988 in five major cities across Canada--Ottawa, Winnipeg, Toronto, Vancouver and Regina. The play was then invited to join the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland giving *The Rez Sisters* the status of being "the first Native Canadian Play in the Festival's 42 year history" ("Native Play," *Tekawennake* 18 August 1988). This same year, *The Rez Sisters* also became a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award for Drama. Then, between February 8, 1989 and March 5, 1989, *The Sage, the Dancer and the Fool* was revived at the Native Canadian Friendship Centre, and, later, this play was nominated for another Dora Mavor Moore Award. Highway was also given the Wang Award at the International Festival of Authors in October, and, then, NEPA's 1989/90 theatre season was launched at Stop 33 in the Sutton Place Hotel where people were given a sneak preview of Highway's rez musical, *Rose* (Preston 151).

Despite all of these successes, however, nothing seemed to come close to the
reception and admiration of Highway’s original production of *The Rez Sisters*. None of Highway’s other stage plays had been published, and none of them had toured the major cities between central and Western Canada as *The Rez Sisters* had. However, Highway then produced a sequel to this play which he called *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. *Dry Lips* was first mounted as a co-production by NEPA and Theatre Passe Muraille at the latter’s Mainspace between April 21 and May 22, 1989 (Preston, *TDR* 1992: 147), and it cemented Highway’s arrival as a literary great. Reviewing the production in *The United Church Observer* in June 1989, David Wilson remarked that “[i]f *The Rez Sisters* established Highway as a promising new figure in Canadian theatre, his follow-up play, *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, [confirmed] him as a major talent” (40). Wilson was right. During the 1988-1989 theatre season, *Dry Lips* was nominated for six different Dora Mavor Moore Awards, and it took the following four: Best New Play, Best Production, Best Actor and Best Actress. It also won the Floyd S. Chalmers Award for best play in the Toronto area. In 1989, the play was published by Fifth House, and, then, in 1990-1991, *Dry Lips* became the third original Canadian drama ever to be selected by David Mirvish for the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto (Steed, *Toronto Star* 24 March 1991: D1). In 1994, *Dry Lips* was also included in Jerry Wasserman’s revised edition of *Modern Canadian Plays*.

While literary scholars are understandably most familiar with Highway as a writer, his versatility as an artist, although not as well known, is also quite impressive. Not only has Highway written and produced his own works, but he has also helped to produce the work of fellow aboriginal artists. Between February 9 and March 4, 1990, for example,
both Tomson and Rene directed a production of John McLeod’s play *Diary of a Crazy Boy*, and between April 20 and May 13 of that same year, Highway also directed a production of Ron Weihs’s musical comedy, *The Beavers*, at the Annex Theatre (Preston TDR 1992: 151). Highway still had time, somehow, to produce his next play, *A Ridiculous Spectacle in One Act*, at the LSPU Hall in St. John’s, Newfoundland in July 1990 (Hannon 36), and, after all this work, it seemed fitting that Highway should be awarded the Toronto Arts Award for Performing Arts. Native Earth’s 1990-91 season then ended with a workshopping of Highway’s next play, *The Large Tit* (Preston, TDR 1992: 155), but this was a project which Highway would have to temporarily shelve (Highway, qtd. in Brown, *The Spectator* 22 October 1994: 6). In the middle of writing it, Rene, Tomson’s brother, best friend, mentor, and co-worker, died of AIDS-related meningitis.

When CBC produced a profile on Tomson Highway for their Life and Times Series in 1997, Highway spoke at length about Rene, and Highway made it clear that his success was really the result of close collaboration with his brother. Out of all the chaos of their younger years at the Guyhill Residential School had come a dancing star who had given Highway inspiration, support and love. Rene had been Highway’s choreographer, and he was perhaps best known, within his brother’s body of work, for performing the role of Nanabush in the original production of *The Rez Sisters*. It is understandable, then, that, after Rene’s death, Highway was not as transparently active as he had been for almost a decade. Most notably, Highway turned over his position as artistic director of Native Earth to Floyd Flavel in 1992, but this is not to say that Highway and his work
disappeared from the public's eye. Between September 22 and October 2, 1993, Highway's French-language debut, *Les Reines de la Reserve*, ran at *la Maison de la Culture Frontenac* in Montreal,\(^{11}\) and on the play’s opening night, Highway flew on invitation to Sydney, Australia. Highway participated in the Australian National Playwrights’ Conference in Canberra between September 24 and September 29, and he then worked with the Black Swan Company in Perth until October 1. Afterwards, Highway visited Melbourne, Australia and Wellington, New Zealand (“Highway at Meeting in Australia,” *WFP* 22 September 1993: D8). Then, on January 4, 1994, *The Rez Sisters* opened at The New York Theatre Workshop, and, in October, another production of *The Rez Sisters* opened at Theatre Aquarius in Hamilton, Ontario. This same year, Highway read at the International Festival of Authors at Harbourfront in Toronto from his newest piece, *Rose*, which had been commissioned by the National Arts Centre, Toronto’s Stage Company and Manitoba Theatre as part of the NAC’s twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations (Brown, *The Spectator* 22 October 1994: 6). In 1995, *Dry Lips* was produced again at the Arts Club Centre in Vancouver, and, as well, Highway received what so few Canadians can ever hope to receive in their lifetimes—the Order of Canada.

Highway, however, soon went into retreat. Highway had not only lost his brother but also his long-time colleague, theatre director Larry Lewis, to AIDS (Posner, *Globe and Mail* 17 October 1998: C12). *Rose*, which Highway had been working on for years, had still not received any production offers. It would be revived in the winter of 2000 by the University College Program at the University of Toronto,\(^{12}\) and the show would be sold out days before opening night, but, until this time, *Rose* would sit upon the shelves
only as a future possibility. As well, *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, which was first a stage play and, then, a screenplay, had also been rejected, and a film script for Bruce Macdonald’s *Dance Me Outside* had also been turned down. These personal tragedies and rejections would slow down anyone, and, so, too, would public pressure. As Denise Bukowski, Highway’s agent, suggests, Highway “withdrew because he became this celebrity everyone wanted a piece of” (qtd. in Posner, *Globe and Mail* 17 October 1998: C12). But it was not as if Highway were taking time off. For the next four years, he privately reconfigured one of his pink slips for the third time. Although it hadn’t been given the chance to work on stage or on television, Highway was determined to tell an important story, and in 1998, Highway’s first novel, *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, was published by Doubleday Canada. For four years, Highway had been working on a tribute to Rene. The novel’s epigraph is Cree—*Igwani igosi, n’seemis*—which loosely translates “[t]his one’s for you, little brother” (Posner, C1).

As part of his marketing strategy to double sales for Doubleday Canada, Don Sedgewick, the new and short-lived vice-president and publisher of Doubleday Canada,13 began to seek out and sign up those authors who, as one of his later replacements, editor-in-chief John Pearce, said, “could be the Atwood or Ondaatje of the next five or 10 [sic] years” (qtd. in Anderson, *Quill and Quire* 64.4, April 1998: 5).14 Not surprisingly, Sedgewick was quick to pick up Highway’s autobiographically inspired novel. After all, *Maclean’s* had already immortalized Highway as one of the most important thinkers and writers in Canadian history (Granatstein, *Maclean’s* 1 July 1998: 21), and his reputation extended well beyond the limited spheres of academic journals. Before her untimely
death, the Princess of Wales, someone whose time and person were assiduously guarded, had entertained Highway for dinner, and Highway had entertained her, greeting the occasion with welcome and flair and ending the evening by playing piano at her request (Teresa Castonguay, qtd. in McLaughlin, Financial Post 13 January 1992: S10). This was a man and artist whom the public admired, and although Sedgewick apparently denied the claim at the time, many at Doubleday felt that Highway’s Kiss of the Fur Queen could “make or break Doubleday’s literary ambitions” (Lorinc, Quill and Quire September 1997: 8). Indeed, Highway’s status as a public icon continues to grow. In April 1999, for example, thousands of Canadians had the opportunity to read about Highway when Air Canada featured him as their cover story in the airline’s magazine enRoute (“Tomson Highway: Words that Heal”). A glossy image of Highway was tucked into the backs of thousands of chairs, and customers were presented with an eleven-page article on Highway and his work.

Given a full awareness of Highway and his achievements, it is understandable that Highway would attract a considerable amount of attention and praise. This biography of Highway has traced Highway’s success back through a clear trajectory, and it serves to indicate that although the story of Highway’s life may be a bit under-documented, there is a long history of personal achievement here. But that said, there does seem to be somewhat of a mystery surrounding the admiration of Highway, and it seems to be the case that Highway has garnered a certain type of praise which is often removed from an appreciation of his artistic capabilities. For instance, when Highway first appeared on the literary scene and in the public domain, a sense of bewilderment greeted him almost at
once, and it would seem that Highway had become something much larger than life. As Martin Knelman, a theatre critic for the Financial Post, put it as early as 1991, it seemed as if Highway had almost immediately "crossed over from the ghetto fringe of theatre to become the darling of Canada's mainstream culture" (Financial Post 22 April 1991: 30), and, here, Knelman accurately underscored the recognition that while Highway's art carried a new and forceful voice, it was his person that had quickly grown to carry something else. But what could this be?

In order to answer this last question, it is most telling, perhaps, to first consider the act of celebration and the feeling of curiosity which surrounded the "discovery" of Highway, for it is the sense of bewilderment that greeted Highway's arrival in the public-at-large that seems to shed most light on an understanding of what Highway has come to represent. In 1990, literary critic Denis Johnston put it succinctly when he said that "[t]o non-Native critics, [himself] included, Tomson Highway [was] an exotic new figure in Canadian theatre" (254). This is an understatement. If one were to weave a fiction from the isolated descriptions of Highway which appear throughout ten years of reviews, profiles and interviews, the cumulative effect would be almost absurd, most definitely romantic, and indisputably mythic.

Writing in the Globe and Mail in 1987, Ray Conlogue, for example, provided his readers with this image of Highway:

Tomson Highway has long black hair, worn straight and loose. There is no mistaking that he is a native person—he will even call himself an Indian, but the word is tongue-in-cheek nowadays—and his commitment to his heritage is
Barbara Crook offered Ottawa a similar depiction this same year, employing much the same diction when she described Highway as “a gentle, soft-spoken man with a dazzling smile and a mane of jet-black hair falling past his shoulders” (Ottawa Citizen 10 October 1987: C1). In John Bemrose’s description two years later in Maclean’s, the fixation is still with Highway’s “flowing black hair,” but Highway is further described as a “tall, self-consciously regal man” (8 May 1989: 62). Ted Ferguson’s interview with Highway the same year begins by positioning Highway as “a sturdy, self-assured man with graceful movements and friendly, dark eyes . . . [who] settles at a plain wood table and talks about the Manitoba bush, where he was born in a trapper’s tent” (18). Ferguson quotes Highway as saying “[t]he summers were magical,” and, of course, it is important to note that Highway is “sipping a glass of tap water” (18) at the time. In Nancy Wigston’s profile of Highway in Books in Canada in 1989, Highway is drinking coffee rather than something reminiscent of the pure lakes of Manitoba, but his ability to commune with other worlds—simply hinted at thus far—becomes more likely:

As we sat over our cups of coffee in a blue-and-white farmhouse-style kitchen, his soft voice barely disturbed the sounds of dripping water outside the windows. A white cat came in, and curled up at his feet . . . He gestures to an empty chair behind the kitchen table, a deep blue director’s chair. ‘Because there’s
an Indian in this room, the Trickster is here'... I turn and look at the chair, which seems a little less empty than it was a minute ago. ‘But if I were to leave this room, he’d be gone too. There’d be no Indian spirit in this kitchen.’ Just then the phone rang, as if on cue, breaking the spell. Tomson Highway got up to answer it. Outside the windows the grey Toronto cityscape looked even duller than usual. (7-9)

Here, we seem to be presented with a depiction of Jeremiah Okimasis—that silver child—instead of with a depiction of the artist Tomson Highway. And, in fact, in all of these descriptions so far, it seems that Highway could very well have been dropped down from on high.

To be sure, these portraits of Highway are now over a decade old, and one could argue that they are simply the kinds of responses that naturally attend the discovery of any new artist. However, it is interesting to note that such romantic depictions of Highway are not only found in early reactions to this artist. In 1998, for example, The Globe and Mail’s Michael Posner took even more creative license when he capitalized on Highway’s physical person:

Large and barrel-chested, [Highway] manages to give the impression of nimble lightness. His dark eyes dance. His black hair flows to ponytail length. And he seems to move to the music of his own speech, the words spilling out in waves, like an incantation, by turns full of angry passion or playful mockery. (17 October: C1 & C12)

What is this? What is happening here? Is this Nanabush or Highway? A sprite or a
human? Is this last passage an excerpt from a translation of the Jesuit Relations or from something written in the twentieth century? Air Canada's customers would also learn of Highway's "solidity" and "nimbleness" (enRoute 1999: 42), his ability to stay put or move with stealth. These romantic depictions of Highway seem to confuse the artist with the wildlife which he claims to have grown up with and with the rural trappings which somehow make him a "legitimate Indian." There is an implication in Posner's portrait, as well as in earlier reviews, that Highway is at once wild and tamed and that he is also a spirit or God as well as a trickster. His "mane" of hair, always a point of fascination, and his dancing and friendly, dark eyes are attributes which would naturally seem to distinguish one raised in the wilds. In fact, these characteristics have often distinguished such animals as the horse and the deer. Also, like any trickster, Highway is a combination of the sacred and profane. Within his presence, the skyline of Toronto loses its appeal in light of more spiritual concerns (Wigston), but while the music of his speech exalts his listeners, one must be wary: at any moment, his speech can turn to "anger," to "mockery," to tricksterish play (Posner).

So Highway is "dramatic" (Conlogue), "dazzling" (Crook), "regal" (Bemrose), "graceful" (Ferguson) and spell binding (Wigston). And is he "exotic" (D. Johnston), too, then? Indeed, it would seem so. Divine? Probably. Capable of shape-shifting at any moment just like his favorite trickster, Nanabush? Apparently. But is he also a playful participant in this construction of his public self? Most certainly. In fact, it is interesting to note that both Ferguson and Wigston respond to Highway's comments and prodding and that they unequivocally believe everything he is saying. They take their cues from
Highway and, accordingly, construct him as a trickster, god, or, at the very least, as someone who is a bit removed from the ken of the everyday world. Highway seems to be having some fun here, but the critics don’t really recognize that he is playing, and they gobble up his romantic speech. At this early point, then, in the construction of Highway as a symbol in the public domain, it is interesting to note that an important tension surfaces. On the one hand, critics are employing problematic, romantic stereotypes to describe Highway, and, on the other hand, Highway is contributing to his public image.

And Highway will continue to contribute to his public image over the years, and he will also contribute, in different ways, to the criticism of his work. As this chapter will go on to explore, both reviewers and critics will begin to rely heavily on Highway for critical validation and direction in their responses to Highway’s work, and they will turn to what Highway has said in public addresses and interviews over the years in order to assess this man and his art. Now, at this point, I do not wish to analyze Highway’s comments, but I would like to draw attention to what Highway has said over the years, because it is important to keep in mind that the relationship between critic and artist is of especial importance in Highway criticism. Most notably, of course, Highway has claimed that he comes from a “magical” land, and he has also insinuated that tricksters follow him from room to room, but Highway also says much more than this. To be sure, astute comments and inspired reflections have come out of this man’s lips, but so, too, has a certain kind of essentialism which lends itself to stereotypical formulas and mythological archetypes.

Whether or not this habit and a critical reliance on this habit lead to good or bad criticism will be discussed later at greater length, but, here, it is worth listing some of the
most repetitive claims which have been made by Highway over the course of the last decade:

1. This trickster is so central to our system of spiritual belief. . . . . It's a connection to this great energy, or God, which most people perceive only in moments of extreme crisis. Or when they are close to death, and can see into the spirit world. (qtd. in Conlogue, Globe and Mail 21 November 1987: C5)

2. I am convinced that we are all infused with elements of male and female. We have access to both energies. Women are able to express the masculine aspects of their personalities. This is their power. (qtd. in Moore, The Province 8 January 1988: 49)

3. Mythology is the articulation of the dream life of a society. (qtd. in Davitt, The Leader-Post 4 February 1988: n. pag.)

4. Whereas the Indian system--of politics, of theology--is a circle, a never-ending circle, the elective system, the European system, is a straight line, what I call the Genesis to Revelations line: progress, progress, progress, from point A to point B, until the apocalypse comes. As a result, the circle was shattered, and got stretched open to a straight line. The impact, psychologically and spiritually, was devastating. (qtd. in Wigston, Books in Canada 18.2, 1989: 8)

5. I am obsessed and very disturbed by the fact that the ruling principle in that (European) linguistic system is the division of the universe and of life into that which is male, that which is female, and that which is neuter. It is a progressive hierarchy, with one dominating the other, dominating the next. Female is second
on the ladder.

In (the North American Indian) system, the universe is divided into that which is animate and that which is inanimate, that which has a living soul and that which has not. That linguistic structure is such that you address a tree on the same basis as you address a human being. When you cut a tree down, for instance, and make it into a chair, then the spirit has left it and it is inanimate, spiritless, dead.

(qtd. in Crew, Toronto Star 15 April 1989: J4)

6. [Speaking of Christian versus aboriginal cosmology] The overriding principle is one of time, as opposed to space. (qtd. in Crew, Toronto Star 15 April 1989: J4)

7. I think that if there ever came the day that aboriginal people in this country were destroyed, then the soul of this country would be gone forever. . . . It is Canada’s first people . . . who can help the rest of the population to re-discover spirituality.

I think there is a tremendous danger of becoming a society without a soul.

(qtd. in Prokosh, Winnipeg Free Press 20 October 1990: 25)

8. I think Canadian society, or any paternal society, can gain a lot by looking at native theology. Myths define society and we need to break down the ones that oppress people, whether they’re women, or homosexuals or racial minorities. (qtd. in Smyth, Winnipeg Free Press 15 April 1991: 16)

9. [W]e have people--and the way our writing is coming on proves it--that you know there is this connection with God. There is a spirituality that still is so powerful and beautiful and passionate! Whereas, in the case of mainstream culture here on this continent, both American and Canadian, we find that the mythology
that they came over with is—their relationship to that mythology is really an
genuine academic relationship. (qtd. in Lutz, Contemporary Challenges 91)

10. The mythology of a people is the articulation of the dreamworld of that people;
without that dreamlife being active in all its forms—from the most extreme beauty
to the most horrific and back—the culture of that people is dead. It is a dead
culture and it is, in effect, a dead people we speak of. (Highway, “On Native
Mythology,” Theatrum 6, Spring 1987: 31)

11. [Speaking of early European art and its spiritual connection] Here in Canada
now, I don’t sense that. Not that direct contact with the spiritual, that devotion.
It needs to find it. (qtd. in Morgan, “The Trickster and Native Theater” 132)

12. It’s very ironic that while Christian missionaries tried to stomp out Native
spirituality, it not only survived, it bloomed. Our spirituality comes from our
dreamworld. . . We’re very connected to everything in that way. We
acknowledge that the spirits of our ancestors are still with us, that they still walk
this land, and are a very active part of our lives and our imaginations. We still
have that while mainstream culture doesn’t. It’s lost that faith, that magic, that
wonder. So I think they kind of envy us. (qtd. in Hodgson, Books in Canada
February 1999: 5)

Now, this is neither the extent of Highway’s philosophies nor an exhaustive list of his
public assertions, and this is not to say that truth does not exist here, but this list does
indicate, as literary critic Sheila Rabillard has also noticed, that, quite frequently, Highway
“employs a strategic essentialism in his more politicized statements” (16).15 And as this
chapter will go on to explore, the criticism of Highway’s work shares an alliance with both the strengths and weaknesses of this kind of essentialism. But what is important to note here is that this essentialism, when relied upon for critical direction, leads to the creation of superlatives and dichotomies.

And perhaps Gerald Hannon had such comments as these in mind, or perhaps he had considered how critics were confusing essentialism with criticism in their responses to Highway when, in 1991, he used his profile of Highway in Toronto Life, “Tomson and the Trickster: Scenes from the Life of Playwright Tomson Highway,” to underscore, self-consciously, the inventive process which often shapes the narratives surrounding Highway. Here, Hannon employs the same language and images which appear throughout many reviews, and he then blows them up to ironic proportions:

Tomson too has grace, but it is more sinuous and wary—he invites you close enough to hear his impossibly gentle voice, then stops you still. The great, dishevelled mane of jet-black hair confirms the cat in him, repels even and invites a closer look. He can seat himself with something of the cat’s fastidious disdain.

