CANADIAN INDIAN LITERARY NATIONALISM?:
CRITICAL APPROACHES IN CANADIAN
INDIGENOUS CONTEXTS – A COLLABORATIVE
INTERLOGUE

Kristina Fagan
University of Saskatchewan
krf787@arts.usask.ca

Daniel Heath Justice
University of Toronto
daniel.justice@utoronto.ca

Keavy Martin
University of Alberta
keavy@ualberta.ca

Sam McKeegney
Queen’s University
sam.mckegney@queensu.ca

Deanna Reder
Simon Fraser University
dhr@sfu.ca

Niigonwedom James Sinclair
University of British Columbia
niigon@interchange.ubc.ca

Abstract / Résumé

This collaborative paper emerged from a roundtable held on June 1, 2008 at the annual conference of the Canadian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (CACLALS). The purpose was to reflect on the usefulness of “American Indian Literary Nationalism” to the study of Indigenous literatures in Canada, and to probe such questions as: is this somewhat American Indian-led movement applicable in Canadian Indigenous contexts? Can (and should) Indigenous literary self-determining efforts in Canada be localized? Does dealing with different colonial regimes result in different senses of “rhetorical sovereignty?” And, perhaps most simply, what are the benefits of this vein of analysis and what are the challenges?1

L’article collectif est le produit d’une table ronde tenue le 1er juin 2008 lors du congrès annuel de l’Association canadienne pour l’étude des langues et de la littérature du Commonwealth. La table ronde visait à réfléchir sur l’utilité du « nationalisme littéraire des Indiens américains » pour l’étude des littératures autochtones au Canada et à explorer les questions suivantes : est-ce qu’un tel mouvement « dirigé » par les Indiens américains peut s’appliquer aux contextes autochtones canadiens? Est-ce que les efforts d’autodétermination littéraire des Autochtones du Canada peuvent (et devraient) être localisés? Est-ce que le fait de composer avec des régimes coloniaux différents se traduit par un sens différent de la « souveraineté rhétorique »? Plus simplement, quels sont les avantages et les enjeux d’une telle façon d’analyser la situation?

Niigonwedom James Sinclair (Anishinaabe)

Opening Thoughts: Canadian Indian Literary Nationalism – A Criticism of our Own?

American Indian literary nationalism—what we will refer to in this paper as Indigenous literary nationalism—is an intellectual movement that marks a range of committed critical responses to the calls throughout the 1980s and early 1990s for Indigenous-centered literary scholarship. Because mainstream critical approaches—including those indebted to formalism and post-structuralism—proved somewhat incapable of relating to grassroots Indigenous struggles or of engaging adequately with particular tenets present in Native literatures (such as elements of tribal community histories, politics, and subjectivities), calls were made by both Native and non-Native literary critics to consider the specific contexts and aesthetics of Native literary production. This resulted in an explosive critical movement advocating specific spheres of Indigenous literary study in English and Native Studies departments, as well as innovative definitions of Native literary criticisms. Indigenous literary nationalism is one such theoretical response.

Indigenous literary nationalism is one of the most dynamic, controversial, and broadly defined critical approaches emerging today. Simply put, this movement is interested in illuminating the intellectual histories, experiences, and knowledge structures available in Native (tribal/pan-tribal) nations’ creative and critical expressions, and embedding these in the history and politics of those nations’ community existences. Literary nationalism examines stories, poetry, songs, nonfiction works and autobiographies as processes deeply invested in the continuance of a People; it seeks to identify a political (and at times polemical) subjectivity at the centre of Native literary endeavors, while at the same time celebrating the interconnectedness of Native peoples with other cultures through treaties, nation-to-nation sovereignty struggles, models of cultural adaptation, and linguistic exchanges. It is also deeply invested in articulating histories, aesthetics, and expressions in political and historical moments while placing Native voices at the core of critical thought in relation to Native literatures (with their accompanying complex knowledges and experiences privileged). Following Robert Warrior’s 1994 call in *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions*, this privileging ensures that Native peoples are treated not only as storytellers and creative thinkers but as intellectuals with abilities to articulate and devise dynamic, complex, and sustaining philosophies, theories, and approaches to their own lives, literatures, and laws (xviii-xix).

As literary nationalist critics have argued, Indigenous nationalisms
tend not to be predicated on the historical “nation-state” model, which depends upon unifying patriotisms, coercive policing of perceived deviance, and hegemonic allegiance to the structures of the state at the expense of kinship and other loyalties. As Daniel Heath Justice indicates in his 2006 book *Our Fire Survives the Storm: A Cherokee Literary History*,

Indigenous nationhood is a concept rooted in community values, histories, and traditions that...asserts a sense of active sociopolitical agency, not simply static separatism from the world and its peoples..