(31)

Hannon takes a pause to make sure his readers grasp the tone: “[i]t would be easy to romanticize him as a gentle natural from the woods. In fact, he is an urban sophisticate” (31). And, then, in a depiction of Highway’s crowning glory at the 1989 Dora Mavor Moore Awards, Hannon returns to his story:

June 1989. The Royal Alexandra Theatre, Toronto. Smart City has turned out for the Dora Mavor Moore Awards. . . . Each announcement fills the
auditorium with the melody of wolves as the tribe that is this city’s native theatre company howls its satisfaction. (31)

Hannon wittingly places Highway and his community within a tradition that stems from an unbearable, romantic sensibility. He self-consciously draws attention to Highway as a symbol, and he has some fun with his readers. This is, after all, what people already seem to know, and this is also what people seem to want.

But what exactly do people want, and what do they know? And how are these observations and questions related to a larger discussion which is intent on tracing the paths of aboriginal influence in post-CNLR/post-NCR, non-Native, Canadian literature? Indeed, these questions are large, but in order to broach them, we might consider more closely the language which is used to describe Highway as well as those aspects of Highway’s life which reviewers tend to emphasize in their profiles of this artist. And we might note, then, that like that “new pastoralism” (R. Brown, “Time of the Redmen” 92) which began to dominate Canadian literature during the late sixties and seventies, a romantic pastoralism almost immediately came to typify reviews of Highway’s work and profiles of his life. Of course, this is not to say that this kind of romanticization is new in any way, but what is telling here is that this early form of Highway criticism resurrects a nineteenth-century type of romanticism, a sensibility which Thomas King considers at length in his unpublished doctoral dissertation, “Inventing the Indian: White Images, Native Oral Literature, and Contemporary Native Writers.”

Here, King interrogates what many critics have called the image of the noble savage, and he makes the following claim: “The Indian was tailor made for the romantic
mind. With its emphasis on feeling, its interest in nature, its curiosity with exoticism, mysticism and eroticism, and its preoccupation with the glorification with the past, romanticism saw in the Indian a symbol in which all these concerns could be united” (28-29). Of course, there have been many critical pieces which have explored this romantic impulse and its attendant images in works which have appeared since the eighteenth century in the Americas, but when King traces this legacy of the noble savage back to its roots and, then, considers its subsequent development in literature, he makes some astute observations. King notes, for example, that “the Noble Savage was a powerful attitude or stance but [that] it faded during the second half of the nineteenth century” (29) in the creative works of novelists, dramatists and poets. And what is telling here is that while King does not ignore the idea that this image still exists in different ways in contemporary writing, he does allow for the recognition that this romantic sensibility has dissipated or transformed itself over time. However, and as this body of reviews attests to, this old image of the noble savage and the old sentiments which gave birth to such an image have found fertile continuance within the field of Canadian journalism, and it is this recognition that this body of criticism is anachronistic which is ultimately provocative here.

Above all else, the shaping of Highway as a curious figure with anachronistic language points to the idea that these reviewers were bewildered with Highway—that they were unsure of how to speak about this artist. Although the arrival of Highway on the Canadian literary scene was no more unprecedented than the arrival of the literature of the CNLR, the phenomenon of discovery which attends early Highway criticism indicates that these reviewers were, in many ways, unequipped to deal in a sophisticated fashion with
Highway. And one consideration that comes to mind here, then, is that these reviewers, unfamiliar with Native literature and writers, either turned to or unwittingly employed the directives of the only solid critical precedent that had already been set for the interpretation of aboriginal art and the values of aboriginal cultures—the romantic and reductive theories of nineteenth-century thought. After all, while it seems absurd that such responses to Highway would reinscribe a tradition dependent upon biological determinism, it does not really seem unexplainable that a body of criticism, lacking significant precedents and a tradition to emphasize the dangers of anthropological curiosity or to provide a point of departure, would grab at such past critical straws. And what is significant about this recognition, then, is that we might recognize in these reviews not only the legacies of nineteenth-century traditions but also a contemporary anxiety which underscores a reaction to something equally contemporary. That is, while we may be able to trace this romantic tendency in Highway criticism back, in part, to the limitations which attend a critical enterprise not yet educated to deal with Native literatures and peoples, we might also be able to trace this romantic sensibility back to the impress of a social revolution which demanded that people begin speaking of Native artists in relation to some kind of tradition and a cultural collective. In other words, it seems possible to suggest that the pan-Indian revolution of the 1960s and 1970s was a powerful movement which, ironically enough, prompted people to resurrect an old type of discourse when, engaging with a figure inextricable with the authority of pan-Indianism, these reviewers responded to the Zeitgeist of the time and attempted to understand Highway in relation to some kind of larger sensibility.
As well, there is something to be said for the recognition that these romantic images of Highway inevitably construe Highway as a culture hero of sorts or as some kind of icon which carries the impress of heroic qualities. Like any hero, Highway comes off in these reviews as one who is capable of extraordinary feats and as one who is capable of guiding a people. And it is quite telling, I think, that this body of criticism turns on heroics in order to make sense of Highway since this body of criticism can be compared, in a way, to those mythological works which have been discussed in the last chapter. After all, and as the third chapter has suggested, mythologically minded writers who were engaging with Canadian history and with an awareness of aboriginal traditions after the advent of the CNLR and NCR were led to revisit this country’s past and to fashion something new out of a recognition that this country’s history was more than suspect. That is, they were led to re-consider the locus of community—the hero—and they were led to construct anti-heroes and rid their narratives of those anti-heroes who shared a relation with this nation’s past. Now, while heroes begin disappearing in works such as Badlands, Burning Water, Beautiful Losers, Surfacing, and Invention of the World, and while a very large and notable hero begins to surface in Highway criticism—Highway himself—I would argue that this impulse to destroy heroes and this impulse to create a hero are related. As the last chapter has suggested, the removal of the anti-hero from a center of madness which is symbolic of this nation’s past and which is symbolic of this nation’s implication in holocaust was, in large part, due to the recognition that the sacred had been offended and that the profane—the national—was responsible for a significant amount of destruction. And, thus, and as the last chapter has also argued, a new and traditional mythological
figure emerged out of the nexus between the sacred and profane: a trickster. Now, while Highway appears to be more of a culture hero than a trickster—although he can be both or either at times—the figure he has become embodies the same kind of tensions which led to the construction of a new kind of trickster in those post-modern, contemporary mythologies which have been discussed in Chapter Three. That is, Highway—not the person but the symbol—carries a certain amount of profane weight as well as sacred potential.

For example, this desire for a culture hero may be understood as being predicated on a recognition that this nation is implicated in an ugly history which attempted to destroy everything which Highway represents. That is, the fashioning of Highway in romantic or heroic terms may be recognized as a desire to re-write the problematic history of the past since this fashioning superimposes on an understanding of that past an icon or symbol who both comments on that past and effaces a certain amount of disparagement with that past by promising new potential. In other words, like those mythological writers who were recording a belief in alterity in their new attempts to mythologize out of a tension between history and myth, these reviewers are deferring to the idea that the sacred still exists. Here, after all, is living proof that the Anna Yellowbirds, the Catherine Tekawithas, and Vancouver’s Indian friends have not suffered the fate of Shawnaditti’s people. In other words, Highway, symbolic as he has become of a pan-Indian identity, spirituality, and vitality, becomes a promise of redemption.

Indeed, this is one consideration here, but one might also observe that Highway is a literary figure who shares a historical place with a social revolution that resurrected the
past and that did so with the familiar mechanics of heroism. As the second chapter has suggested, one of the defining characteristics of the literature of the CNLR was its heroic or neo-heroic nature. For the most part, contemporary Native literature entered the public domain in the 1960s and 1970s through the voices of elders and chiefs who were speaking in grand, heroic terms. In addition, many different national histories were recorded during these years, and in public addresses, court battles and the “new” Native literatures of this time, heroic deeds—the events of national pasts—were recorded in an appropriate, heroic manner. In other words, one might consider that this unbearable romanticization of Highway shares a certain kind of affinity with those heroic qualities which manifested themselves in the literature of the CNLR and the social actions of the NCR. Now, this is not to say that the logical extension of such an influence is the construction of Highway or other Native artists in anthropologically curious terms. But it is interesting to consider the idea that these reviewers are not only bewildered with a man but also with a large social force which they cannot yet understand but which they have experienced. And, thus, we might consider that the language which these reviewers are using is an example of how language is subtly shaped and changed by social revolution and how new rhetoric is either wittingly or osmotically adopted.

Thus, if we re-visit the concerns of this chapter so far, it seems possible to suggest that these reviews are indicative of a reaction to the influence exerted by the CNLR and the NCR and the larger resurgence of Native literature and social actions in the mid-to-late twentieth century for the following reasons: 1) in early responses to Highway, as in those mythological works which have been discussed in Chapter Three, there is a re-visiting of
the past and, then, the creation of a mythologically inflected figure, and, as the last chapter has suggested, in tandem, these two reflexes point to both a collective, national desire and the impress of a notable and newly felt aboriginal authority; 2) the language of Highway criticism is comparable to both the heroic language which dominated the literature of the CNLR and the romantic language which grew to characterize those non-Native works which were produced on the heels of the CNLR and the NCR; 3) and the romantic idealism which is strewn throughout Highway criticism suggests that this criticism is responding to something both new and large since critics attempt to make sense of an individual artist in terms of old and established sensibilities which, because they are anachronistic, register bewilderment with a new and powerful force. Indeed, these reflections are speculative, but we might consider other patterns that surface in early Highway criticism, and we might consider how reviewers also show an anxiety with influence in different ways.

For example, it seems telling that early Highway criticism, like certain postmodern Canadian mythologies, attempts to protect what could be called a superficial understanding of the contemporary sacred since reviewers begin to construct Highway in ways which smack of that “back-to-the-land-primitivism” (Goldie, “Getting it Right” 64) that characterized a significant portion of Canadian literature during the 1960s and 1970s and since they attempt to keep Highway within parameters that help to perpetuate the idea that Highway is representative of the locus of sacred aboriginal truth or culture. And, here, we might turn again to a consideration of Hannon’s seemingly contentious and trite take on the Highway brothers. “How could you not love these guys” (85), Hannon
questions near the end of his piece on the Highway brothers. “I mean, Tomson was practically born in a manger” (85). Here, it seems that Hannon is on to something critically astute, even though the critic’s reflex is to jump out, attack Hannon and protect that babe in swaddling cloth. A manger? That’s condescending, isn’t it? Comparing Highway to an infant Jesus who needs protection from Herod and his hoards--isn’t there some paternalism at play here? Yes. And this is exactly what reviewers have consistently done in different ways--enveloped what Highway has become in their paternal arms.

One of the earliest pieces of criticism to make mention of Tomson Highway is found in the Rene Highway Special Collections at the University of Guelph. Alina Gildiner’s review of New Song . . . New Dance, which appeared in the Globe and Mail on November 13, 1982, focuses mainly on Rene, but it makes mention of Highway’s brother, Tomson, who composed and performed the piano music for this theatre piece. Whether or not earlier mention of Tomson Highway exists is not really the point, but Gildiner’s review includes the seeds of a trend which grow to be prominent in the body of Highway criticism. Gildiner begins with the following claim: “New Song . . . New Dance is one of those pieces it would be nice to like, full as it is of vision and intent” (E3). Gildiner then goes on to call the piece “choreographically mushy,” and she ends her review by asserting that “it could easily be greatly improved upon by being taken back to the studio.” Granted, this departure from praise to criticism attends many mixed reviews, but what does not commonly attend the criticism of an author’s work--at least in this country--is the declaration that the critic truly wishes the artist could have received the most glowing of praises. And this declaration is not unique to Gildiner. Stan Dragland’s review of Kiss of
the Fur Queen, which appeared in Canadian Forum in 1998, begins in much the same way:

“I also wish that I could unconditionally endorse Highway’s novel. I wish he had managed to infuse ‘this language of the Englishman, hard, filled with sharp, jagged angles’ with Cree” (45). But Dragland doesn’t endorse the novel. He attacks the work for its “ungainly English style,” and he claims that “Highway has not yet found a narrative voice subtly and naturally able to hold the much he has to say with it” (45). Like Gildiner, however, Dragland would like to see this artist produce the perfect work.

Now, if we play devil’s advocate here, we might note that both Gildiner and Dragland are responding to first works and that critics often root for artists when they produce something new for the first time. But there are other reviews to be considered which embody the same types of motives or desires that govern Gildiner’s and Dragland’s responses to Highway. For example, in 1986, when Henry Mietkiewicz wrote a second positive review of The Rez Sisters, his account at once more subtly and more brashly embodied the impulse noted in Gildiner’s and Dragland’s comments:

Instead of mounting his first-rate play, The Rez Sisters, in a theatre that houses professional productions, the 34-year-old Manitoba Cree Indian has insisted on showcasing his script at the Native Canadian Centre, 16 Spadina Rd.

In this way, Highway may be giving outsiders the mistaken impression that a well-meaning amateur from a minority group has chosen to work in a community hall where standards are lower and ethnic audiences are inclined to be generous with their praise.

Quite the contrary. (Toronto Star 8 Dec. 1986: D1)
Here, Mietkiewicz recognizes, like Gildiner and Dragland, that Highway’s intents are good—that he is well-meaning—but he also takes his praise a step further. He automatically constructs a counter argument against Highway and, then, he protects Highway from any potential charge of tokenism.

In 1989, when theatre critic Jamie Portman reviewed the original production of Dry Lips at Theatre Passe Muraille, he also advanced what can now be recognized as a critical pattern: “With native culture a current burning issue, the arrival of a new stage work by as gifted and intelligent a writer as Tomson Highway will generate interest. But it does him no service to gloss over the play’s defects” (Calgary Herald 25 April 1989: D3). Here, Portman spells out what is only hinted at by Gildiner. Highway’s political timeliness is recognized, and Portman suggests that Highway’s work will naturally be noticed because native culture is being noticed. But unlike Mietkiewicz, who protects Highway from the charge of tokenism by pointing out the successes of Highway’s work, Portman protects Highway by pointing out his play’s “defects.” Granted, Dry Lips, because of its central, contentious rape scene, provokes a long list of attacks which are not possible to lob against The Rez Sisters, but Portman’s review suggests that criticizing Highway is synonymous with liberating him from patronizing intents.

And perhaps it would initially seem, then, that this attempt to protect Highway runs counter to that kind of romanticizing which appears in an almost unbearable way in the composite portrait drawn of Highway over the last decade. For instance, at first glance, this check against showing Highway any disservice would therefore seem to be a check against that kind of anthropological curiosity which threatens to choke the criticism
of Highway’s work. However, in these reviewers’ desires to protect this artist, these same romantic ideals persist, and perhaps this last claim is best elucidated by considering that well-known debate which has grown out of the publication of Jennifer Preston’s article on Native Earth Performing Arts in The Drama Review in 1992. Here, Preston provided an admirable, and seemingly objective, overview of NEPA’s history since its inception, but her piece sparked the anger of Susan Bennett. Bennett responded to Preston’s piece in the Spring issue of TDR in 1993, and she charged TDR with contradicting their mandate by including Preston’s article. For Bennett, TDR’s “commitment to ‘interculturalism’ as the active exploration of the contradictions, problems, faults, and possibilities of multiculturalism made in resistance to the kinds of ‘false multiculturalism’ marked by leisure time celebrations of otherness without much disturbance of the status quo” was undermined by “the white expert writing about Native theatre” (9). This is a mouthful, but Bennett’s desire was simply to protect NEPA and its artists from a “tourist gaze” (12) or from white appropriation of native voice. Preston’s response to Bennett in the same issue, however, included the following anecdote: “when I read the letter over the phone to [Drew Hayden Taylor, he] snorted and said, ‘[i]s this a white liberal who thinks she’s defending the oppressed? As a member of the ‘oppressed,’ I don’t think I need defending’” (qtd. in “Preston Responds” 15).16

Now, there is a problem here with drawing attention to Drew Hayden Taylor because my reliance on Taylor seems to insinuate that Taylor can represent “the” Native voice, and, indeed, it is not my intention to perpetuate the critical tactics which I am attempting to de-stabilize. But this example, problematic as it is in this situation, serves to
draw attention to the problems which attend paternalism. Just as Taylor is able to stand on his own, so, too, is Highway capable of holding his own ground. However, it seems that critics need to defend Highway. Or is it more accurate to say that they need to protect that manger in which he lies instead of the babe himself? That is, do they need to protect those things which define and carry Highway--those things which Highway has come to represent? Indeed, these are questions worth answering, and it seems that their significance and meaning are best elucidated by considering the subtleties which are involved in those critical discussions which attempt to make sense of Highway’s remounts and of the way in which different audiences have been understood as responding in different ways to Highway’s art. For example, in these responses to Highway’s work, it becomes clear that Highway--the artist--is not the center of consideration but that Highway--the carrier of collective desires--is of paramount importance.

Most notably, when Dry Lips was re-mounted at the Royal Alexandra theatre in Toronto in 1990-91, Highway became the center of attention in a new and even more forceful way. In the world of Canadian theatre, Highway had made the big leagues, and the commentary surrounding Highway could only change somewhat since his work had been chosen to cater to those who patronize a venue which endorses only those productions that are thought will satisfy a general and wealthy crowd. And, indeed, the tenor of this commentary did change significantly. After Dry Lips was produced at the Royal Alex, critics began directing a notable amount of attention to the rape scene which is at the heart of this play. Indeed, for those familiar with Highway and Dry Lips, the controversy surrounding the Royal Alex production is well known, and, by now, it is also
well known for being a bit contrived. In an interview with Joanne Tompkins and Lisa Male in 1995, Highway, for example, remarked that the media blew up the event and made the debate much larger than it actually was (20). Highway was referring to such stories as those spun by Joseph Ferguson who, in his review of the production, noted that cabbies had begun lining up outside the theatre at an appropriate time to cater to those walk outs who couldn’t stomach or make sense of the central and disturbing rape scene in *Dry Lips* (*Catholic New Times* 12 May 1991: 7). At the time, reviewers constantly drew attention to the discomfort which this play elicited, but Highway now counters these kinds of claims by noting that “the houses for *Dry Lips* were ninety per cent full every night” (Tompkins and Male 20). And he also diminishes the significance of this debate in appropriate Highway fashion by drawing a parallel between himself and Shakespeare who, as he says, also witnessed people leaving his plays by the “droves” (qtd. in Loucks, *CTR* 1991: 10). However, the reality is that, within the field of literary criticism, there is now a polarized debate about whether or not this play is misogynist, and what is significant here is that this debate has served to push Highway--the creator of this contentious piece--into the background of consideration and that is has also served to draw strong lines of demarcation between the community which Highway has come to represent and those communities which are understood as being divorced in some way from Highway and his world.

I have not yet examined the distinction between pop-cultural responses to Highway and his work and those critical articles which form a significant and different corpus of criticism on Highway, but, at this point, I would like to consider a critical article
written by Alan Filewod which is the only significant response to this debate thus far.

Filewod understands that the controversy over the Mirvish production of Dry Lips has been reconfigured into one “between middle-class white feminists and marginalized Native artists” (371), and he problematizes the manner in which this argument has been presented to the public by drawing attention to three specific reviews of Dry Lips which have formed the central core of this debate: Marion Botsford Fraser’s (non-native) in The Globe and Mail, Anita Tuharsky’s (Métis) in Windspeaker, and Marie Annharte Baker’s (Saulteaux) in Canadian Theatre Review. Indeed, all women consider the play offensive. Fraser claims that “Dry Lips is not only about misogyny but [that it] is a drama studied with misogyny” (Globe and Mail 17 April 1991: C1), and she supports this claim with the following observation: “the two central events in the play are horrible abuses of women, unmitigated by compassion, the images outlined in neon while our attention is drawn not to the women who are suffering but to the men who are watching.” Annharte Baker’s is the most outspoken of all attacks, and she speaks of this play as having “silenced Aboriginal women” (88) and, with caustic wit, diminishes to mockery the rape of Nanabush/Patsy, the most disturbing portion of the play: “I wonder if anyone feels sorry for her when she gets the crucifix up her spoon” (Canadian Theatre Review 68, Fall 1991: 89). Annharte Baker’s point is that Highway has created depictions of helpless, vacuous women and that there is not much about women in this play that anyone can appreciate and, therefore, not much that elicits empathy. As well, Anita Tuharsky admits to having been “sadly disappointed” by the play, and she claims that “Highway abused his writing abilities and chose to . . . create pleasures for the public, which enjoys these stereotypes
and images” (Windspeaker 12 March 1991: 5). Now, all of these criticisms are launched by women who share a common complaint and who feel it necessary to draw attention to the fact that “the second sex” has again suffered misrepresentation. But what is significant here, and what Filewod also notes, is that this debate about Dry Lips has become “the site of intercultural, cross-gender contention” (371) rather than the site of criticism which examines male representation of female voice.

And, interestingly, while Filewod seems to be intent on problematizing the divide which has grown out of this debate, his article perpetuates this divide in a way as he does not explore other critical avenues which are capable of assessing this critical debate in new and different ways. For instance, while Filewod astutely notes that critics have not “addressed the complexities of the gay male claiming insight into female experience” (369), this remark remains a fleeting one, and Filewod returns to a consideration of the cultural divisiveness which this debate sparked. It is interesting to note, for example, that Filewod speaks neither of female solidarity nor of differing female opinions which can be understood in terms of competing feminist perspectives. Filewod does not mention Jacko Ursula’s (Ojibway) positive review of the production and her insight that, as “a work of art,” Dry Lips has the right to transgress (Catholic New Times 12 May 1991: 7). Invited by the editors of Catholic New Times to comment on this performance from the viewpoint of a native woman, Ursula claimed that the play was important and powerful and that if she simply saw “people just out in the street making fun of a crucifix” that she would object. It is also interesting to note that Filewod does not mention Lenore Keeshig Tobias’s (Ojibway) interpretation of Dry Lips which, quoted by Hannon, was printed in
the popular and well-circulated pages of *Toronto Life*. As Hannon claimed, "Lenore Keeshig-Tobias . . . thinks *Dry Lips* is frankly misogynist" (81), and he re-produced Keeshig-Tobias’s reaction to Highway’s play: “A lot of women ask me what I think of *Dry Lips*, and it turns out we’re all uncomfortable with the prospect of this big fat woman flying through the Royal Alex this spring” (qtd. in Hannon 81). Moreover, there is also no mention of Pat Donnelly’s comment in the *Montreal Gazette* that “the role [of Nanabush] is hardly a great leap forward for native actresses, who in the past have complained that rape-victim roles, like that of Rita in George Ryga’s *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*, . . . were their only career option” (23 March 1991: E12). There is also no mention of Hannon’s immature quip: “I can’t help but wonder whether Tomson isn’t after the cheap laugh sometimes. He knows that everyone knows fat women are funny” (82). And there is no mention of Robert Cushman’s puzzling comment: “This is the most powerful play I have seen about misogyny, and it is fitting that it should be the work of a man” (Globe and Mail 15 April 1991: C3). Like most reviews, and, certainly, like most substantial contributions to Highway criticism, Filewod’s article is based upon a certain kind of essentialism, even though his article addresses and attempts to redress the problem of essentialism. Here, we have a focus on the differences between native and non-Native women, and we have no mention of any male contributions to this debate and no larger considerations about Highway’s implication in this misogyny whatsoever. Thus, a much-needed debate about misogyny and male representation of female voice gives way to a focus on cultural divides and not the problematic nature of Highway’s portrayals. To be fair to Filewod, there is much more going on in his article than a simple examination of the “Mirvish controversy,”
and his contributions to Highway scholarship will be considered more fully at a later point in this chapter, but it is significant to note here that Highway, the artist, has faded into the background in discussions of this debate. And it is also significant to note that he would be pushed into the background in another way in critical discussions of the Mirvish production.

When critics began reviewing the Royal Alex production of this play, they immediately drew attention to the recognition that there was a big difference between presenting this work to an audience which was familiar with, if not somehow related to, Highway and his work and presenting this work to an unfamiliar crowd. For example, the Globe and Mail's Jay Scott claimed that the Royal Alex production could only produce different debates than those which grew out of the Theatre Passe Muraille version, and he drew attention to the idea that the TPM audience was "cognizant of Highway's previous play, ... The Rez Sisters," and, therefore, he suggested that the TPM crowd would understand that Dry Lips was "a logical continuation/elaboration" of the message inherent in The Rez Sisters (Globe and Mail 22 April 1991: C1). Scott went further, however, and he continued to note that at the Royal Alex the play’s "clarity ha[d] been subtly dimmed by a conventional, Broadway-sized stylization detrimental to Highway’s art," and, here, Scott echoed what Pat Donnelly had claimed a month earlier in the same newspaper. As Donnelly put it, Dry Lips "appear[ed] to have sold its soul to Broadway" (Montreal Gazette 23 March 1991: E 12). Joseph Ferguson merely mentioned in the Catholic New Times that "the Royal Alex [had] hurt Dry Lips as a play" and that the play "[seemed] to demand the immediacy and intimacy of a smaller place" (12 May 1991: 7), but it was
Richard Knowles who explored all of these considerations more thoroughly in a critical article entitled "Reading Material: Transfers, Remounts, and the Production of Meaning in Contemporary Toronto Drama and Theatre."

Knowles takes a look at "three potentially transgressive scripts that have emerged from Toronto since 1980 in order to assess the material conditions that changed with different theatrical or cultural contexts" (266)—Anne-Marie MacDonald’s Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet), George Walker’s Love and Anger, and Highway’s Dry Lips—and he notes the following: "[a]pparently containment occurred in the new settings: what had been empowerment devices in the first productions became ways of constructing a kind of unity and universality that effaced difference. . . . [T]he focus of reviewers after the transfers was on the uproarious comedy and aesthetic quality of the production" (278). This observation is linked to Knowles’ further assertion that "Dry Lips was considered more polished in its remount (at the Royal Alex), more aesthetically pleasing, with comfortable closure provided by a combination of . . . [an] awakening-from-dream [ending] and . . . sentimentality in the final image of the perfect Indian family" (279), and, here, Knowles ends up asserting that the critical reception of Dry Lips inevitably honoured what the play’s advertising solicited:

[T]he commercial-theatre Dry Lips program astonishingly framed Highway’s portrayal of poverty, alcoholism, and misogyny on the reservation within the context of glossy, full-colour ads for Cadillac and Mercedes Benz and eroticized photographs of scantily clad (white) women selling Smirnoff vodka. . . .

These and other contextual circumstances suggest, then, that any potential
the productions had for cultural intervention was effectively contained and institutionally neutralized when they transferred to their new venues. But was containment complete and efficacy denied? Or did the shows mean *differently* for their differently constructed audiences? (283)

Indeed, this last provocative question has embedded within it certain desires not unlike those which are found in reviewers’ attempts to ensure that Highway is shown no disservice.

The notion that Highway’s plays were effective in either the Native Canadian Friendship Centre or in an venue dominated by a crowd which knows Highway and that they were not effective elsewhere involves a certain set of assumptions and leads to several observations. Most notably, by claiming that Highway’s work was more real somehow in its original community, critics are again attempting to protect Highway. That is, by consistently interpreting the shortcomings of remounts as reflective of racial friction—as something extrinsic to the play and intrinsic to the dynamics of the audience—critics avoid thoroughly criticizing Highway’s art and, thus, Highway himself. Again, the assumption here is that Highway must be doing right and that his visions are simply not capable of being read by those who do not share a place within his community. The posh Royal Alex and the Factory theatre, divorced as they are from the Native community of Spadina Road, become the point of contention here. In other words, the focus is not really *Dry Lips* and the artist Tomson Highway but the man and the world he has come to represent.

To turn back to that metaphor which Hannon used, then, it would seem that
people are, indeed, intent on protecting that manger, so to speak, rather than Highway himself. And I would argue that this “manger” is an essentialist conception of some sort of Native community or world which does not, in fact, exist but which has been created by the romantic ideals of reviewers and critics. And in order to further elucidate this last claim, it is interesting to note that Highway is not only strictly located within the Native community and given a kind of critical asylum there but that he is also made to be representative of a heroic and glorified past. Highway has lived half his life in Cabbagetown—a now trendy area of old, Upper Canada. But no one is really interested in this history. They are interested in reviving a very different past for Highway. And it is a past which is constructed in very subtle ways at times.

In his review of the revived production of New Song... New Dance in 1987, Paul Ogresko claims, for example, that “[t]here is little here that resembles what people have come to assume is Native dancing” (Canadian Tribune 4 April 1988: 10). Of course, if, in another context, one had read, “there is little here that resembles what people have come to assume is Canadian or American dancing,” such a comment would seem absurd. But within a body of criticism that confuses the roles of artists and heroes and which points to the hero’s birthplace as a symbol of authentic “Indianness,” such a comment does not really stick out in an awkward manner. And it is important to note here that Ogresko’s sensibility is not an isolated affair. For instance, Robert Cushman notes in his review of the Royal Alexandra production of Dry Lips that “Highway’s characters live, for the most part, like poor whites [and that] they have adopted rock-bottom American values” (Globe and Mail 15 April 1991: C3). Granted, the “life-size pin-up poster of Marilyn Monroe”
which is "[p]rominently displayed" on the wall of Big Joey’s house (Dry Lips 15) is
certainly meant to suggest that Wasaychigan Hill is saturated by de-valuation of its own
cultures (Cree and Ojibway). But Cushman’s observation seems to be infused with a
certain assumption that is also found in depictions of the native community in Toronto of
which Highway is a part. There is an element of surprise to John Bemrose’s observation,
for example, that, on the opening night of Dry Lips at the Royal Alex, "[N]ative people in
formal evening attire mingled under the television lights with the well-to-do opening-night
crowd" (Maclean’s 29 April 1991: 60). Of course, these comments seem strange. To be
sure, Native dance in the twentieth century will not be identical with native dance from the
nineteenth century or fourteenth century. People on reserves will look forward to running
bakeries and making money just as others in isolated, rural communities will look forward
to doing the same thing. And most people, of course, will wear formal evening wear to a
formal event in a city. In any case, one would assume that these would be obvious givens,
unless, of course, there is something much larger at play here. And I would argue that
there is, indeed, something very large looming in the background of Highway criticism.

Together with those relentless, romantic depictions of Highway, this strict
segregation which is posed between Native and non-Native worlds inevitably denies the
recognition that Native cultures, like any other cultures, are necessarily adaptive and
accretive. And in a discussion of mythology and mythological impulses, this denial can
perhaps be explained in several different ways. First, together with that paternalistic
impulse which is infused throughout different reviews, this denial suggests that people
wish to keep a certain part of the past alive. After all, to protect Highway is to protect
that essentialism which authors have turned to to create their public images of Highway;
and, in turn, to protect the type of essentialism that is being honoured in Highway criticism
is to protect a romantic image of the Native and a romantic image of a world that is
somehow purely Native and that has somehow existed in a "pure" and unadulterated way
for hundreds of years. After all, when reviewers insinuate that an immutable Native
"culture" exists, they are constructing some kind of belief in an untainted, "pre-
Columbian" Indian culture or some sort of Native culture which has remained "pre-
Columbian" because its innate difference from non-Native cultures allows it to withstand
the impress of any type of cultural exchange or different cultural influence. But, that said,
there are a couple of other questions which surface here. Why would people feel the need
to keep this part of history—a "pre-discovery" or "pre-conquest world"—alive? And what
purpose does this resurrection serve?

Indeed, these are tricky questions, but it seems possible to suggest that if one can
point to a verifiable living source who is representative of a past which has been
threatened, and if one can therefore keep part of that past intact somehow by pointing to a
hero who carries that past, the present need not register or account for such a sense of
destruction. And what I mean is that this desire to protect Highway, along with this
tendency to make him symbolic of a glorious age that has been threatened, might be an
extension of that impulse which has been outlined in Chapter Three—that is, it might be
understood as an attempt to attack and arrest the proliferation of that part of Canada’s
traumatic past which cannot be forgotten. But it is equally important that if a certain part
of this past is kept alive, and if it is proven to manifest itself in a hero, trickster or god—
one who is representative of a collective vitality—then that past can be located. And I would argue that this is a more provocative and telling recognition. That is, while Highway, as a potential god, hero, or trickster, can shift shapes at times, albeit from his side of the fence, the history which he represents cannot be permitted to shift shapes at all. For if this were to happen, people could not use Highway as a touchstone to measure their progression out of, or exemption from, a history of colonization.

In order to elucidate this last claim, it is important to note that another trend begins to surface in reviews of Highway’s work after Highway has been constructed in romantic or heroic terms and that it indicates that reviewers are using Highway to fulfill a need. It is very significant, for example, that after 1991, a notable number of reviews show disdain for non-Native culture and for those attitudes or people who would show Highway disservice. However, instead of making sure that Highway is shown no mistreatment, reviewers also make sure that they, themselves, are judged fairly. That is, reviewers begin to use Highway and his work as a medium of sorts through which they distance themselves from potential charges of implication in a complicated history. For example, describing Ottawa’s reaction to Dry Lips in 1991, Stephen Godfrey noted the following:

Nanabush . . . [is] the spiritual equivalent of Christ in Indian mythology, and a trickster who is a true provocative. She appears as a bloated and pregnant Madonna, kissing her rosary before she takes another swig of beer, or later as God, in the shape of a woman in a beard filing her nails while perched on a toilet. You could hear the clucking of the NAC [National Arts Centre] audience voicing
its disapproval. *(Globe and Mail* 9 March 1991: C8)

Here, by pointing an accusatory finger at the audience with whom he had to watch the play, Godfrey divorced himself from the kind of attitude he was describing. And interestingly, when Peter Pearson offered Montrealers an account of this same production, he also felt it necessary to underscore and remove himself from the limitations of this audience when he mentioned that, “[i]n Ottawa, *Dry Lips* regularly played to full houses, packed with politicos and mandarins” *(Montreal Gazette* 23 March 1991: E12).

Reviewing the Royal Alexandra production of *Dry Lips* in Toronto, Bronwyn Drainie also provided a more thorough description of those with whom she had to watch the play, and her comments, directed as they were at an ignorant theatre crowd, insinuated that Drainie was somehow different from the collective she was describing:

The Toronto audience on Tuesday night seemed pretty stunned and pretty unhappy. They tittered nervously at the nudity (both male and female) and the foul language, and gasped in disbelief at the brutal examples of misogyny, like the young girl being raped with a crucifix. A lot of seats were empty for the second act, and a well-dressed older woman in the washroom commented, ‘I don’t know how they can allow them on the stage.’ *(Globe and Mail* 20 April 1991: C1)

Earlier that month, *The Globe and Mail*’s Robert Cushman had moved beyond mere observation of this Canadian theatre crowd, and Cushman became prescriptive, but his advice was coloured by the same accusatory tone which would appear in Drainie’s review: “One hopes that a general audience, subscribers or otherwise, will fill a large theatre for a major new play. This is a matter of economics, but also of morale and of ultimate value.
If the Canadian theatre is to mean anything, it cannot skulk forever in holes and corners" (Globe and Mail 15 April 1991: C3). True, these are all reviews of a contentious play and of a play which has become a platform for a larger-than-life debate, although it is interesting to note that something similar was occurring as early as 1987 in several reviews of The Rez Sisters. David Prosser wondered, for instance, about “the validity of what your average theatregoer—the sort of person who is neither poor nor Indian nor dying nor crazy—sees through his or her flawlessly polished 20-20 blinkers” (Whig Standard 5 December 1987: 10), and Malcom Burrows praised The Rez Sisters because its women weren’t “angst ridden and anal retentive like so many of the characters on Toronto’s stages” (The Varsity 7 December 1987: 11). As well, the play’s humour, as he understood it, did not possess a “sneering, crusty WASP tone.”

What is happening in all of these instances is that reviewers are describing their audiences in a pejorative way, and by foregrounding the puritanical nature of their audiences (something to be scoffed at), they are separating themselves from those whom they are criticizing. These reviewers wish to be seen as different from those who don’t “get” Highway, who are not informed enough to understand the program notes: “before the healing can take place, the poison must first be exposed.” As well, there is a lot of this same sensibility in Susan Bennett’s letter in TDR. She, somehow, is in the “know.” She is aware of the critical and cultural debates surrounding Highway, and she is doing what is proper. And so, too, are these theatre reviewers doing what they think is proper. In any event, they are not doing what others are doing. And they are aware of all the important questions. Interestingly, Filewood has also noted that this habit is a dominant one in
Highway criticism, and he observes that "[n]ewspaper reviewers commonly assert authority by finding fault while claiming privileged understanding" (368); furthermore, he aligns this awareness with the conclusion that critics, after they have established themselves as authorities on things aboriginal, then become more comfortable criticizing native work for not adhering to the dictates of "western realist dramaturgy" (365). Indeed, this is a provocative point, but what is also interesting to consider here is that these reviewers are using their responses to Highway's work as a medium of sorts through which they attempt to remove themselves from something which is symbolic of that history which plagues the works of those such as Kroetsch, Bowering, Cohen, Hodgins and Atwood.

That is, these reviewers are removing the most central figure in their narratives--their very selves--from the center of something which is symbolic of what I would call this nation's "sickness" or "madness"--its implication in holocaust--and, in many ways, they are doing the exact same thing which those authors are doing in those mythological works which revisit the trauma of this nation's past. True--reviewers are not removing anti-heroes from their fictions, but it is significant that they are removing themselves from something which is symbolic of this nation's troubled past and that they are taking sides with a collective that carries the impress of something comparable to those contemporary inscriptions of the sacred in Canadian postmodern mythologies. That is, these reviewers are deferring to what Highway has become representative of--a heroic and glorious Native culture which has been created by critics who are thinking about this Native artist in anachronistic terms--and like those "postmodern" mythologists who defer to a recognition
of alterity and who blindly embrace the "symbolic indigene" in their fictions which resurrect a strong aboriginal presence, these reviewers are also deferring to a difference which is enigmatically "aboriginal."

Indeed, these last considerations are telling, but it is also significant to note here that this trend in early Highway criticism indicates that responses to Highway and his work have become extremely self-reflexive or introspective. And in addition to the recognition that reviewers become self-reflexive in an attempt to isolate themselves from an association with colonization, it is interesting to note that sometimes this self-awareness manifests itself, quite simply, in the reviewer's recognition of her or his own "difference" from Highway and his or her acknowledged community or collective(s). In his review of Aria, for example, Ray Conlogue considers Highway's satirizing of such mythologies as "the white notion of the snake as evil" and of religious and political figures, and he makes the following claim: "[For] a white viewer this has the flavor of extirpating somebody else's demon. That particular image of the Virgin, and of the Queen of England, has lost much of its force in society at large. This attack may be meaningful for a native audience, but to me it had the feeling of punching a couple of ladies who are already down" (Globe and Mail 12 March 1987: C7). Embedded within Conlogue's statement is the warranted recognition that he possesses a different relation to and understanding of the iconography of the British Crown and of Christianity than does Highway, but by recognizing this difference with cynicism, Conlogue not only forges a sharp dividing line between himself and Highway and his community, but he also defines himself with sharp parameters.

Susan Henders also makes her readers aware that she is a non-native viewer when she
suggests that *The Rez Sisters* "coaxes us to identify with Indians" (*The Leader-Post* 4 February 1988: n.pag.). Both Conlogue and Henders create and adhere to these neat cultural dichotomies which have been in vogue since the appellation "post-colonial theory" began trying to make sense of different cultural voices, and they take a side. More than simply inscribing some kind of self identity in critical responses, though, reviewers begin to more consciously analyze themselves and the collectives to which they think they belong, and an exploration of their own positions as subjects begins to assume more space and consideration in their works.

To summarize what has been said thus far, then, it seems that in early Highway criticism—in the reviews, profiles and interviews which first announced the arrival of Highway—five dominant patterns emerge: 1) Highway is described in romantic terms; 2) reviewers adopt a paternalistic stance, and they seemingly attempt to protect Highway; 3) this attempt to protect Highway reveals itself to be an attempt to protect what Highway represents—a heroic and essentialist Native culture; 4) reviewers begin to use Highway as a medium of sorts through which they attempt to purge themselves of guilt and distance or remove themselves from those people or audiences who become representative of colonization; 5) and reviewers become highly self-reflexive and personal in their responses to Highway. Indeed, these observations may not seem that telling at this point, but it is important to keep them in mind when turning to a consideration of how more scholarly responses to Highway follow on the heels of this fledgling criticism.

And perhaps it is appropriate that this survey of the next stage of Highway criticism begins with a consideration of Daniel David Moses's article "The Trickster
Theatre of Tomson Highway.” Published in Canadian Fiction Magazine in June 1987, this was the first critical article to engage with Highway and his work, and while it is more a summary of Highway’s life and career than it is an in-depth analysis of Highway’s plays, it does provoke some interesting considerations. Moses, of course, is a Delaware poet, playwright and critic, and this recognition serves to suggest that Moses’s response to Highway will be somewhat different from those responses which grow out of a bewilderment with Native culture and artists. But is this really the case? For example, Moses begins his article by perpetuating a number of patterns which are found in early reviews of Highway’s work, and, here, then, we might consider that the following depiction of Highway indicates that the walls between Native and non-Native scholarship are not impermeable:

Tomson Highway’s dark moon of a face is beaming out over the heads of Toronto’s theatre community. It is late on an afternoon late in January and his play, The Rez Sisters, has just been named one of the Runners Up for the Best New Canadian Play for 1986.

His acceptance speech, unlike the others given today, does not contain a long list of names of individuals. Instead he pushes his long black hair back over his shoulders and gives his thanks to ‘the Indian people, the most beautiful people in the world.’

Coyote cries, probably the first ever heard at a Chalmers presentation, are part of
Here, Moses, like many others, capitalizes on Highway’s “long black hair,” and his depiction of Highway and his “dark moon of a face” seems quite at home in the world of Highway criticism. Moreover, Moses’s reference to the “Coyote cries” which filled the auditorium during the Chalmers presentation smacks of those descriptions of Highway and his community which are intent on resurrecting a heroic past. Indeed, this opening seems to suggest that Moses, just like any other critic, is responding to the cult of Highway in an appropriate cultist way, and perhaps we can understand Moses, then, as participating in an ongoing fascination with Highway just as many other non-Native critics have done.