Indigenous nationhood is more than simple political independence or the exercise of distinctive cultural identity; it is also an understanding of a common social interdependence within the community, the tribal web of kinship rights and responsibilities that link the People, the land, and the cosmos together in an ongoing and dynamic system of mutually affecting relationships. (24)

In the following provocative contributions, a multitude of Indigenous nationhoods inclusive of these “dynamic systems” are suggested, ranging from tribal to pan-tribal, rural to urban, separatist to integrative. Perhaps the singular unifying “national” ideal of these critics, resembling the many proponents of tribal sovereignty, is in their Indigenous-centered complexities – and the relationships that come out of them as a result.

For the most part, however, Indigenous literary nationalist critics have remained focused on Indigenous struggles in the United States, with American Indian critics becoming the movement’s dominant voices and Native experiences and histories south of the 49th parallel being cited most regularly. This is most easily evidenced in one of the movement’s seminal texts, co-written in 2005 by Jace Weaver, Craig Womack, and Warrior and aptly entitled *American Indian Literary Nationalism* [hereafter *AILN*]. In this book, while broadly conceived notions of Indigenous global sovereignty and intellectualism are used, clearly identifiable Indigenous struggles in America become linchpins for discussion.

Such American-centrism, however, has not stopped many scholars from utilizing literary nationalist tools to interpret Indigenous creative and critical endeavors in Canadian contexts. Native critics in Canada like Emma LaRocque, Thomas King, Basil Johnston, Lee Maracle, Maria Campbell, Armand Garnet Ruffo, and Jeannette Armstrong have all made what might now be considered literary nationalist arguments in the past and can be viewed as contributing to the intellectual climate in which this movement has developed. Today, several scholars working at Ca-
nadian universities reference American Indian literary nationalist critics in their own work to make persuasive interpretations of First Nations literatures in Canada. Some also critique the movement’s potential pitfalls or weaknesses, including two critics in this interlogue. This all leads to several interesting and crucial questions regarding locality, inheritance, transportability, transnational-tribalism, language, colonialism, continental Indigenous resistance, and possible areas of development. These, and more, are what this paper seeks to engage. Importantly, this interlogue is intended to be a starting point in examining the value of this critical lens, and all authors invite thoughts and further discussion towards what Kristina Fagan later calls for: “a truly inclusive and expanding form of Indigenous literary nationalism.”

Keavy Martin

Renaming a Double-Edged Nationalism

Indigenous literary nationalism is in many ways a project of renaming. Instead of myths and oral traditions, instead of the early writing of letters, diaries, and treaties, instead of crafts or material culture like beadwork, sewing, carving, and mapmaking, and instead of a Native American literary renaissance, we may now speak more gracefully of Indigenous intellectual traditions. It is not that the old names were necessarily bad; rather, like any names, they represent an inheritance and carry a set of connotations – and these had been both troubling in their paternalism and limiting in the perspectives that they convey. Womack writes in Red on Red that tribally-centered criticism (a forerunner to Indigenous literary nationalism, as Sinclair cites), “attempts to find Native literature’s place in Indian country, rather than Native literature’s place in the canon” (11); however, an important (and not unrelated) side-effect of this task is that it rephrases Indigenous traditions in terms that the academy can recognize and engage with. Myths are easy for the university to sideline, but intellectual traditions it must contend with.

Nationalism is another term known to the Western tradition, but as a label it is somewhat less benign than intellectual traditions. As Sinclair notes above, Indigenous scholars have been careful to differentiate between the nationalism of Indigenous peoples and the nationalism of nation-states; Justice stresses “the ability of Indigenous nationalism to extend recognition to other sovereignties without that recognition implying a necessary need to consume, displace, or become absorbed by those nations” (Our Fire 24). Yet, although it has been re-signified, the term nationalism cannot escape troubling connections to the excesses of nation-states. Like Womack’s initial term for his methodology—liter-
ary separatism—the signification of literary nationalism hovers within
reach of militarism or at least of militancy. Indeed, these connotations
are an important part of the term’s usefulness in Indigenous literary criti-
cism: nationalist literatures or literary theories are by implication autono-
mous and worthy of recognition—even if that recognition is tinged with
wariness. As Warrior writes of one of his intellectual forebears: “[Ed-
ward] Said understood nationalism as something problematic, but also
something necessary to the mobilization of groups of people toward
political goals” (AILN 180).