However, it does seem that some kind of divide can be posed here between Moses and other critics since it is interesting to note that Moses is quite self-reflexive about the tone and language he is using, and since it seems possible to suggest that “The Trickster Theatre of Tomson Highway” is quite comparable to Hannon’s profile of Highway in Toronto Life. For example, in his depiction of Highway’s physical person, Moses is careful to indicate that he is quoting Highway and that he has relied on Highway for support. And this recognition becomes more apparent when one considers the rest of this article. Moses, a practiced poet, is acutely aware of how words should be used economically, but it is interesting that in this six-page article on Highway, Moses repeats five times that word which he quotes Highway as using—“beautiful.” And he makes sure that his readers know that this word has been introduced into his article because of Highway. For instance, describing the place of Highway’s birth, Moses notes the following: “Highway was born close to the land, in a tent on the Brochet reserve in the far
north-west of Manitoba in December 1951. He grew up in a hunting and fishing community, traveling by sled and canoe, the eleventh of twelve children of a couple he uses words like ‘amazing’ and ‘beautiful’ to describe’’ (85). Moses has no compunction about employing Highway’s romantic language, but he does make sure that readers know where such language is coming from. Sometimes he indicates, quite clearly, that Highway is the author of this “beautiful” romantic speech, and, sometimes, it is through sheer repetition that Moses underscores the idea that he is fully cognizant of the fictive process in his own writing. Speaking of Highway’s years at the University of Manitoba, for instance, Moses explains that Highway was “developing an interest in ‘beautiful writing’,” and, a moment later and referring to Highway’s decision to leave his career of social service for a future as a playwright, Moses recognizes that Highway “returned to his love of beautiful writing” (86). Discussing the manner in which Highway relies upon Cree and Ojibway languages in his plays, Moses again employs Highway’s diction, and, again, he carefully indicates that he is appropriating Highway’s words: “The worldview these languages engender and express seems to Highway almost untranslatable, though he hopes that his work in English can teach his audience ‘something new and something terribly relevant and beautiful about that particular landscape that they too have become inhabitants of’” (87). True, Moses will, at times, employ the word “beautiful” without Highway’s prompting, but by the end of this article when he claims that “part of [Highway’s] accomplishment is simply his beautiful use of language” (87), the reader should be fully aware that Moses is making a significant comment through repetition.

Moses makes us aware that he is telling a story and that this story has been shaped
by Highway and by popular conceptions of Native culture. He seems to have some fun here—not at the expense of his readers—but at the expense of the academic enterprise. Moses seems to be testing his readers’ knowledge of Highway and of the manner in which language can be used to comment on language, and when he ends his article, it becomes apparent that he has told a story with the machinery of romantic speech which he recognizes to be both “beautiful” and precarious:

Late on an afternoon late in January, Toronto’s theatre community met [the trickster] for the first time in the guise of Tomson Highway.

No wonder there were Coyote cries mixed in with the applause. (88) Moses indicates that he is fully aware that Highway has provoked an understanding of himself in tricksterish terms, and it becomes evident that Moses has willingly engaged with this tradition of understanding Highway in a heroic way. His story has a neat beginning and an end, and “late on an afternoon late in January” smacks of both poetic refrain and mischief. It draws attention to the delight which attends re-creating the story of a magnetic personality, and it underscores the recognition that we must always be aware of the differences between fiction and “factual” truth. Indeed, it is important to keep Moses’s article in mind throughout the rest of this chapter, for while it remains an important touchstone in Highway criticism, it also remains an anomaly.

Now, Denise Debenham’s article “Native People in Contemporary Canadian Drama,” published in Canadian Drama in 1988, is not devoted entirely to a consideration of Highway, but it is the second critical article to significantly engage with Highway and
his work. Debenham attempts to provide a distinction between non-Native drama and
native drama, and while her criticism accounts for other Native writers besides Highway.
Highway is central to her argument. Debenham recognizes Highway as a trailblazer in
native drama, and she claims that *The Rez Sisters* makes an “extraordinary break with all
previous portrayals of native people” (152) on the Canadian stage: “The play is
remarkable because it simply does not address many of the usual perceptions of native
people. It does not define them in terms of their struggle to exist in white society, or even
in terms of their cultural past” (152). For Debenham, Highway’s work does not
perpetuate stereotypes about Native people, and the real strength of his art is his ability to
produce well-rounded characters. Today, Debenham’s article does not really stand out
among Highway criticism, but a portion of it does in this study.

Before Debenham goes on to draw a distinction between plays by non-Native
writers and plays by Native writers, she attempts to historicize her discussion of Native
theatre:

> It is difficult to pinpoint the beginnings of the contemporary ‘native’

theatre movement. Native playwright Tomson Highway in his unpublished
monograph, ‘A Brief History of ‘Native Theatre’ in Ontario,’ expresses his own
uncertainty about the history of the movement, in Ontario at least: ‘Native
Theatre’ in Ontario can be said to be about 10 years old this year (1987), although
one would be hard-pressed to find an exact date for its actual birth.’ He goes on
to list a wide range of influences and early initiatives, including the plays of James
Reaney and George Ryga and the 1962 Norval Morrisseau exhibition, as
Contributing to the development of the native theatre movement. (143)

By itself, this observation may not seem that telling, but it is interesting to note that Debenham takes critical direction from Highway in two other ways. First, Debenham prefaces the appreciation she will show for Highway's portrayal of women in The Rez Sisters by referring to comments which Highway made in an interview with Ray Conlogue in the Globe and Mail in 1987:

I am sensitive to women because of the matrilineal principle in our culture, which has gone on for thousands of years. Women have such an ability to express themselves emotionally. Men are all clogged up. And as a writer, you want to express emotion. 17

Second, Debenham turns to Highway for validation again when she attempts to draw conclusions about "this liberated vision of life" (155) which she says appears throughout his play:

In a personal interview, Highway discussed his views of the Trickster and of the future of native theatre. He sees Christianity as a male, judgmental religion, fundamentally life-destroying and opposed to native religion, which he characterizes as non-sexist, accepting, and life-enhancing. The spirit of the Trickster, which has been smothered by many years of 'white' religion and thinking, is now beginning to revive. In his view, Christ is a figure 'on a pedestal', whereas the Trickster is disarmingly, even crudely, human. (155)

Tellingly, Debenham does not really go beyond applying Highway's words to her analysis, and she inevitably concludes that Highway is a riveting new artist in the world of Canadian
theatre: "Talking to this extraordinary playwright anything seems possible" (155), Debenham maintains.

In 1990, when Denis Johnston contributed the first, real, full-length article to Highway scholarship and published "Lines and Circles: The 'Rez' Plays of Tomson Highway" in Canadian Literature, he seemed to both build on and depart from the precedents which Debenham had set in her article. Although he called Highway "exotic" (254) instead of "extraordinary," he also capitalized on the newness of Highway and on the new potential which Highway spelled for drama in this country. Like Debenham, Johnston recognizes Highway as a seminal figure, and, like Debenham, he also claims that The Rez Sisters is new because it does not create stereotypical portraits of native life: "It is not a play about social problems, but about people and their dreams and their fears" (259), Johnston claims. Moreover, like Debenham, Johnston also relies heavily on Highway for critical direction. In fact, both the title and underlying premise of Johnston's article are direct responses to a distinction which Highway draws between Cree and Christian life:

This is the way the Cree look at life. A continuous cycle. A self-rejuvenating force. By comparison, Christian theology is a straight line. Birth, suffering, and then the apocalypse. . . . Human existence isn't a struggle for redemption to the Trickster. It's fun, a joyous celebration.18

Inevitably, Johnston uses this theory to prove that the strength of The Rez Sisters "depends on cyclical character journeys rather than on the plot line" (257) and that in Dry Lips "more of the action is imposed on the characters and less arises organically from their
own needs” (260). This is not memorable criticism, but what is memorable here is that the most astute comment made by Johnston is entirely divorced from a consideration of what Highway has said in interviews:

Highway is perhaps the first Canadian member of the international tradition of accomplished writers who work in their second language. Among playwrights, this tradition includes Samuel Beckett in French and Tom Stoppard in English.

Like them, Highway delights in linguistic estrangements and paradoxes. (255)

Here, Johnston is the first critic to place Highway within an understanding of international, literary traditions, but, unfortunately, this is a fleeting recognition, and it serves only to introduce Johnston’s “lines and circles” theory. However, Johnston’s reflection does indicate that it is possible to interpret Highway’s work without relying on Highway himself for critical direction.

Interestingly, then, we can see at this early point in the literary criticism of Highway’s works that this tendency to rely on Highway for validation is not specific to the world of journalism. And we might also note that self-reflexivity is not unique to newspaper reviews. For example, Johnston’s article ends with a homily on spirituality in contemporary Canadian society:

White society ought to watch carefully for this Native resurgence, because we need to learn from it. Our spiritual values have withered from neglect in our linear pursuit of progress. We are beginning to realize that we are poisoning ourselves physically as well, and we are not at all sure of our regenerative powers. We yearn for a society more in tune with that of Nanabush: more humorous, more visceral,
less gender-bound. (263)

Like journalists Susan Henders and Ray Conlogue, Johnston polarizes a multitude of different cultures into “white” and “non-Native” in order to suggest that non-Native critics should be learning from Highway’s example and Native cultures, and, like a number of reviewers who begin speaking in self-conscious, self-reflexive terms in their responses to Highway, Johnston writes in a manner which is reminiscent of Highway’s rhetoric when Highway speaks in interviews and at public forums.

And it is interesting to note that, in 1992, these rhetorical characteristics would appear again in Highway criticism but in an even more noticeable way. When American theatre critic Gitta Honegger contributed a review of Dry Lips to the American journal Theatre in 1992, “Native Playwright: Tomson Highway,” she spent nearly the full, first page of her article providing a curriculum vitae of sorts, and, here, Honegger not only defined herself very carefully, but she also used her self-reflexive rhetoric to teach her readers about appropriate, interpretive strategies for the study of Native works. First, she begins by introducing herself in the third person, and this not only lends a dramatic quality to her work, but it also seems to suggest that Honegger could easily represent any “non-Native” critic:

A non-Native theatregoer sees a play written by a Native playwright. It is one of the most exciting plays she has seen in a long time. . . . The observer, a theatre professional herself, with extensive training in Western theatre has no problem ranking the work (very highly) within the canon of Western drama. She is much more limited in her resources to define adequately, let alone do full justice to
that ‘other’, ‘Native’ dimension, that enriches and transcends the European conventions. Already the quotation marks reveal the perspective of the speaker which necessitates a special care in the use of language, and specifically, of misleading generalizations such as ‘Native Drama’ or ‘Native Theatre.’ (88)

Second, and aligning herself with the generic “non-Native,” Honegger suggests that there are certain ways in which non-aboriginal peoples should be reading and paying attention to Native literature. As Honegger notes, because she is “other,” she must be very careful about the language she is using, and when Honegger continues her introduction by switching from the third person to the first person, her change in narrative voice accentuates the points which she is attempting to make:

Although I have for some years now involved myself in the histories of some of the Native peoples, their different performance traditions, and the present situation, particularly of American Indians, I am in no position to adequately illuminate the intricate texture of the play [Dry Lips] within the rich and diversified heritage of Native traditions. My emotional response, overwhelming as it was, comes from my own cultural and personal experiences. The play generously led me into its world, its tragic dimensions as well as its wonderful comedic spirit. This world, as I perceive it, in all its contemporary vitality, takes on its full life and meaning only within the ancient circle of myths which hold the origin and still safeguard the continuity of its people. I consider myself an invited, privileged guest at the periphery of that circle. I cannot speak from within it. I feel that at this point in our shared history on this continent it is important to establish one’s
perspective and acknowledge one's limitations. (88)

What is notable about this passage is not so much the overwhelming sense of guilt, self-deprecation, and love of all things native and spiritual but the recognition that this passage and the article to which it belongs are part of a new tradition where critics are very consciously analyzing themselves in their responses to Highway and native literature and where they are becoming didactic and prescriptive.

Of course, there is more going on in Honegger’s article than self-reflexive rumination. And it is important to note that Honegger’s response to Dry Lips is interesting for several other reasons. First, the main point of Honegger’s article is that Highway is an anomaly for reasons different than those which have been outlined in Debenham’s and Johnston’s articles, and Honegger makes one consider how aboriginal writing can be understood not only in terms of Native traditions but also in terms of other, contemporary national identities. As Honegger sees it, the United States cannot boast of any artist comparable to Highway, and, here, she draws attention to the idea that Native playwrights have gained much more attention in Canada than in the States. While Honegger points to the exception of Native American playwright Hanay Geiogamah, she notes that “no Native American playwright has achieved the recognition of a Scott Momaday, Leslie Silko, James Welch [or] Linda Hogan” (89). Honegger also makes two other interesting comments, both of which are short-lived but both of which will gain importance at a later point in this survey of Highway criticism. Honegger observes, for example, that there is a mixture of “Western drama” and “Native customs” (91) in Dry Lips, and she also refers to the “grotesquely exaggerated guises of femininity” (90) which
Nanabush dons when she/he parodies the women in this play. And, here, we might note that in the course of providing large and sweeping comments about Native literatures, Honegger attempts to define what is unique in Highway's work.

Perhaps it does not seem that surprising by now that when the next contribution to Highway scholarship was published in Australian-Canadian Studies in 1992--Agnes Grant’s “Canadian Native Literature: The Drama of George Ryga and Tomson Highway”--this article also included a noteworthy examination of the critic’s “self.” First, speaking of The Ecstasy of Rita Joe, Grant claims that the play was an “eye-opener” (42) when it first appeared to the public and that it served to comment on those like Grant—a non-Native community, the reader is left to imagine: “For myself, and many like me, the play was devastating as we recognized our own penchant for doing good, directing the lives of others and our despair of ever finding remedies for exploited femaleness” (42). Here, Grant allies herself with those who are distinct from Rita Joe’s world, and when she goes on to discuss Highway’s The Rez Sisters, she continues to examine herself in relation to a non-native identity. For example, Grant draws attention to how her understanding of humour has changed because of her exposure to Native literatures: “When I first began teaching Native university students I was accused by the men of lacking a sense of humour and of feeling ‘uneasy’ with their jokes. Perhaps, but more likely I simply did not recognize or understand the humour” (49). Grant’s explanation is related to her reflection that “[u]nique Native humour surfaces on almost every page” (49) of The Rez Sisters, but, unfortunately, Grant does not go on to explain the subtleties which are involved in this different kind of humour.
In fact, what stands out in this piece of criticism is Grant’s almost unbearable reliance on Highway for critical direction, a reliance which is inextricable with her attempt to protect Highway from any kind of attack. Interestingly, Grant maintains that The Rez Sisters is “not a ‘feminist’ play” (47), and it would seem that she is finally providing a new take on Highway’s work, but the comments which follow this observation arrest any new development in Highway criticism:

[B]ut few men have come close to capturing the essence of what it is like to be a woman as has Highway. This could be because the Algonkian languages are gender neutral, or because of the reverence for Mother Earth and the role of women in Native cultures which contrasts so sharply with the devaluing of women in patriarchal societies. Or it could be because the Trickster is androgynous and Highway has been raised from his earliest breath knowing that the gender of a human being is of little consequence. (47)

A moment later, Grant refers to that world of Northern Manitoba where Highway grew up, and she protects Highway from any charge of sexism by interpreting this world as egalitarian:

Nowhere is this equality more in evidence than in the kind of environment into which Tomson Highway was born--on a trapline on a remote island on Maria Lake, hundreds of miles from the nearest city. He was born in a tent, like all his brothers and sisters while his parents, in partnership, lived off the land and cared for their growing family. Though men and women likely had different responsibilities there would have been no gender hierarchy. (48)
Here, Grant seems to embrace that “manger” in which Highway lies—that heroic and glorified past which Highway has come to represent—and she uses her reference to this world to protect Highway from any implication in a charge of misogyny. Most significantly, perhaps, one might note that these reflections and this dependency on an understanding of the world in which Highway was raised arrest any real criticism of Highway’s work.

Earlier in this article, Grant also broaches a consideration of Highway’s more contentious play, Dry Lips, and, again, essentialist assumptions about Native cultures undermine any kind of critical enterprise:

Perhaps Dry Lips appears more confused because of the subject matter—men. Men and their role in contemporary Native culture is confusing. This same ‘confusion’, as we would call it in our terribly methodical, time-oriented Western culture, is also found among Native women but not to the same extent. The women’s role, as in all cultures, has basically remained unchanged because they have the very necessary tasks of giving birth, keeping families fed and clothed and rested and healthy and in more modern times, reasonably in time for school. (45)

Huh? Grant’s reference to Western time-oriented culture is reminiscent of what Highway has said in a number of interviews about linear Christian reasoning and circular Native thinking, but it certainly does not smack of sophisticated analysis. After all, Grant creates a simple binary here between men and women, and her reference to a “time-oriented Western culture” and her insinuation that Native culture is somehow not “time-oriented” is never explained but taken for granted. And when Grant moves on to a discussion of
rape in Highway’s *The Rez Sisters* and Beatrice Culleton’s *In Search of April Raintree*,
the prefatory explanation she provides of rape in Western literature indicates just how
reductive an understanding of differences between Native and non-Native cultures has
become: “Western literature has long romanticized brutal sex and its dehumanizing and
devaluing of the female body” (51). Grant maintains. Inevitably, Grant leads her readers
to consider the idea that Native literature presents rape in a more realistic way, but her
claims are hardly substantiated in such a stereotypical discussion of Native spirituality and
difference. True, Grant also recognizes, like Debenham and Johnston, that Highway has
departed from a stereotypical tradition and that in *The Rez Sisters* the “women in the play
speak, think and act like real women” (44), but the reader must wait until the last line of
this article for another comment which seems as significant as Grant’s claim that native
humour might be distinct from non-native humour. As Grant says here, “[m]uch of
[native] literature is yet to come; when it does it could have a profound impact on Western
modes of thinking” (55).

Marc Maufort’s “Recognizing Difference in Canadian Drama: Tomson Highway’s
Poetic Realism” was published in the *British Journal of Canadian Studies* in 1993, and
while it only marginally advances Highway criticism, it does include some significant
precedents, nonetheless. Like Debenham, Johnston, and Grant, Maufort notes that
“Highway rejects stereotypical views of the Canadian Indian, showing the latter as capable
of genuine suffering” (230), and, like Honegger, Maufort observes that Highway blends
different traditions in his plays. Indeed, it is the last claim which allows for a new
direction of sorts in Highway scholarship, and Maufort spends much of this article
discussing how Highway "can be read from a multicultural perspective" (230). Maufort goes on to suggest that in both The Rez Sisters and Dry Lips, Highway "combines the best of two cultures in his plays, fusing Indian tales (the Nanabush figure) and traditional European forms" (231), and the newness of his critical approach is recognized when Maufort attempts to create new terminology to deal with Highway's work. First, he notes that "Highway's dramatic style could . . . be called extended poetic realism" (231) -- "a form blending realism and expressionism" (235) -- and, second, he observes that "the interrelatedness of comedy and tragedy in human life" contributes to "Highway's oeuvre" (238). Maufort expands on this latter observation and attempts to understand what unique characteristics Highway has contributed to Canadian drama: "Highway does not affirm the superiority of any type of rituals, and hence of tragic or comic forms, but posits their complementarity. His blend of tragic and comic moods parallels the new identity, the new voice that Highway encourages Canadians to discover for themselves, a blend of Eurocentric and Native values" (239).

Unfortunately, however, an exploration of Native values does not lead to an examination of Native literary characteristics, and, in fact, Maufort's discussion of Highway's plays seems limited by that same kind of romanticization which, in reviews, serves to deny the recognition that Native cultures are adaptive and creative. Maufort suggests that "Zachary's dream of owning a bakery. . . . certainly shares with the bingo motif of Rez Sisters the fact that it remains purely materialistic and fails to re-establish connection with the spirit of Indian mythology" (235-36), and, here, it seems that Maufort, while understandably recognizing that Highway's plays comment on the
devaluation of Native cultures by Native peoples themselves, misses the idea that grassroots dreams exist in both Native and non-Native worlds. That said, though, Maufort’s article does mark a huge departure from Grant’s study, and we are left to consider that Highway’s style is becoming a bit more defined. His plays mix “complementary opposites” (239), and “[h]is vision of human fate is based on the never-resolved tensions of comedy and tragedy” (240).

In 1993, Sheila Rabillard’s article “Absorption, Elimination, and the Hybrid: Some Pure Questions of Gender and Culture in the Trickster Drama of Tomson Highway” was published in Essays in Theatre, and it marks the greatest turning point in Highway scholarship in two notable ways. First, Rabillard treats Highway’s work with a sophistication that Highway’s work demands, and, second, she leaves behind that easy-to-understand and self-reflexive language that came to characterize Highway criticism in its early years and delivers her ideas in an almost impenetrable, jargon-ridden language. Indeed, more will be said about this latter point in the conclusion to this chapter, but, here, I feel it is important to note that 1993 marks a change in the language which critics will use in Highway criticism and that it is a frustrating change to witness. Now, without employing the language which Rabillard uses, it is interesting to note that Rabillard provides an interesting comment in her post-colonial critique of Highway’s work. First, and relying on the theories of Edward Said, Rabillard suggests that Highway counters a tradition which is found in colonial literatures or literatures which embody colonial traditions. As Said has argued, cultures who are deemed inferior by colonial minds are often constructed by colonialists or neo-colonialists in feminine terms, and, picking up on
this idea, Rabillard goes on to suggest that Highway neither perpetuates nor directly redresses this tradition. Rabillard’s argument involves many different nuances, but her main point seems to be that Highway’s work evades neat dichotomies and divisions and that it is not essentialist. As Rabillard suggests, Highway takes a bunch of colonial stereotypes, mixes them up and serves them back to his audiences in a new dish. His drama therefore “mounts a challenge to such categories of knowledge as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’” (13) and “moves towards a dissolution of divisions of gender” (17). Moreover, Rabillard claims that Highway disrupts the search for the “‘authentically’ Native North American” (15). In conclusion, then, Rabillard notes that Highway’s plays “demand [that] we re-examine the usefulness of [two] categories--both ‘Native North American culture’ and ‘the female’” (23).

Indeed, Rabillard’s article is important because it prods people to consider the idea that Highway’s work does not lend itself to easy divisions and simplistic dichotomies. And perhaps most importantly, Rabillard suggests that Highway’s non-essentialist drama is distinct from his essentialist theories when she draws a distinction between Highway’s work and Highway’s public pronouncements:

It appears that at least to some degree Highway acquiesces in the essentialist categories that, in the systems of knowledge of the dominant culture, construct both the female and the feminized Other of non-white culture. Without imposing a false consistency, however, it may be possible to account for the complexity of Highway’s stance by observing the polemical cast of the statements about his work which for the most part are made in interviews, public speeches, or the prefatory
notes to his plays--contexts in which he may well be concerned to define the social and political purposes of his work and to stress its difference from the usual dramatic fare. . . . In short, I suggest that Highway (consciously or not) employs a strategic essentialism in his more politicized assertions . . . while his dramas, particularly in performance, challenge the stability of categories that divide genders and cultures. (16)

This is by far the most insightful statement made in Highway criticism. While Rabillard does not go on to explore how critics have incessantly relied on the essentialist directives laid out by Highway in his speeches and interviews, she does draw a distinction between Highway's work and his theories, and she abandons the latter in order to produce the first real in-depth look at Highway's work.

It is interesting to note that Alan Filewod's article "Receiving Aboriginality: Tomson Highway and the Crisis of Cultural Authenticity," published in Theatre Journal in 1994, shares certain likenesses with Rabillard's piece of criticism, and that, together with Rabillard's article, it indicates that Highway criticism began to change slightly in the early 1990s. Most notably, perhaps, Filewod employs the same kind of theoretical language as Rabillard does, making the critic work to understand some very important ideas that need to be clearly understood. Filewod claims, for example, that "[t]he problem of white reception of aboriginal theatre is a problem in the dialectics of decolonization and reinscribed colonization, in which voices of cultural affirmation and resistance are received by white critics as a testament of authentic and unmediated reality, which, in critical response, disallows the agency of resistance itself" (364), and, here, it becomes apparent
that while Highway's work is being discussed in more sophisticated ways, it is also being subjected to a confusing type of language. Filewod seems to be arguing that while aboriginal artists include in their works a strong sense of what it is like to be aboriginal, non-native critics understand that they are representing true or "authentic" Indianness and that this recognition really denies an understanding of the sophistication of human experience. And, then, Filewod goes on to suggest that in the world of theatre criticism, when critics start evaluating native authors with the tools of Western dramaturgy, they make excuses for those things which do not make sense in terms of Western standards by claiming that "shamanistic authenticity" (367), for example, "excuses transgression" (367). Filewod really seems to be saying that patronization has become a mark of the criticism of native literatures and that there is no real depth to an understanding of different native dramaturgical traditions.

Filewod then goes on to discuss the debate which ensued when Dry Lips was remounted at the Royal Alexandra Theatre in 1991. After exploring the divide which was created in this controversy between Native and non-Native women, he suggests that the corpus of criticism which was launched against Highway's play by Native women might reflect a larger divisiveness between native women and native men. Filewod refers to the 1992 Referendum debate over the Charlottetown Constitutional Accord, and he notes that "the newly formed native women's lobby [was] at odds with the male-dominated Assembly of First Nations" (372). Next, Filewod notes that when Dry Lips moved to its new venue, the audience at the Royal Alex was divorced from an understanding of Highway's larger vision and that the lack of solidarity between audience and performers
might have contributed to the negative responses which the Mirvish production engendered. Indeed, and as my earlier discussion of the Mirvish production of Dry Lips has shown, Filewod's second observation has been supported by a number of other critics. However, Filewod's comment about divisiveness in Native communities is interesting, because, here, Filewod attempts to reject an essentialist view of "the native community.” Most importantly, perhaps, when Filewod provides this reflection, he draws a distinction between what he is doing here and what Highway has done on a number of occasions:

Reviews of Highway’s plays frequently describe them as “magic” while at the same time finding fault with dramatic structure. In Dry Lips, for example, the ‘overlong presentation’ is justified by ‘cleansing magic’;¹⁹ in a review of another production of that same play, we read that despite being ‘overlong, loosely structured . . . and . . . hurt by lack of clarity . . . it’s still a stunning evening of theatre filled with ritual, magic, grim realism and the spirit of life.’²⁰ Highway himself has encouraged this reading with public statements that stress cultural reconciliation, referring at one point to the possibility of interculturalism as ‘this magical transformation that is potentially quite magnificent.’²¹ (367-68)

Like Rabillard, therefore, Filewod also notes that Highway has encouraged essentialist readings of his own work, and while he does not go on to explore the tensions which are created in Highway criticism as a result of Highway’s essentializing, he does add to an awareness of a potential problem in Highway scholarship.

Published in the Winter 1993/Spring 1994 issue of Essays on Canadian Writing, Richard Knowles’ article “Reading Material: Transfers, Remounts and the Production of
Meaning in Contemporary Toronto Drama and Theatre” includes, as my earlier discussion has shown, an attempt to make sense of how the Royal Alexandra affected responses to Dry Lips when it was re-staged in 1991. Knowles simply adds to what different reviewers have said about the differences between audiences familiar with Highway’s work and those unfamiliar or removed from an understanding of Highway, but it is interesting to note that Knowles makes another important observation here. Knowles draws attention to Highway’s public assertions, and while he does not address Highway’s essentialism as Rabillard and Filewood do, he does, nevertheless, point out a contradiction in Highway’s pronouncements:

Despite Highway’s claim in some forums that he had not merely applied white forms to Native subjects, he is quoted in many interviews and articles as saying that he had done just that: ‘I put together my knowledge of Indian reality in this country with classical structure, artistic language. It amounted to applying sonata forms to the spiritual and mental situation of a street drunk, say, at the corner of Queen and Bathurst’. (280)

Here, Knowles draws attention to the recognition that Highway, just like anyone else, is not necessarily consistent, and this observation indicates that Highway is not always the best authority at times, not even, and, perhaps, especially when it comes to the criticism of his own work.

Interestingly, this same issue of Essays on Canadian Writing includes another article which makes mention of Highway, and while W.J. Keith’s “Shooting Niagara? Some Pessimistic Thoughts about the Future of English-Canadian Literary Studies” is
more an examination of how literary values seem to be changing in the late-twentieth century than it is an examination of Highway and his work, it does include a telling comment. Here, Keith mourns what he calls a "decline in cultural memory" (386), and he attacks those critics who no longer seem to know their British canon. Keith argues against quota requirements, and he suggests that such acts of political correctness ignore literary quality. More specifically, Keith links these assertions to a discussion of Highway's reception within the domain of Canadian literature, and, interestingly enough, Keith echoes what Martin Knelman had asserted in the Financial Post in 1991--that Highway had been almost instantly embraced by the public domain:

The current literary mood seems desperately concerned that ethnic minorities not hitherto conspicuous in English-Canadian writing should be brought into the mainstream as quickly as possible. Hence the attention recently paid to such writers as Tomson Highway and Sky Lee. Frankly, I am not convinced that they have yet produced work of sufficient quality to merit the praise that has been accorded them. . . . I do not wish to be misunderstood. I fully believe that, in the Canadian literature of the future, the Native and Chinese communities, along with others, will contribute their share. . . . But we do both groups a disservice--display, in an inverted way, a condescending prejudice--if we do not evaluate such contributions as rigorously as others. . . . Highway has demonstrated a capacity for raw theatrical power but not, in my view, any depth of vision and certainly no verbal distinction. (394)

Keith's comment is interesting for a number of reasons. First, and most notably, this is the
first negative comment of its kind made about Highway. While critics and reviewers had problematized and even responded vitriocially at times to the Mirvish production of *Dry Lips* at the Royal Alex, no one, until Keith, had ever actually insinuated that Highway was only being published because he was a Native playwright. As my earlier discussion has shown, reviewers had, in fact, anticipated claims such as these, and they had assiduously protected Highway from such a charge, but Keith is the first critic to say aloud what others have not said directly. Now, I do not agree with Keith, and *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and *Disappearing Moon Café* are two of my favorite books, but I am reminded of Hannon again and what he says about the debate which grew out of *Dry Lips*: “It was almost a relief . . . to hear something critical about at least one of the Highways. While Rene was alive, the two of them seemed like candidates for canonization” (82). Hannon does not mince words, and he is intentionally inflammatory and quick to employ any stereotypes which more sensitive critics avoid, but he does get to the heart of something here. While he immediately goes on to suggest that these two artists “were bound to be lionized” because of their “genuine talent, passion and probity” (82), he also underscores the dangers which attend patronization. And Keith’s comment also makes critics consider more closely how paternalism and patronization need to be addressed in literary criticism and, especially, in the criticism of Native literatures.

Keith’s reflections are also interesting for several other reasons. First, and despite the recognition that Keith seems to be doing the opposite of what reviewers are doing when they rush to protect Highway, it is interesting to note that Keith also attempts to protect Highway as well as himself. Keith might attack Highway, but he also does so
because he does not want Highway to be shown any "disservice" (394), and, here, it is possible to suggest, then, that Keith's article perpetuates, to some degree, that paternalistic impulse which is found in early reviews of Highway's work. And, interestingly, here, too, paternalism gives way to an attempt to protect the critic: that is, Keith inevitably protects himself by showing that he is not guilty of paternalism. Third, and perhaps most importantly, however, Keith's article provides an interesting comment on literary value. Keith attacks literary scholars who do not seem to know their British canon, and, against this consideration, he draws attention to the decision which SSHRC made in 1991 when they stopped funding Canadian Poetry because this journal was not representing enough ethnic diversity. Keith uses this example, as well as his reference to Highway and Lee, to support his conviction that political correctness ignores literary quality. And in a way, Keith is probably right. But in another way, Keith is wrong or, rather, too focused on traditional conceptions of quality. After all, Keith measures everything against a touchstone of British literary value--a value which he does not question. But are there not other values and other literatures? And should we not expose ourselves to different cultural expressions and literary traditions and determine, with rigorous measures, what are the very best examples of quality in different kinds of literatures? In any event, Keith's article leaves these questions in our minds, and they are important questions to which this chapter will return.

Here, though, it is impossible to engage with this question any further when one considers the next contribution to Highway scholarship: Clint Burnham's "Lips, Marks, Lapse: Materialism and Dialogism in Thomson [sic] Highway's Dry Lips Oughta Move to
"Kapuskasing." Published in *Open Letter* in 1994, this response to Highway’s work is delivered in the form of a postmodern poem, and I reproduce the introduction here simply to indicate the nature of Burnham’s response:

will begin with the lips
the lips that are
on the cover that
mark
and cover
and are on the face of
the book its ass-
sumptions (19)

If frustration attends the recognition that the language of Highway criticism began changing in 1993, despair attends the recognition that Highway criticism should suffer an even greater change like this. Plodding through Burnham’s elliptical comments, one discovers—when one is forced to read this a second time—that Burnham is simply saying, as Rabillard and Filewod have done, that Highway’s work evades neat binary oppositions. Granted, this is an important assertion, but more than anything else, Burnham’s “article” encourages one to consider why this point could not be made in a straightforward manner and why Burnham, like others, has begun to opt for an almost impenetrable language in discussions of Highway’s work. And we might begin to consider, then, whether this language and this type of critical approach are just products of a time period in literary criticism when theoretical jargon is considered to be good or whether or not something
else is happening here.

In the spring of 1995, *Canadian Literature* published two more responses to Highway’s work, Renate Usmiani’s “The Bingocentric Worlds of Michel Tremblay and Tomson Highway: *Les Belles-soeurs* vs. *The Rez Sisters*” and Roberta Imboden’s “On the Road with Tomson Highway’s Blues Harmonica in ‘Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing’.” In the former, Usmiani attempts to consider what Highway’s and Tremblay’s plays have in common, and she astutely notes that “both plays marked the beginning of a new and original dramaturgy, the ‘nouveau théâtre québecois’ [sic] in the case of Tremblay, Native Canadian theatre in that of Highway” (126). Usmiani points to cultural revolutions—to the “quiet revolution” in Québec in the 1960s and to what she calls the revolution of “native peoples in the 1980s” (128)—as shaping forces in both of these plays, and, here, she seems to be making a valuable and original contribution to Highway scholarship. However, Usmiani does not really go on to explore how revolution has contributed to the creation of distinct literary styles, and her most insightful comment is the following: “The political impact of these cultural revolutions became clearly manifest in a change of nomenclature from colonial to independently assertive: ‘French-Canadian’ to Québécois’; ‘Indian’ (the colonizers’ term) to ‘Native’ or ‘Aboriginal’” (128).

Unfortunately, Usmiani neither re-visits this idea nor connects it to her discussion of revolutionary drama, but it seems that she is providing room for future critics to take Highway criticism in another direction. She also notes, for instance, that “[i]n the best plays [by native authors] to emerge so far, the authors have successfully grafted the techniques of Euramerican postmodern theatre onto [a] traditional matrix of ritual and
storytelling" and that “[t]he result is a theatre which shares all the surface aspects of Western postmodernism, but differs essentially in spirit” (126). Indeed, this is an interesting reflection, but there seem to be a couple of factors which stunt the growth of a potentially forceful argument here.

First, Usmiani begins her article noting, as Debenham had done almost a decade earlier, that “Native playwrights are forced to work in a genre without direct antecedent in their culture” (126). Usmiani does mention that “theatrical elements are present, of course, in many aspects of traditional ritual and storytelling” (126), but, throughout her article, Usmiani holds to her idea that there are no Native theatrical traditions, and such an assumption seems related to the fact that Usmiani does not spend time attempting to consider how Native literary traditions have contributed to a unique style of drama which seems to be postmodern on the surface. Second, like many other critics, Usmiani inevitably turns to Highway for critical direction, and perhaps it is no wonder, then, that this article—promising though it is at some moments—slips into a facile comparison of Les Belles-soeurs and The Rez Sisters. For example, in her discussion of how “the two authors deal with [a] loss of spirituality” (137), Usmiani turns to an interview with Highway in Per Brask and Morgan William’s Aboriginal Voices: Amerindian, Inuit and Sami Theatre, and she reproduces one of Highway’s explanations of Native “magic”:

Looking at the two plays under discussion, one must agree with [Highway’s] own basic distinction between native and non-native theatre: ‘The use of underlying native mythology is the distinctive feature. Native mythology is so alive, electric, passionate. . . . the relationship in Christian mythology is so academic by
comparison . . . [in] native theatre that spirituality is there. It is magic."

And what does Usmiani inevitably conclude, then? "The Nanabush figure in The Rez Sisters indeed conveys that sense of magic" (137). This comment is not that insightful, and, in fact, many of the conclusions which Usmiani draws are not really that analytical; rather, they are flat responses to the comments which Highway makes. Near the conclusion of her article, for example, Usmiani turns again to the authority of Highway and applies his theories in her interpretation of how Les Belles-soeurs is distinct from The Rez Sisters:

Nanabush, then, stands for the joyful, life-affirming spirit of Native mythology, as well as for a calm and fearless attitude to death. As Highway points out, contrasting these attitudes to Christian ones, 'One super-hero is stating that we are here to suffer and the other basically says we are here to have a helluva good time . . . One was crucified, the other wasn’t; so we have absolutely nothing to feel guilty about . . .'

The two plays provide a perfect illustration of these basic differences. All the women of the older generation in Les Belles-soeurs are deeply steeped in a sense of sin and guilt. (138)

Usmiani then ends her article by drawing grand conclusions based on Highway’s reflections: "Tremblay’s cynical treatment . . . echoes Western postmodern nihilism; Highway’s idealization of characters and retention of a humanistic value system indicates a society in which hope has not yet died" (139).

However, while Usmiani’s article leaves readers anxious for a more in-depth consideration of Highway’s work, it is interesting to note that Roberta Imboden’s article
satisfies one’s desire for a more thorough type of criticism and that it does so because Imboden, unlike Usmiani, does not depend upon Highway for critical direction. The premise of Imboden’s article is that the harmonica which provides the “sound-scape” (Dry Lips, production notes) for Dry Lips is an “excellent medium of exodus for Highway’s characters on the road toward meaningful liberation” (114). Imboden notes that, stemming as the Blues does from a history of black slavery, “the Blues harmonica suits well the situation of the Native people who are also struggling with a freedom that they have and do not have, toward some form of transcendence, some affirmation of the self” (114). Imboden then goes on to provide Frygean and Derridean readings of Dry Lips in an attempt to consider how the blues functions in different mythological ways in Highway’s play, and while the theoretical language of this article threatens a clear presentation of ideas, Imboden does make some astute comments. When she observes that the characters of Dry Lips should be understood not in terms of Oedipus’s trek from Corinth to Thebes but in terms of Moses’s trek with the Israelites to the promised land (because, as Imboden points out, the Blues harmonica promises more hope than despair), she notes that certain characteristics dominate Highway’s play: “The weapons of satire that break the structure of the tragic circle are: militant irony, burlesque, caricature, wild, obscene humour, the hallmarks of satire” (117). Now, whether or not these are the hallmarks of satire or the hallmarks of Highway is a point not raised by Imboden, but when one surveys Highway criticism in a manner such as this study is doing, these comments stand out as the most important, because they indicate that critics are beginning to define Highway’s style even if they think they are defining something else. And, here, it
is worth mentioning that Imboden, speaking of “burlesque humour”--the property of satire, as she sees it--also refers to it as “grotesque humour” (117), a comment which echoes Honegger’s earlier reference to Nanabush and the “grotesquely exaggerated guises of femininity” (90). As well, it seems interesting that Imboden trips upon a consideration of postmodernism in her next breath. “The grotesque humour creates a sense of utter chaos, but, ironically, this realization of chaos means that a certain kind of freedom exists” (117) Imboden claims, a freedom which leads her to consider that “[t]he zeitgeist of the Postmodern world suggests that it is only upon ruins that creativity takes place” (118). Here, Imboden echoes Usmiani’s insinuation that those “postmodern” characteristics in Highway’s work deserve examination, but, like Usmiani, Imboden will leave this comment behind and will continue tracking the argument she has set out to explore.

In 1995, Studies in Canadian Literature also published another contribution to Highway scholarship, Anne Nothof’s “Cultural Collision and Magical Transformation: The Plays of Tomson Highway.” Echoing Rabillard, Filewod and Burnham to some degree, Nothof argues that Highway’s work is not essentialist and that “[i]n Highway’s plays there is no concept of ‘pure’ cultures” (36). Nothof understands Highway as examining “cultural collision” (35) in his plays, and she suggests that the cause of “collision” or conflict in The Rez Sisters and Dry Lips is neither Native culture nor non-Native culture but, rather, the inability of people to understand each other’s differences. Nothof’s article is not that enlightening, but what it is interesting to note is that Susan Bennett later relies upon Nothof’s discussion to defend the decision which Jerry Wasserman made when he chose to publish Dry Lips in the revised edition of Modern Canadian Plays and make
Highway's work representative of Native drama. As Bennett recognizes in an article entitled "New Stages: Questions for Canadian Dramatic Criticism," this decision led Chris Johnson to consider the problems of tokenism in his article "Wisdom Under a Ragged Coate: Canonicity and Canadian Drama," but, as Bennett maintains, "Nothof argues persuasively for the achievement of Highway's plays in speaking across cultures at the same time as they dramatize 'their collision'" (5). And for Bennett, the following question thus ensues when one considers both Highway's work and Nothof's article: "In the accommodation (again deliberately) of Highway's work on the main stages of Canadian theatre, what lessons have audiences learned about their 'other' and what possibilities are there in a field of representation where it is still the case that most bodies walking out on the stage can be assumed to be 'white'? (5). Here, it is interesting that Bennett underscores the didactic nature of Highway's work, and this is a reflection which leads one to consider the manner in which reviewers and critics have become didactic and prescriptive at times in their responses to Highway. In other words, it seems to be important that Highway critics have been led to ponder, or somehow to engage with, the didactic sensibility of Highway's work and, thus, we might consider that didacticism is part of an aesthetic.

It would seem at this point, then, that 1995 is the most important year in Highway criticism since Highway scholarship grows considerably, and, indeed, this becomes even clearer when one considers the second contribution which Agnes Grant made to Highway criticism this same year in Contemporary Issues in Canadian Drama. In large part, Grant's article "Native Drama: A Celebration of Native Culture" is a regurgitation of her earlier
piece in *Australian-Canadian Studies* in 1992, and, in fact, Grant re-produces a significant portion of her earlier criticism here. However, Grant has significantly revised her ideas, so much so that I am able to claim that this is, by far, the best article produced on Highway to date since Grant seems to outline here the next direction which the criticism of Native literature should take. Interestingly, Grant refers only briefly to Highway's critical theories, and she turns to a number of different authorities to draw conclusions about native drama. First, as both her bibliography and her discussion indicate, her article has been informed by a number of non-native critics and their studies of oral literatures: Thomas E. Sanders and Walter W. Peek's *Literature of the American Indian*, Harold Seidelman and James Turner's *The Inuit Imagination: Arctic Myth and Sculpture*, Herbert Schwarz's *Elik: and Other Stories of the Mackenzie Eskimos*, and Diamond Jenness's *The Indians of Canada*. Second, she relies upon the ideas and theories of a number of Native artists and spokespeople--Tomson Highway, Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, Maria Campbell, and Daniel David Moses. And it is her cross-referencing of a number of opinions and authorities which perhaps leads Grant to begin defining, very carefully, what she says are the key characteristics of contemporary Native drama. Referring not only to Highway but also to Drew Hayden Taylor, Margo Kane, Monique Mojica and Daniel David Moses, Grant suggests that “commonalities are found in all [their] writing” (105).

First, Grant considers the themes with which all of these authors are dealing: “Not only are the characters in the drama Aboriginal people, but their experiences are those of Aboriginals. Consequently, issues of race, class, colonialism, discrimination, oppression, loss of culture and redefinition of culture are found in all the plays” (105). Next, Grant
considers the aesthetic qualities of Native drama more closely: "Humour, pathos, stark realism, rage, and grief are all found in the dramas, but love, joy, optimism, pride, ritual and celebration are also found" (105). True, Grant does not interrogate these characteristics very closely, but she attempts to pinpoint and define what is different about Native drama. She considers the importance of language, for example: "The recognition that Native languages exist and have an impact on a writer's art is a fairly new phenomenon" (109). And she considers the role which mythology plays in contemporary Native literatures: "Native mythology plays an integral part in all Aboriginal literary productions" (109). She also points out that the dominant characteristic of tricksters—enantiodromia—is not only to be found in Highway's plays: "Shape-shifting is an integral part of Native mythology and the sooner theatre goers accept it as a unique literary device, the sooner enjoyment and appreciation of the drama develop" (110). And she also returns to a consideration of humour and significantly builds upon that fleeting reference which she had made to native humour in 1992: "Native people cannot be portrayed accurately without humour and laughter. Native humour is hearty and spontaneous and is often directed at misfortune turned into a joke" (112). Moreover, Grant suggests how people can begin to understand Native humour:

Analyzing the humour in Native drama becomes very difficult in Western literary terms yet the humour is one reason why Highway's plays are so uniquely Manitoban Indian. He has captured the very essence of the culture. Non-Natives need to see these plays in the company of Native audiences in order to understand and appreciate the humour. (113)
And, then, and perhaps most significantly, Grant spells out what a large problem has been thus far in the criticism of Highway by referring to impasses in the larger field of Native studies: "Western culture has long paid lip service to the 'different' Native world view but little attempt has been made to understand what this might be" (113-14).

In 1998, when Christopher Innes published an article on Highway and Derek Walcott in a collection of essays dedicated to contemporary theatre, *Theatre Matter: Performance and Culture on the World Stage*, he indicated that there were others who were thinking in the same terms as Grant. Interestingly, though, in his comparison of Walcott's *Dream on Monkey Mountain* and Highway's *Dry Lips*, "Dreams of Violence: Moving Beyond Colonialism in Canadian and Caribbean Drama," Innes begins by claiming, like Usmani, that "North American Indians . . . had absolutely no exposure to a theatrical tradition" (77); however, despite this shortsightedness, Innes does attempt to define what is unique in Highway's plays. Like Grant, then, he seems intent on defining specific literary characteristics, and he attempts to do so by considering what Walcott's play and Highway's play have in common and also by considering Highway's play in isolation. Innes notes that both plays are "dream-plays," or that they both "contain a double dream," that "[b]oth centre on the distorting deception of a white 'Goddess'," and that "both present a 'Trickster'" (78). Innes then observes more specific characteristics: "In both violence is linked with comedy. Both also require a highly physical form of acting, developed through their own performing groups, and rely heavily on symbolism" (78-79). Moreover, Innes suggests that both plays "work subliminally rather than through direct statement" (79). Next, Innes focuses specifically on Highway, and, echoing
Debenham, Johnston, Grant, and Maufort, he begins by observing that “[t]here is nothing folkloric about the way Highway presents his Indian characters” (86). Like these other critics, Innes suggests that Highway rejects stereotypical representations of native peoples, and this comment is also reminiscent of Rabillard’s and Filewod’s comments about the non-essentializing nature of Highway’s work. In addition, Innes seems to repeat what Imboden says when she refers to the elements of satire which dominate Dry Lips: “The tone is broadly satiric, combining physical farce with a poetic evocation of the Indian sense of community, against a background of serious social problems” (Innes 86). And lastly, Innes employs that word which Honegger and Imboden mention when they attempt to make sense of the burlesque elements of Dry Lips. He claims, for example, that Highway’s play “tends towards the grotesque” (my emphasis 88).

Indeed, it is significant that Innes bypasses much of the essentialism which characterizes early Highway criticism, and it is also significant that he broaches an idea which Usmiani touches upon in her article. Here, Innes suggests very subtly that cultural revolution has been a shaping force in both Highway’s and Walcott’s work or that, at the very least, these works should be understood in relation to cultural revolution:

Neither in the West Indies nor Canada has there been a watershed political event following the performances of Walcott’s or Highway’s work to which the plays might be linked; and despite the Black Power movement or the occasional confrontation on Canadian Indian reserves, the recent history of both countries has been free from the social upheaval that has erupted elsewhere in the world, and that might fuel an immediate political response to a theatrical performance. Yet in
each case a discernible shift in general attitudes occurred after these plays were staged. (94)

Here, Innes is referring back to earlier claims that he had made in this article. As he mentions in his discussion of Walcott’s play, “when Dream on Monkey Mountain was staged in 1985 the response indicated that Walcott’s play was one of the conditioning factors that by then had led to the rejection of Black Power politics, and to a general recognition that the ‘Back to Africa’ movement was a destructive illusion” (84). And as he mentions in his discussion of Highway’s Dry Lips, “[s]hortly after the various performances, a new spirit of conciliation was evident in the renegotiation of Indian land claims, which are still continuing” (93). Now, Innes is quick to realize that one cannot draw a direct connection between these two works and specific political activities, but his discussion does provoke one to consider how Highway’s work may be inextricable with a larger social movement or revolution.

The next significant contribution to Highway scholarship was published in the fall issue of Essays on Canadian Writing in 1998, and while Jerry Wasserman’s “Where the Soul Still Dances: The Blues and Canadian Drama” is not devoted specifically to Highway, it does include a significant discussion of Highway’s Dry Lips. Wasserman seems to pick up on Imboden’s ideas somewhat, and he attempts to suggest that “Canadian drama and theatre have also been a crossroad where the blues and African American and Canadian cultures meet in productive transit” (56). More specifically, Wasserman is intent on proving that non-Native artists who have written about Native peoples, as well as Native peoples who have written about Native communities, are
particularly apt to turn to the blues for inspiration. Indeed, Wasserman’s article is provocative, and, along with Usmani’s comparison of Tremblay and Highway and Innes’s comparison of Walcott and Highway, it advances Highway scholarship by showing how Highway’s work can be understood in relation to various cultural expressions. However, Wasserman, like many reviewers and critics, inevitably turns to Highway for critical input, and the critical path he sets out to trace is therefore intercepted by a confusing colossus:

Making the blues harp a marker of Native spirituality—with its complex mesh of suffering, frustration, humour, and endurance—seems to have been in part a logical choice for Tomson Highway, in part an intuitive leap. In one interview, he explains that he chose ‘the blues harmonica because Zachary is blue; Zachary’s nature fits the blues harmonica: he has aspirations deep down in his most secret part of his heart and his fantasies, and his dream registers this’. But when I asked him about it, he said that his choice was determined by the fact that actor Gary Farmer, who played Zachary in the original production, played blues harp. Then, I wondered, if Farmer played accordion, say, instead of harmonica, would Zachary have ended up playing accordion in Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing? ‘Absolutely!’ Highway answered. He also said that the initial ‘blues’ connection was his original idea of opening the play with the first notes of George Gershwin’s ‘Rhapsody in Blue.’ Finally, I tried to tie his use of the blues in Dry Lips back to African American sources by asking whether he thought the music that grew out of the oppression of African Americans might naturally help to articulate the parallel experience of oppressed Native Canadians. Highway vociferously objected. (71-
Wasserman garners three conflicting responses from Highway, and he is inevitably presented with yet another consideration when Highway answers Wasserman’s last question:

No—it never entered my mind for a second. I don’t think of Native people as oppressed. I feel *privileged* to be Native Canadian. When I left my reserve, I discovered a Canada rich in material things but poor in the life of the spirit. Where I came from was just the opposite: materially poor but spiritually rich. In Indian people, the soul still dances. (72)

Wasserman takes this comment and applies it in a creative way to his concluding remarks, but the essentialism in his exiting comments seems a bit removed from his astute, opening observation that “[m]odern Canadian drama emerged in the 1960s and into the 1970s . . . with the so-called blues revival” (57). “This was a useful reminder to me that the blues has always been party music as well as lament,” Wasserman says. “I can think of no better way to describe the blues than as music in which the soul still dances” (72). Indeed, in this assertion lies a beautiful title, and it is significant that Wasserman does push Highway’s comments aside to a certain degree when he finally notes, in his last line, that “[s]ometimes in ironic dissonance, more often in a kind of harmony, Canadians continue to stage the blues” (72); however, and even though Wasserman does not make essentialist claims about native cultures here, essentialist theories again surface in Highway criticism and remain undisputed.

Essentialist philosophies are contested, however, in Peter Dickinson’s *Here is*
Queer: Nationalisms, Sexualities, and the Literatures of Canada. When Dickinson published this work in 1999, he included a chapter on Tomson Highway, and this study became the third reading of Highway’s work to consider, very closely, how Highway’s plays do not support essentialist theories. As Dickinson notes in his seventh chapter, “Learning New Tricks: Re-Imag(in)ing Community in the Two-Spirited Writing of Tomson Highway,” “[t]here is no ‘true’ or ‘essential’ category of Indigenous two-spiritedness, just as there is no singular or authentic definition of Western homosexuality” (179). Indeed, what is perhaps most interesting here is that Dickinson’s queer reading, like Rabillard’s and Filewod’s post-colonial readings, inevitably leads him to consider how Highway’s work neither creates neat categories, dichotomies or stereotypes nor lends itself to essentialist readings. Looked at from two very different perspectives, in other words, Highway’s work reveals the same things.

Perhaps most importantly, though, Dickinson’s study is the first in-depth look at sexuality in Highway’s plays, and, near the beginning of his piece, Dickinson draws attention to the recognition that his article marks a turning point in Highway criticism:

What I find remarkable is that in virtually all of these analyses the ‘crisis of authenticity’ that most agree is enacted in Highway’s plays is situated solely within the context of ethnicity and gender, leaving sexuality, for instance, as an undifferentiated aspect of the intersection of these two categories rather than, as I would argue, the ‘critical’ site of their articulation and elaboration. (182)

Unfortunately, as is the case with Rabillard’s, Filewod’s, and Burnham’s articles, this study is weakened by theoretical jargon, but, nonetheless, Dickinson is significantly
contributing to Highway scholarship by breaking an unexplainable kind of silence.

Highway is an openly acknowledged gay playwright who consistently writes about queer sexuality, and although sexuality is at the front and center of his work, this survey of Highway criticism reveals that no one seems to want to talk about sexuality when they are discussing Highway. There have been brief comments or gestures, but all have been short lived. As early as 1987, Monique Mojica mentioned in an interview with Barbara Crook in The Ottawa Citizen that “the fact that one of the women [in The Rez Sisters] is gay is really revolutionary for native theatre” (28 October 1987: F16). As she further claimed, “[t]here are gay Indians, but it’s something that is never really discussed or acknowledged.” Jocelyn Cullity echoed Mojica verbatim that same year (The Strand 2 December 1987), and, then, in 1993, Rabillard pointed out that “Highway’s acknowledged homosexuality added a significant frame to his refusal to confine the gender possibilities of Nanabush” (14). Alan Filewod was the next critic to make mention of queer insights in Highway’s work, but he merely observed that “no attention whatsoever has been placed on Highway’s occasional public comments about his homosexuality, nor have critics addressed the complexities of the gay male claiming insight into female experience” (369). And Stan Dragland provided a provocative comment when he suggested that the residential school depicted in Kiss of the Fur Queen, “like all such church/government schools in Canada, exists to turn Indians into white people [but that] [i]t does a better job on Jeremiah than on Gabriel, whose homosexuality keeps him more aloof from all things mainstream” (44). Gabriel, Dragland also notes, “has permanently sexualized the body of Christ” (45), but Dragland goes on only to confuse his readers by the following, cryptic
reading: “To counter such consuming adversaries—collectively a leviathan—you need a hero like resourceful Weesageechak to enter the Weetigo’s burnhole (as when he turned himself into a weasel) and eat its guts from the inside” (45). Therefore, since Dickinson’s article is devoted entirely to a consideration of sexuality in Highway’s work, it breaks a decade of silence and opens up more possibilities for Highway critics. But Dickinson’s article is also important for another reason. His concluding comments, like Bennett’s response to Nothof’s article, suggest that Highway’s plays are not only a source of entertainment but that they are also teaching tools: “The performance of (ab)originality on stage requires white, heterosexual audiences, in particular, to reimagine their relationships not only with Indigenous peoples, but with other marginalized communities as well, including women and queers” (186).

Indeed, Dickinson’s article seems to mark a large departure from Debenham’s article a decade earlier, and, here, then, we might note that the literary articles which engage with Highway differ from early responses to Highway in that they represent a greater diversity of interests than that found in pop-culture journalism. But that said, it is interesting to note that there are a number of consistent patterns which also emerge in this corpus of criticism: 1) a notable number of critics claim that Highway is a trailblazer in Native literature (Debenham 1985; Johnston 1988; Grant 1992; Maufort 1993; and Innes 1998); 2) certain critics maintain that there are no Native theatrical traditions or precedents (Debenham 1985; Usmiani 1995; Innes 1998); 3) until 1992, certain critics, like journal and newspaper reviewers, show a certain amount of bewilderment with Highway (Debenham 1985; Johnston 1988; Maufort 1992); 4) a notable number of critics
depend on Highway and his theories for critical direction in their responses to Highway’s art (Debenham 1985; Johnston 1988; Grant 1992; Usmiani 1995; Wasserman 1998; 5) until 1992, a number of critics, like reviewers, are highly self-reflexive in their responses to Highway’s work (Johnston 1988; Honegger 1992; Grant 1992); 6) after 1993, most critics abandon self-reflexivity in favor of an impenetrable theoretical language (Rabillard 1993; Filewod 1993; Burnham 1994; Imboden 1995; Dickinson 1999; 7) in 1992, critics begin to isolate the characteristics which are unique to Highway’s art (Honegger 1992; Grant 1992; Maufort 1993; Imboden 1995; Grant 1995; Innes 1998); 8) around 1993, critics begin to claim that Highway’s work is not essentialist (Rabillard 1993; Filewod 1993; Burnham 1994; Nothof 1995 and Dickinson 1999); 9) at the same time, critics begin to state in theoretical terms, as Moses had insinuated in a creative way in 1987, that Highway’s public pronouncements are essentialist, and they further note that his essentialist theories differ from the philosophies revealed in his art (Rabillard 1993; Filewod 1993; Knowles 1993/94); 10) in 1995 and later years, critics begin to compare Highway with other artists from different cultures, or they attempt to understand his work in relation to different cultural traditions (Usmiani 1995; Innes 1998; Wasserman 1998; and Imboden 1998). As well, and while it must be recognized that two critical voices do not constitute a pattern, other important assertions appear in Highway criticism: Honegger (1992) and Maufort (1993) recognize that Highway’s work boasts a mixture of different cultural traditions; Rabillard (1993) and Filewod (1993) problematize the quest for Native authenticity which often accompanies essentialist theories; Usmiani (1995) and Innes (1998) suggest that social revolution has been a shaping force in Highway’s work; and
Usmiani and Imboden (1998) claim that Highway’s work appears to be postmodern. Now, what does all of this mean? And how do these patterns help make sense of the manner in which this body of criticism reflects an anxiety with contemporary, aboriginal influences?

The first three considerations—that most critics see Highway as a trailblazer in the world of Native drama, that early criticism shows a bewilderment with Highway, and that critics believe there are no Native theatrical traditions or precedents—are reminiscent of the hero worship and romantic sensibility that plague the reviews of Highway’s work. As I have suggested earlier in this chapter, it seems that reviewers were led to construct Highway as a romantic hero because they had no significant critical precedents—other than the romantic theories of nineteenth-century thought—to which they could turn, and, here, it seems possible to suggest that literary critics were also floundering during the early years of Highway criticism (and even as late as 1998) because, they, too, had no real critical precedents to guide them. In particular, the claim that there was no such thing as Native theatre before Tomson Highway is especially telling. As the second chapter has revealed, the Kwakwaka’wakw nation, for instance, has a long history of theatrical traditions, and as the Edinburgh program guide for The Rez Sisters indicates, the Nootka have also practiced drama for centuries. Moreover, one might also consider here Inuit artist Makka Kleist’s claim that “[t]heatre ha[s] always been a main part of all cultures” (qtd. in Kaplan, Now Magazine 5 March 1987: n.pag). What I wish to emphasize here is that it is important to note that while the literature of the CNLR did not grow out of an absolute lacunae, the criticism of this literature and the reception of Native writers did in
many ways. That is, those six decades of “silence” which preceded the advent of the
CNLR were also six decades during which no precedents were set or inroads laid for a
sophisticated study of aboriginal literature and writers. And, so, it is possible to suggest
here that these patterns in Highway criticism are a result of a lack of knowledge about
Native literatures and cultures. Now, what this means in such a study as this one is that,
like early responses to Highway, these patterns suggest that this body of criticism is a
reaction to that “Renaissance moment” which has been spoken of in the second chapter.
Registering a bewilderment with Highway and his art and an ignorance of Native literary
history, this body of criticism which attempts to speak about Highway in terms of Native
traditions—despite the fact that it cannot do so with any real depth—suggests that critics
have been prompted by some kind of social pressure or influence to understand Highway
in relation to a large community and a notable tradition.

And, here, we might also consider that the fourth pattern mentioned above—that
critics consistently rely on Highway for critical direction—also indicates that critics are
bewildered with the newness of Native literature. Like those reviewers who seem to
believe everything Highway is saying and who respond to Highway’s playfulness and
adopt his essentialism, these critics are also unable to separate the republics of poets and
philosophers in their responses to Highway. And the fact that they lean on Highway for
validation and direction and that they let their criticism be dominated by interpretations
provided by Highway himself indicates that this criticism is stalling because it has come up
against something which is very large in both a political and literary sense. In other words,
it seems possible to suggest that because these critics are unfamiliar with a large body of
Native literature or unfamiliar with a large number of Native authors, they cleave to Highway for critical direction because they do not understand or recognize that they have other critical authorities to turn to in order to assess Highway’s art and his comments in a sophisticated way.

These ideas will be returned to shortly, but here, it is interesting to note that the next pattern which manifests itself in the literary criticism surrounding Highway—that tendency for critics to become self-reflexive—constitutes an especially significant comment on how values have been possibly shaped by Highway’s art, by Highway’s language and by some of the dominant characteristics which appeared to the public domain during the CNLR and the NCR and the ensuing years. Here, we have the emergence of critics who find it necessary to create themselves anew when they begin to participate in a re-visiting of that history which Highway has come to represent. We have the emergence of critics whose identity is constructed out of a tension between aboriginal authority and a lack of a verifiable national authority. And perhaps most significantly, we have the emergence of a type of rhetoric which has possibly been shaped by the dominant characteristics of a new sort of language and the weight of another cultural tradition.

It is very telling, for instance, that like those mythological works which have been called post-modern but which also incorporate a number of characteristics which came to prominence during the CNLR and the NCR, the language of this critical exchange has, in many ways, taken on an aesthetic which grows out of a different, and perhaps aboriginal or, more specifically, Cree, tradition. For instance, and to broach this last consideration, it is interesting to note that, writing in Maclean’s magazine in 1987, Drew Hayden Taylor
commented on Highway and made the following claim: “Despite the success of The Rez Sisters, it is at the community level that native theatre will continue to flourish. That is because its primary goal is not to entertain a mass audience but to make connections with indigenous cultures torn apart by social change” (19 October 1987: 69). Here, Taylor underscored the fact that Highway intends for his work to do something. The Rez Sisters is not an isolated spectacle simply meant to entertain an audience--although it does do that--but it is also a learning and teaching tool. As well, and in his profile on Highway in Toronto Life, Hannon solicited the expertise of Robert Wallace, author of Producing Marginality: Theatre and Criticism in Canada, and Wallace, like Taylor, noted the communal nature of Highway’s work: “Tomson’s not interested in individual psychology so much as in group dynamics,” Wallace began. “[And][t]he question becomes: How do we keep a culture alive? Individual concerns and problems become secondary” (qtd. in Hannon 44). Interestingly, in both Taylor’s and Wallace’s comments there is the recognition that Highway’s work speaks for a collective and that it embodies the potential to be efficacious, and this recognition is provocative because it first leads one to consider the idea that those critical responses to Highway’s art which include an interrogation of self indicate that Highway’s art does lend itself to eliciting active responses. After all, here we have a group of critics who, although they are affiliated with different institutions, begin to speak in a similar manner and begin to employ a rhetoric that is collectively dictated. And we have a group of critics who begin to assess both the values of that collective to which they belong and the values of that collective or collectives to which Highway belongs, or to which he has been assigned by the critic. Indeed, this is one
consideration. But is there something more that can be said about Highway’s work and its affective characteristics? Just what intrinsic qualities does Highway’s work possess that enable his artistic creations to have such an influence? That is, what structural properties might Highway’s work carry, and is it possible to suggest that his work embodies the formal characteristics of Cree literature and the Cree language?

Most notably, there is within Highway’s art and his public assertions a strong sense of self, a strong sense of being Cree, and a strong sense of being part of a large aboriginal community. The very first event which Tomson and Rene offered to the public drew attention to its national identity since much of it was in Cree and since it was not translated for the audience, and New Song . . . New Dance also began a tradition which would be constantly maintained by Highway. The first part of the trilogy was “about being hurt physically and psychologically”; the second part was “about healing . . . on a deep spiritual level”; and the third part was “about taking those old sentiments and using them in a new way” (Rene Highway, qtd. in DiManno, Toronto Star 18 March 1988: E10). Since the first production of this piece in 1982, Highway has continued to offer his audiences and readers art and public assertions which are never void of an awareness of the community to which he belongs. All of his creations serve a collective, and, because of this, his works embody certain rhetorical tactics or traits which, when considering how the criticism of Highway’s work takes serious directions from Highway, become more defined. For example, this foregrounding of self and identity which accompanies every public declaration made by Highway, and this acute awareness of belonging to a collective which is at the center of every piece of Highway’s art, have also found their way into the
critical reception of Highway's work. It is as if the polemic and didactic sensibility of Highway's plays has become transferred to the critical reception of Highway's work, and, thus, this sensibility must be recognized as an influential, utilitarian aesthetic.

Indeed, it is impressive that critics would so quickly adopt some of the principles which Highway's art includes, for their ready adoption of a different kind of language and rhetoric suggests that an established literary tradition has been an influential force in their works. The art of rhetoric is old and culturally or collectively dictated, and it is interesting to consider how Highway's work might be influenced by traditional, Cree orature and how, for example, its attendant characteristics might be influential. However, such a pursuit lies beyond the scope of this chapter and my knowledge. What does not lie beyond the scope of this chapter, however, is the recognition that critics have begun speaking like Highway and that there is something in their self-reflexivity that is comparable to the self-reflexivity of those such as Maria Campbell and Lee Maracle who, as the third chapter has argued, might possibly have influenced the way in which writers began creating new and "post-modern" strategies for invoking reader participation in post-CNLR/post-NCR novels. And in light of these suggestions, it seems telling that certain critics have spoken of something that seems to be postmodern in Highway's art—though it is recognized as differing somehow from other forms of postmodernism—that others have suggested that his art should be understood in relation to social revolution, and that critics have also noticed that there is a unique mixture of forms and cultural traditions in Highway's plays. Like those mythologies which, if they are understood to be not simply post-modern works but also post-Renaissance works, this body of criticism may be taken
to indicate that a new and heightened awareness of one's self, a new and heightened awareness of the tenuous nature of this nation's past, and a new and forceful engagement between speaker and audience point back to a shaping influence which demanded that people--authors and critics included--begin listening and speaking in different ways.

But that said, why does this language begin changing around 1993 when Highway criticism begins to mature? What sense can be made out of the recognition that this self-reflexivity is exchanged for the impenetrable language of theoretical jargon? Have the effects of the CNLR and the NCR simply worn off to a certain degree? Do critics want to indicate that they can talk about Native literatures in a sophisticated way? Or are critics afraid that their ideas will be too clearly understood? These questions are more provocative than anything, and it is difficult to offer any convincing answers. However, it is significant to note that this change in language accompanies a growing awareness in Highway criticism that Highway--the man--speaks in essentialist terms and that Highway's art marks a departure from this kind of essentialism. And I think that this new focus in Highway criticism is somehow related to a change in language. For instance, it seems possible to suggest here that critics, recognizing the dangers inherent in borrowing Highway's ideologies for their interpretive strategies and in perpetuating the romantic sensibilities found in early Highway criticism, attempted to re-correct this romantic tradition by employing a type of language which is entirely divorced from an essentialist form of discourse. That is, we might understand this change in language, then, as an example of over-correction where critics, intent on destroying the romantic essentialism in Highway criticism, begin speaking in an entirely different way.
Indeed, this last conclusion seems plausible, but it is also interesting to note that by the mid-nineties critics were divorced from the most revolutionary years of the CNLR and the NCR by two decades, and, here, we might consider, then, that this change in language reflects a gradual and natural waning of reactionary sentiments. Also, it is interesting to consider the idea that this type of language and jargon often suppresses the clarity of ideas, and perhaps there is something to be said for the recognition that critics begin talking about Highway’s essentialism with a cryptic type of language. Might this be, then, another way in which critics are attempting to protect Highway? No one has said directly that if Plato saw this guy coming from a mile away, he would have kicked him right out of the republic without any questions. And this is what needs to be said.

Now, this assertion may be a bit extreme, but, at the very least, people need to recognize that Highway’s comments need to be adjudicated with as much critical integrity as that which accompanies the study of any body of criticism. And here, then, we might consider that if we choose to keep Highway within the republic of critical philosophy, we still need to discard his essentialist comments in favor of his more critical reflections. It is interesting to note, for example, that Highway has made some notable assertions over the years and that the following comments provide a much better map for critics than those which are governed by essentialist ideologies:

1. There are 250 native languages in Canada and all but three--Inuit, Cree and Ojibway--are bound to disappear within the next two generations (qtd. in Dykk, Vancouver Sun 14 November 1987: H2)

2. We have a narrative tradition that goes way back. I swear to God there are
myths that spoke about the roundness of the Earth thousands of years before Galileo. (qtd. in Yanofsky, Montreal Gazette, 4 February 1995: J1)

3. In the course of a single generation, Crees have been forcibly ‘yanked from the 16th century, from bone tools and dogsleds and moose hides, to a culture of computers. It’s the biggest transition in our 12 000-year history’. That upheaval . . . has taken a terrible toll—in unemployment, drug and alcohol addiction, ruptured families, spousal abuse. (qtd. in Posner, Globe and Mail 17 October 1998: C12)

4. Dance is a metaphor for everything in our culture: for ritual, for art, for religion. Dance is a metaphor for being, so if we cannot dance, we cannot pray. (Hodgson, Books in Canada 28.1 February 1991: 2)

Here, Highway speaks of the importance of Native languages, the longevity of Native cultures and traditions, the changing dynamics of Cree culture, and a specific metaphor which he sees as being central to different Native cultures. And if we consider these comments in light of how Rabillard and Filewod have problematised that search for “authenticity” which they see as being a systemic problem that accompanies essentialist theories, we might consider that there is also a problem with avoiding this search for “authenticity.”

The “over correction” which appears in Highway criticism in the mid-1990s when critics begin abandoning romantic speech, self-reflexivity and essentialist theories also carries with it a discomfort with recognizing cultural difference. And this is a problem. Such a discomfort leads critics to abandon a search for the Cree legacies in Highway’s work or the Native traditions upon which much of contemporary Native literature is
based. And we should, in fact, be asking "what is Cree in Highway's work?" We should be considering the importance of Native languages and the manner in which they have contributed to unique literary styles—styles different from anything else in the Canadian publishing world. In fact, we need to say a lot of things that we are scared to say. For instance, Highway comes across in his interviews and public speeches in a different way than other public speakers do. His language is romantic, essentialist, boastful and rhetorically persuasive. Why is this? Why is it that he sounds, in certain ways, like Chief Dan George, Edward Ahenakew, Alex Grisdale, James Redsky, and Basil Johnston? Why does his language smack of the heroic language which dominates the literature of the CNLR? What is different about the language which this man is using?

It becomes apparent, therefore, that there is a critical need to venture beyond the possibilities which the criticism of Highway's work, and, possibly, a significant amount of Native literature, has offered so far. And in addition to the recognition that an understanding of Cree and other aboriginal traditions should be considered more closely, it becomes apparent that more attention needs to be focused on the specific literary characteristics which dominate Highway's art. Much time has been spent attempting to situate Highway and his work within politicized debates about "Nativeness," but as Grant's 1995 article on Highway illustrates, there is much to be learned when one attempts to understand what makes Native literatures distinct from other literatures. And here, then, it is significant to consider certain critical patterns which encompass the reception of Highway but which have not yet been "accumulated," as it were. Indeed, surrounding Highway and his work there already exists a significant amount of critical
material which has the potential to take Highway criticism in new directions.

First, since Highway’s work began being reviewed in 1982, journalists and newspaper reviewers have consistently criticized Highway’s work for not maintaining a sense of cohesiveness. For example, Alina Gildiner’s review “New Song... New Dance Needs a Brave New Vision” took the inspiration for its title from the fact that, as she understood Rene and Tomson’s first public spectacle, “the four parts of the dance” never “finally coalesce into his brave new vision” (Globe and Mail 13 November 1982: E3) A similar attack would soon be lobbed against The Rez Sisters when Mira Friedlander, while appreciating the play, noted that “it’s too long and should end after the very moving speech made by Pelajia Patchnose” (The Entertainer January 1986: P6). Despite Mietkiewicz’s heralding of the same play as the best thing in Toronto at the time, he, too, criticized Highway’s work, making note of its “remarkably lightweight plot” (Toronto Star 28 November 1986: D24). The CBC’s Alvina Ruprecht suggested in 1987, when The Rez Sisters was in Ottawa on its national tour, that the play was “terribly disjointed,” that the “focus wasn’t always clear,” and that “Highway [was] trying to say too much” (CBC, Ottawa, 23 October 1987). The thinness of The Rez Sisters’ plot was also mentioned by Rosie DiManno (Toronto Star 20 November 1987: E3) and David Prosser (The Whig Standard Magazine 5 December 1987: 11) this same year, and, then, Malcolm Burrows got a bit braver admitting that he didn’t see “what... all the excitement [was] about” (The Varsity 7 December 1987: 11). As he understood it, “the construction is weak, just scenes and monologues thrown together loosely.” The Globe and Mail’s Ray Conlogue noted in his review of the original production of Dry Lips that the play’s “many
strands—bloody, comic, classical, contemporary, native and European—are not satisfactorily drawn together” (24 April 1989: A17), and, then, in The Toronto Star. Robert Crew almost parroted this response when he noted that Dry Lips is "over-long, loosely structured in parts and sometimes hurt by lack of clarity" (23 April 1989: C1). The Calgary Herald's Jamie Portman "remain[ed] troubled by [the same play’s] tendency to stress frivolous anecdote at the expense of structure" (25 April 1989: D3). Jerry Wasserman (UTQ 60.1, 1990: 69), Bronwyn Drainie (Globe and Mail 20 April 1991: C1) and Geoff Chapman (Toronto Star 14 April 1991: C1) all maintained in their reviews of the Royal Alex production of Dry Lips that Highway's work play was a number of plays tacked together. Barbara Crook would seem to support these criticisms even though her review of the same play was based on a production in Vancouver four years later (Vancouver Sun 25 March 1995: H8). As Crook noted, Highway "introduces so many issues . . . that he can’t explore them with any degree of satisfaction" (H8). Indeed, these assertions are scattered throughout years of reviews, but what is important to note here is that, over the years, Highway’s work has been consistent and that, as an individual artist, he has a certain style as well as limitations.

In addition to the recognition that Highway’s work has consistently been criticized for not being cohesive or for being structurally loose, his work also seems to lose its audience and critics when he moves abruptly into the abstract. In his review of the original mounting of The Rez Sisters at the Native Canadian Centre, Liam Lacey mentions that “[t]he handling of the abrupt transition in the play from audience participation to tragedy is felicitous; not so believable is the attempt to treat Bingo as a metaphor for Life
and Death” (Globe and Mail 4 December 1986: D3). He added that “[t]he entire spiritual dimension of the play remains vague.” Ray Conlogue touched on the same sort of thing in his review of Aria when he noted that while “Highway seems to have an affinity for expressing a female viewpoint . . . he does it best in those sections . . . which represent the everyday women that he knows” (Globe and Mail 12 March 1987: C7). Conlogue continued: “The play is weaker when it touches on symbolic women . . . for satiric purposes.” Stephen Godfrey similarly suggested in his review of Dry Lips at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa that “it is only when Highway tries to zero in on the larger themes that imagination leaves both director and writer” (Globe and Mail 9 March 1991: C8).

These same sorts of criticisms have been broached even recently in reviews of Kiss of the Fur Queen. For instance, Suzanne Methot argued that the novel’s women are “one-dimensional, assigned to roles as mother or clown or tough girl or victim, but never a realistic combination thereof” (Quill and Quire September 1998: 56). And in the tradition of those critics who are puzzled by Highway’s mixture of different genres and intents, Frank Moher, although showing preference for Highway’s new prose form, claimed that “a law of diminishing returns sets in as the book moves from the exhilarating playfulness of its early pages to the discount magic of the theatre world later” (Saturday Night September 1998: 14).

What is hopefully being underscored in this narrative is that while Highway often speaks for a communal cause, he is, nevertheless, an individual artist who produces work with unique qualities and characteristics. Given above is a short, cumulative history of several types of criticism that have been launched against Highway’s work, and the
important thing to note is that they remain consistent over a period of sixteen years. The structure of Highway’s art is always a point of consideration as is the observation that things do not neatly cohere in this artist’s plays or prose. But the fact is that a discussion of Highway and his artistic style has taken a long time to develop. A recognition of Highway’s position within the field of contemporary First Nations literature, his political importance and his cultural affiliations has led to a body of criticism which seldom steps beyond essentialist divides.

There is still no article which is entirely devoted to a consideration of Highway’s aesthetics, and there is still no article which has attempted to gather together all of these comments which have been made about Highway’s style over the years. However, if we accumulate what reviewers have said about Highway’s specific literary characteristics here and add them to those comments found in literary articles, it is possible to suggest that there are now many different critical avenues which critics can explore in Highway criticism. In addition to the recognition that Highway’s work is incredibly abstract and unconventionally disjointed, it has been described as tending towards the “grotesque” (Honegger, Imboden and Innes), and it has also been said to embody a “[u]nique Native humour (Grant, 1992: 49). As well, Highway’s dramatic style has been defined as “extended poetic realism” (Maufort 231), and Highway has been recognized as mixing both “complementary opposites” (Maufort 239) and different cultural traditions (Honegger and Maufort) in his work. His plays have also been understood as relying on “militant irony, burlesque, caricature, wild, obscene humour” (Imboden 117), “pathos stark realism, rage, and grief” (Grant 1995: 105), “a highly physical form of acting” (Innes
"symbolism" (Innes 78) and "[subliminal], rather than . . . direct, statement[s] (Innes 79). Now, this is quite a catalogue of characteristics, and it is important to note that this list grows out of a consideration of literary aesthetics rather than out of post-colonial debates. What I wish to underscore here is that while Highway’s identity as an aboriginal spokesperson is important, so, too, is his identity as an individual artist. And, in fact, if we emphasize the importance of the latter over the former, we might be able to discover more about the cultural traditions which influence Highway’s work.

It is also interesting to note that a focus on Highway’s status as “native writer” has led critics to ignore other considerations which grow out of Highway’s work. For instance, Dickinson’s queer reading of Highway comes at a very late date in Highway criticism, and this recognition indicates that something has impeded a careful consideration of Highway’s art. To be sure, there need to be other similar studies which account for the relation between queer sexuality, feminism and patriarchy in Highway’s work. Since 1986, when Highway chose to include a bisexual biker, Rosabella Baez, in the story of The Rez Sisters, Highway’s work has begged critics to consider queerness and its presentation in Highway’s plays. Likewise, Kiss of the Fur Queen deserves a thorough exploration of Highway’s depiction of homosexuality and its problematic relation to sexual abuse. Furthermore, given one very troubling scene with Jeremiah, whose as-yet-unacknowledged homosexuality leads him to crave viewing misogynist violence during a heterosexual encounter (260), Kiss of the Fur Queen begs an exploration of Highway’s portrayal of misogyny, feminism and homosexuality over the years.

What also needs to be considered more thoroughly are the portrayals of the
mentally challenged in Highway’s plays. While reviews of The Rez Sisters, especially its first production, always draw attention to the admirable performance of Sally Singal (Zhaboonigan in the original cast) and those who follow in her footsteps, only two critics have attempted to make sense of this character. Writing in The Whig Standard Magazine in 1987, for example, David Prosser noted the following: Zhaboonigan “demands nothing of us but one thing that [her] condition makes hardest for us to hear. We strain to understand” (5 December 1987: 11). Prosser’s comment draws attention to the portrayal of the traumatized in Highway’s work, but it stops short. It is Pat Donnelly’s brief comment in her review of Dry Lips that provides a challenge to future critics. The rape scene, Donnelly maintains, “perpetuates the myth that the handicapped are dangerous” (Montreal Gazette 23 March 1991: E12).

As well, it seems noteworthy to consider the difference between a vision and the execution of a vision when talking about Highway’s work. First, Highway has had to cope with very severe technical and financial limitations over the years, and while this recognition—the fact that Highway didn’t own a t.v. set or a car early on in his career (T. Ferguson 23) and the fact that he worked for free for years for NEPA—lends itself to the creation of a saint alongside a hero, it should be a critical informant. In his review of The Rez Sisters at the Factory Theatre in 1987, for example, Robert Reid wrote that “[i]t is unfortunate that such a clever and finely crafted script and compelling cast are not served better technically” (Kitchener-Waterloo Record 26 November 1987). Lack of money also has much to do with the fact that Highway’s musical, Rose, remained unproduced until its resurrection in 2000 by the University College Program at the University of Toronto. As
the author of enRoute’s cover story notes, “[w]ith a cast of 22, and an opening scene featuring 18 motorcycles, [Rose] has a scale and price tag that put it out of reach of most, if not all, Canadian theatres” (48).

True, these last recognitions are divorced from an understanding of Native culture and traditions, but this is not a bad thing. There is a fine line, at times, between ghettoization and a healthy recognition of cultural difference, and in order to fully understand what Highway’s work means, we need to respect a balance. To speak of Highway only in terms of a Native heritage is as limiting as speaking of Leonard Cohen only in terms of his Jewish identity, of Margaret Atwood only in terms of her Ontario upbringing, or of Northrop Frye only in terms of his Maritime childhood. Cultural identity is one defining factor in an individual’s artistry, but so, too, is musical knowledge, trilingualism, homosexuality, education, a rural upbringing, urban experiences, a family history of diverse artistic talents, and a consistent social vision.

In conclusion, then, what this chapter has attempted to do is to consider how a certain body of Canadian criticism has been influenced by mythological changes brought about by the CNLR and the NCR, or the influence of the seventh generation. And it has attempted to do so by considering what Tomson Highway has come to represent within the sphere of Canadian criticism. Of course, this motive exposes a contradiction. By attempting to answer the question “what does Highway represent?”, this chapter has suggested how Highway has been romanticized to the extent that the criticism of Highway’s work seldom moves beyond considerations of such categories as “Native” and “non-Native,” and it has further suggested that a dangerous essentialism has disregarded
the characteristics of Highway's individual artistry. By claiming, then, that this chapter can elucidate the criticism of Native literature in general, an embracing of pan-Indianism is experienced once again. But it seems significant that the criticism of Highway's work contains the seeds of great potential for the criticism of literature by other First Nations voices. In this body of Highway criticism, critics have exposed the need for new questions and directions in the study of Native literatures.

More than anything, the criticism of Highway's work has revealed how critics will have to be prepared to discuss Native literatures in the future. The adoption of Highway's rhetorical and stylistic characteristics and the newness of these traits in Canadian criticism indicate that there needs to be much closer consideration paid to different canons of aesthetic values and styles—and this was a suggestion which Keith raised in 1994 when he held up the British canon as the touchstone of all value. And what I would suggest, then, is that Highway's work underscores, more than anything else, the importance of language and its relation to the construction of thought. Critics have been slow to place Highway within a larger context of Native literature, but this is because they cannot do so yet. Highway is but one Native artist who has been influenced by traditions deriving from another language, and he is also one Native artist who writes in his second tongue, and although critics recognize this fact with certain platitudes, the reality is that Highway criticism has underscored its own limitations. And this is important.

By recognizing the limitations in Highway criticism, it becomes apparent that there is a need for a heightened sense of scholastic integrity in the criticism of Native literatures. Since cultural aesthetics are inextricable with an understanding of language, then many
Native literatures offer a staggering challenge to the English departments of Canadian universities. While it is a prerequisite for students of Anglo-Saxon literature and Medieval literature to study such languages as Old English, Middle English and Latin, it is not yet a prerequisite for students of First Nations literature to study an aboriginal language. Highway, for instance, writes his plays in Cree before he writes them in English (Conlogue, "Mixing Spirits, Bingo and Genius," Globe and Mail 21 November 1987: C5), and like many other Native people his age who were also exposed to the trials of residential schools, Highway has an understanding of Latin which should be accounted for in a reading of his work. In other words, if critics are to truly understand the dynamics of literatures which derive from different literary traditions, they will have to learn new languages--both Native and critical.

Indeed, this is one set of important considerations. But to turn back to that narrative which shaped this reaction to Highway criticism in the first place, we might question how this body of criticism is comparable to those mythological, "postmodern" works which have been discussed in the last chapter. In other words, what can be said about this body of criticism and the manner in which it has come to comment on national, mythological urges? How does this body of criticism comment on that search for a national mythology which has been spoken about at length in the first chapter? And, last, how may this body of criticism be understood as an indication that the CNLR and the NCR have been impressionable and affective forces within Canadian literary history? Indeed, these are large questions, but they are possible to broach by first considering how early Highway criticism, following closely on the heels of the most impressionable years of
the CNLR and NCR, embodies the most apparent markers of aboriginal influence and, then, by considering how literary articles on Highway—divorced as they are by several years from early responses to Highway—both depart from and build on certain desires found within the world of journalism.

First, it seems significant that early responses to Highway share with certain, postmodern, Canadian mythologies the following characteristics: 1) like such works as Badlands, Burning Water, Beautiful Losers, The Invention of the World and Surfacing, these critical responses turn to a consideration of heroics and re-fashion the hero after interrogating the community to which this hero belongs; 2) like the trickster that Canadian history has become in certain, contemporary mythologies, Highway carries a profane weight and promises a sacred potential—that is, the stereotypes which are used to fashion this persona point to a discomfort with this nation’s past and to the realization that aboriginal gods, people, and traditions, though mightily offended, are still vital and well and, moreover, that they carry a certain, authoritative weight; 3) like those mythologies which record the madness of this nation’s past and which record the futility of embracing a sacred part of an aboriginal past which has been threatened, this body of criticism re-visits and records the weight of the past by resurrecting stereotypes and a culture hero which comment on that past and which also render those things which are symbolic of the sacred untouchable and off limits; 4) like those mythologically minded authors who remove their anti-heroes from a center of madness symbolic of this nation’s past, these critics remove themselves from the values of a discourse which is symbolic of a past which registers madness; 5) and like those mythologists who create tenuous narrators to question the
“truth” of Canada’s past, these critics underscore tenuous authorities—the ignorant audience, for example—to suggest that everyone associated and allied with this past is, at best, suspect. And what I would say, then, is that, together, these characteristics underscore a desire to break the patterns which gave birth to a national trauma just as much as some postmodern Canadian mythologies do.

Second, however, and to return to the concerns of the first chapter, early Highway criticism does not so much mark a departure from old “habits of metaphorical thought” (Frye, “Conclusion to LHC,” in BG 232) as it does register a desire for what Jarold Ramsey has called “mythpoesis” (Ramsey, Reading the Fire 172). While Highway has become symbolically associated with the land and while this body of criticism is not unlike those mythological works which invest so much time in reading the land and which inevitably sacrifice their anti-heroes to a symbol of the sacred, early Highway criticism, though it seems predicated on the awareness that Highway is symbolic of something which has been threatened, seems arrested in an old impulse. Here, we have a desire to refashion that “empty landscape,” as it were—we have a desire to break from old habits which are predicated on the idea that this world was tabula rasa, and we have an attempt to locate Highway in the wilderness and, thus, to dispel imported beliefs which suggest that this world was a garden or desert that gratefully met the importation of gods, beliefs and peoples. But that said, these journalistic responses, like those mythological works which record a belief in alterity but which recognize the fact that their narrators—those who are not connected with an aboriginal history—cannot borrow indigenous gods or embrace this history for themselves, underscore the suggestion that it will be a long while before
patterns can be broken and before we can stop re-living this national trauma. After all, early Highway criticism has resurrected the sentiments and impulses of nineteenth-century thought, and although it may be predicated on genuine, altruistic intents, it has not surpassed the traditions of the past. And in a way, a substantial portion of later Highway criticism suggests the same thing. For instance, this consistent turning to Highway for critical direction and this refusal to evaluate Highway’s essentialism with any kind of scholastic rigor is reminiscent of the superficial and romantic impulses which govern early Highway criticism and which encase Highway within a different, but comparable, paternalistic manner. While there is a willingness to embrace alterity here and to learn something new, there is no fresh outlook in such responses as these which promises to provide a path out of the essentialist legacies of colonization.

That said, however, it is interesting to note that the self-reflexivity that dominates both early and later Highway criticism suggests more promise. A substantial portion of Highway criticism resurrects a belief in re-visiting the past and in re-visiting one’s relation to the past; it places value on interrogating one’s self; and it demands that one become a participant in an active, social exchange. Although critics may be wagging fingers at others in an attempt to divorce themselves from implication in an ugly history, it is not such a bad thing that the criticism of Highway is complemented by the criticism of cultural values. This should not be disparaged. Rather, the fact that we have been forced to remember the past and the fact that we have been persuaded to actively participate in a new dialogue with aboriginal writers and spokespersons should indicate that some kind of revolution has given us the potential to break old habits.
And one of the old habits that is hopefully being broken is the tendency to understand Native artists as symbols of a romantic and heroic past. Indeed, such a belief takes away from a recognition of the vitality of contemporary Native cultures and, therefore, perpetuates the ideologies which are carried in the romantic language of an early English-Canadian tradition which first shaped Native peoples as innately different from non-Native peoples. And, thus, it is important to note here that while Highway might make a good national hero for a number of reasons, his life story does not enable one to construct him as a mythological hero. Unlike heroes who often appear in stories without a past and without a history, Highway, like any other artist, has a notable history behind him. For example, a fan letter written to the editor of the Winnipeg Free Press in 1987 indicates that Highway had been noticed and that he was being admired and watched from afar even as a young boy:

I read with great interest the article Writer turns back on Bach (Free Press, October 31) by Ken Prokosh.

As a long-time resident of The Pas, I remember the early steps in Tomson Highway’s musical career and was pleased to read of his successes in artistic endeavors. There were several errors in the story, however, that require correction.

Tomson Highway’s gift and interest in music were discovered and promoted by Roger Melnick, a teacher at the Guy Hide [sic] Residential School. Because of his efforts, the school purchased a piano and, at his personal expense, Tomson began formal piano lessons with a prominent, local piano teacher, Mrs.
Grace Weir.

Mrs. Weir recognized the desire and ability of this young man and was eventually very instrumental in his relocation to Winnipeg for more advanced musical study. These two individuals were the first of an obviously long list of people who influenced Tomson’s career and artistic development.

Northern Manitobans congratulate Tomson for his accomplishment and wish him future success.


To be sure, this is an isolated letter, and it stands out in what is now a vast body of reviews and narratives surrounding the story of Highway’s life, but, printed in 1987, and for those who chanced to read it, it indicated that Highway’s appearance was not so sudden after all. As is the case with any artist worthy of consideration, there is a careful and determined climb to the top.
Notes: Chapter Four

1. The Archives at the University of Guelph house Highway’s manuscripts and a significant amount of criticism which surrounds Highway, but the collection is incomplete and needs attention.

2. While both the author of the Edinburgh Festival program guide and Drew Hayden Taylor (Maclean’s 19 October 1987: 69) claim that 1951 marks the beginning of the Contemporary Native Renaissance, other people offer different dates for this movement’s formal beginning. Highway states that the “Native art movement has been a visible force on the Canadian artistic scene for the past 25 years, ever since Norval Morriseau’s landmark exhibition at the Pollock Gallery in Toronto in 1962” (letter to Ms. Anna Thompson 1987). Others, however, might be inclined to agree with Buffy Sainte Marie and cultural critics who recognize the second standoff at Wounded Knee in South Dakota in 1973 to have inspired a “‘comeback’ of the North American Indian” (Sainte Marie, qtd. in MacInnis, Toronto Star 29 September 1990: F1). Indeed, 1973 seems to be a preferential choice; for example, for those most concerned with printed literature, the publication of Maria Campbell’s autobiography Half-Breed (1973) is the marker of change.


4. I do not credit sources when more than two or three sources offer the same dates and information about Highway. Much of this information has been compiled by reading numerous reviews, as well as the Tomson Highway collection at the University of Guelph.
Reviewers and critics frequently offer conflicting information about Highway and different dates for significant life events and productions, but I have tried my best to cross-reference sources and to offer what I think is the correct date. However, when only one source offers information about Highway, I credit the source.

5. "The show consisted of a series of short scenes about street life. It opened at the Native Canadian Centre on 13 December and ran for two weeks; it then played at the Theatre Resource Centre for another two weeks beginning 10 January" (Preston 139).
6. It is possible to view a videotape of Aria (the NCC production) at the University of Guelph archives.
7. The play continued to be very successful on its national tour. On its opening night in Winnipeg, there “was a sellout crowd of 230” (McLlroy WFP 5 November 1987), and in Regina there was also a “sellout crowd of 400 on . . . opening night” (Henders Leader Post 4 February 1988).
8. The acronym stands for Longshoremen’s Protective Union, but the place is commonly referred to as the LSPU Hall.
9. Highway mentions that the play “got put aside” when Rene died but that he will “get back to writing it” (Qtd. in Brown, The Spectator 22 October 1994: 6).
11. The play then toured throughout Québec until December 9 (Donnelly, Montreal Gazette 22 Sept. 1993: A3).
12. The production opened at the Helen Gardiner Theatre on January 21, 2000 and ran
until February 5.

13. Doubleday terminated Sedgwick’s employment only “two years after hiring [him] to head up an aggressive expansion of its Canadian publishing program” (Anderson, Quill and Quire 64.4, April 1998: 5).

14. “In [Sedgewick’s] place, Doubleday . . . established a publishing board composed of Doubleday Canada president John Neale . . . and editor-in-chief John Pearce and senior editor Maya Mavjee” (Anderson, Quill and Quire 64.4, April 1998: 5).

15. The term “strategic essentialism” was coined by Gayatri Spivak. In an influential article published in 1985, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” Gayatri Spivak problematized the work and focus of the Subaltern Studies group and, at the same time, praised their endeavors. Spivak claims in this article that this group of scholars who are attempting to deconstruct India’s colonial legacy are actually employing the tools of a hegemonic imperial discourse, but she also notes that their appropriation of this discourse might be understandable and affective: “I would suggest that elements in their text [Subaltern Studies] would warrant a reading of the project to retrieve the subaltern consciousness as the attempt to undo a massive historiographic metalepsis and ‘situate’ the effect of the subject as subaltern. I would read it, then, as a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest. This would put them in line with the Marx who locates fetishization, the ideological determination of the ‘concrete,’ and spins the narrative of the development of the money-form; with the Nietzsche who offers us genealogy in place of historiography, the Foucault who plots the construction of a ‘counter-memory,’ the Barthes of semiotrophy, and the Derrida of ‘affirmative
deconstruction.' This would allow them to use the critical force of anti-humanism, in other words, even as they share its constitutive paradox: that the essentializing moment, the object of their criticism, is irreducible" (214).

16.It should be noted that Bennett’s response to Preston’s article sparked a significant debate. Doris Linklater, Bill Henderson and Richard Schechner all responded to their exchange in the spring issue of TDR in 1993, and they unanimously supported Preston.

17.Qtd. in Conlogue, Globe and Mail 21 November 1987: C5; in Debenham 153.


22.Morgan 131; in Knowles 280.

23.Wigston 8; in Knowles 280.

24.Highway, in Brask and Morgan 132; qtd. in Usmani 137.

25.Highway, in Brask and Morgan 134; qtd. in Usmani 138.

Conclusion

In truth, no efforts have even been seriously aimed at producing the standard monolithic mythology of the other nation-states. This is described by most federalists and anti-federalists alike as the failure of Canada. The failure to become like others. To regularize a monolithic mythology. Some weep before the ever-retreating mirage of the unhyphenated Canadian. Others say its continued existence proves that the country is not real and cannot exist. For me, this failure to conform is in fact our greatest success. A proof of originality which we refuse to grasp as a positive. (John Ralston Saul, Reflections of a Siamese Twin: Canada at the End of the Twentieth Century 8)

It is the central tenet of this thesis that, in Canada, the story that has searched for a sacred historical mythology is a story that has been intercepted by a powerful movement—the Native Cultural Renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s—and rendered impotent. Moreover, significant post-centenary, Eurocentric mythologies, as well as the criticism surrounding Tomson Highway, suggest that any attempts to justify this nation’s historical beginnings will inevitably be arrested in the reliving of a national trauma. There has not been any atonement for this nation’s treatment of aboriginal peoples. This means, then, that there will never be any such thing as a sacred historical mythology in Canada which erases the past and provides the slate for a new beginning.

But this is not a bad thing. Why should the past be forgotten? Why should a recognition of holocaust be wiped out of this nation’s historical records? Why should Canada be given a new slate upon which to create a monolithic mythology that, by its very nature, effaces competing mythologies? These are questions which both the Contemporary Native Literary Renaissance and the Native Cultural Renaissance have brought to the forefront of attention. And these movements have also inscribed stories in

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the public domain which will never allow the past to be forgotten and which will never permit Canada to create a new national calendar which forgets its past and continuing mistakes. And this is really what John Ralston Saul seems to be saying in his philosophical study of Canada, *Reflections of a Siamese Twin: Canada at the End of the Twentieth Century*. While Saul does not speak of the CNLR and the NCR, he recognizes that Canada is different from other nations because it does not possess a "monolithic mythology" (8), and what Saul seems to be suggesting here is that Canada does not possess a national story which is capable of erasing a significant part of the past from its public memory. In other words, Canada is different from such countries as the United States, France, and England because Canada remains precariously diverse and conflicted and because negotiations with pan-Canadianism must always re-visit the past without the memory of a great moment which, at one point in time, erased all other pasts.

But as Saul also points out, while the lack of a monolithic mythology is one of Canada’s greatest strengths, there are problems which attend this unique form of history and the mythologies which attempt to make sense of this history: “Our difficulty,” Saul asserts, “is how to avoid myth being deformed into a negative force which breeds—among other things—a victim psychosis” (6-7). Saul is right. In particular, a consideration of the criticism surrounding Tomson Highway serves to support Saul’s idea, and it also exposes a challenge for critics who will engage with First Nations literatures in the future. While the story which I have told suggests that this nation must remember its past and that it must continue to relive a national trauma until the patterns of the past are broken, this story also issues a warning: those who involve themselves in this act of remembrance must
be careful not to perpetuate the desires of the past and those impulses which gave birth to a national trauma in the first place.

Since the beginning of Canada’s history, paternalism and romanticism have governed reactions to Native cultures and their artistic productions. And today, these same things govern theoretical explorations of Native literatures to the point that critics are often unable to speak of Native cultures and their art in any terms other than national “desire” and “fear.” For example, although much important work has been done by what I would call the “imagist school of contemporary Native literary criticism in Canada,” and while such studies as Janice Acoose’s *Iskwewak--Kah’Ki Yaw NiWahkomakanak: Neither Indian Princesses Nor Easy Squaws* (1995), Terry Goldie’s *Fear and Temptation: The Image of the Indigene in Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand Literatures* (1989), and the essays included in Thomas King, Cheryl Calver and Helen Hoy’s collection *The Native in Literature* (1987) have done much good by de-stabilizing old centres of power, I find this focus on the image of the Native a troubling and dominating fascination in the criticism of aboriginal literatures in Canada. Granted, such explorations are necessary when coming to terms with the past and when recognizing what has happened in this country, and such explorations must still be employed at times. In fact, the influence of the “imagist school” is felt in my chapter on Tomson Highway. However, the time has come for new considerations, and, as my study of Highway hopefully reveals, more attention needs to be paid to the actual words which aboriginal people in Canada are speaking and writing rather than to what lies behind images of Natives in literature.

Native literatures were never meant to be handled with kid gloves. These
literatures are based upon legacies which are thousands of years old, and in order to account for Native literatures with any kind of scholastic integrity, critics of Native literatures in Canada need to abandon the discourse of national trauma in favour of a discourse that is concerned with aesthetics and historical lineages. Critics need to begin tracing contemporary Native literatures back as far as they can, and, above all else, this means that critics need to recognize not victim psychologies but cultural vitalities. In turn, what this means, then, is that critics of aboriginal literature need to start learning first languages.

Let me explain this last claim by re-visiting the major findings of this study. Indeed, I wished to tell a story and to allow my reader to come to the conclusions that she or he would arrive at by interpreting this story in her or his own way, but I also want to clearly indicate at this point what I think I have discovered and what I think this thesis is suggesting:

1) One of the common denominators between this search for a national literature or "sacred historical mythology" in the nineteenth century and the scramble to borrow Native literatures in the 1960s and 1970s is a heightened sense of, or an anxiety with, nationalism.

2) The story which searches for Canada's sacred historical mythology destroys itself on its own terms--it does not need post-structuralist theory to dismantle its validity. This story, or search, fails by its own accord since it was never informed by a recognition that aboriginal nations in Canada are strong enough to destroy its guiding principles.

3) While some non-Native, Eurocentric writers of the 1960s and 1970s tried to co-opt Native literatures and histories to serve a nationalist agenda, certain mythologies which
follow on the heels of the CNLR and the NCR suggest that the Canadian "centre" cannot, in fact, hold; Eurocentric post-modern mythologies are evidence that any attempt to justify this nation's beginnings will expose trauma and the signs of trauma since such an attempt is inextricable with a re-living of the horrors of the past.

4) Given time, it may be possible to suggest that Canadian history has become a kind of contemporary trickster which has been born out of contemporary, reductive notions of the sacred and the profane, or reductive understandings of "Native culture" and the "Canadian nation," respectively.

5) That "self-reflexivity" which is found in post-centenary, "postmodern" Canadian mythologies and post-CNLR/NCR criticism might be traceable to two things: 1) the impress of a social revolution which rekindled an awareness of the importance of participation between speakers and listeners and 2) Native oral literatures which, whether spoken or inscribed in writing, almost always emphasize the inextricable relation between audience and speaker.

True, my reader may draw other conclusions, and my reader may not take from this story what I have understood to be the principles of this story. However, I would hope that my reader would not ignore the recognition that this story and the conclusions that I have drawn here underscore the importance of considering language and its relation to thought.

If, as Frantz Fanon has said, every language, "every dialect, is a different way of thinking" (25), then, to go a step further, every different epistemology is traceable to a different language. And this recognition is significant. The CNLR and the NCR have challenged Eurocentric, Canadian epistemologies. There is enough evidence here to
suggest that ways of knowing have been seriously affected by this latest Native Renaissance in Canada. If this is true, then it makes good sense to account for the languages that may have carried these different epistemologies since the latter seem to have altered both the narratives styles and thematic interests of certain Canadian mythologies which have engaged with pan-nationalism after the advent of the CNLR and the NCR. This is not to say that one should not be aware that Native languages have been threatened and that many Native authors writing in Canada today do not speak a first language. However, it is to say that different ways of knowing should be evaluated with rigor and integrity.

"In the beginning was the word" (John 1:1), said John. The truth of this statement and the different truths that have been exposed in contemporary aboriginal literatures will not be fully understood until critics suspend disbelief and begin to realize that centres can truly never give way until the dialects or languages which support the centre and perpetuate its ideologies are seriously challenged. As Audre Lorde says, "the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house" (99).
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An independent bibliography for Tomson Highway is included here; it begins on page 410.


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² The Tomson Highway collection in the archives at the University of Guelph frequently contains material with incomplete information. I have tried my best in each case to be as precise as possible.


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