The term nationalism, then, is a double-edged sword. On one hand,
it fulfills a strategic purpose—it draws attention sharply back to the
political origins and impacts of Indigenous texts. On the other hand, it
forces critics to grapple with a set of lingering and troublesome conno-
tations. Ernst Renan, in his seminal 1882 address “What is a Nation?”
stated that “[f]orgetting…is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation…. [T]he essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in
common, and also that they have forgotten many things” (11). And although
Indigenous nations should not be confused with nation-states, the dan-
gers of nation-state nationalism (such as the creation of totalizing narra-
tives or the suppression of internal diversity) can act as a caution for
Indigenous literary nationalism—a warning that rings every time the
methodology is named.

The study of Inuit literature, though somewhat peripheral to both
Canadian and American Indigenous criticisms, embodies many of the
challenges facing Indigenous literary nationalism today. Inuit political
and cultural history is distinct from other Indigenous histories in Canada
and the United States—the Arctic homeland, for instance, never attrac-
ted large numbers of European settlers, and the Indian Act does not
apply to Inuit. For these and other reasons, Inuit literature has remained
somewhat underrepresented in Indigenous literary studies. In a 2004
Windspeaker article, Inuk leader Zebedee Nungak writes about the chal-
 lenges Inuit writers face in distributing their work. “With nobody actively
seeking such material,” he says, “any number of journals, diaries, and
manuscripts gather dust in many an obscure shelf” (26). While literary
nationalist approaches would certainly help to rectify this omission and
would honor the uniqueness of Inuit history and politics, they also seem
to require the pre-existence of an Inuit nation and an Inuit literary tradi-
tion—notions which are problematic in their singularity. After all, the
Inuit homeland reaches from Greenland across the Canadian Arctic to
Alaska and Siberia, and its many regions are naturally distinct in their
language, culture, history and politics. While organizations like the Inuit
Circumpolar Council and the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami strategically empha-
size Inuit unity, scholars and Elders often comment on the inappropriateness of overarching theories (of the style of the generalized knowledge so beloved by the Western academy). As Iqaluit Elder Lucassie Nutaraaluk said when asked by a group of Inuit students to tell the story of Sedna, “I’ll tell you the story as I heard it. I think our stories vary from community to community even though they are the same unikkaqtuat [classic stories]. I want you to know there are variations” (Aupilaarjuk et al. 188).

Indigenous literary nationalists, including collaborators in this essay, are now grappling with ways to honor the diversity within their nations and literatures, while still contending with intellectual and political systems that seem to equate viability with ideological unity (or homogeneity). As Justice writes, “no community is monolithic and without dissent or even conflicting ideas about what exactly constitutes the group” (RT 153). In order to resist the more troublesome connotations of its powerful name, then, Indigenous literary nationalism must entertain and even value this dissent; it must celebrate the slippages – the texts and histories that are unruly, that do not fit, or that cause discomfort and healthy disagreement.

Literary nationalism values historicization; like literary history, it maintains an interest in origins and intellectual heritage. The term nationalism may conjure an energy that is useful to Indigenous literatures, critics, and communities, but this zeal—as history demonstrates—can obscure as much as it inspires. Indigenous literary nationalism may benefit, then, from chasing its tail, or becoming its own text – from acknowledging the historical and political complexities of its own terminology.

Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee Nation)
The Ragged Edges of Literary Nationhood

As a graduate student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln beginning to seriously engage nation-specific understandings of Indigenous literatures, it never occurred to me to consider myself a “nationalist”; while certainly a proud citizen of the Cherokee Nation, my graduate education had familiarized me with a rich archive of scholarship that was sharply critical of nationalism—indeed, of any essentialist ideological structure—along with its legacy. Though never entirely comfortable with some of the amorphous, middle-class White assumptions of so much that was lumped together without much distinction as “theory,” I’d certainly encountered enough work by such varied, big-name theorists as Anderson, Pratt, Butler, Foucault, and Derrida to be equally uncomfortable with claims of collective identity that too often ignored the coercion
and exclusion by which such claims were enabled.

It was under the tutelage of one particular mentor, Malea Powell, an Eastern Miami-Shawnee rhetorician and literary critic, that I encountered Vizenor, Bhabha, Spivak, Fanon, and other theorists who, in varying ways, articulated both the intellectual defensibility and the rich interpretive possibilities of other diverse knowledges. Powell is a strong Native woman, a vigorous defender of Native rights and a brilliant advocate of Indigenous intellectual traditions—a scholar who sees no necessary contradiction between being theoretically savvy and being committed to the study of Native literatures on their own terms. She’s equally comfortable grappling with the arguments and ideas of French philosopher Jacques Lacan and Paiute intellectual and activist Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins.

From Powell I was able to understand theory as something more than a weapon used by insecure (and often very privileged) graduate students to avoid taking any real intellectual stand or actually risking an opinion. She shares with other international theorists whose work I’ve come to admire (among them Warrior, Stuart Hall, Hortense Spillers, and my fine colleagues Linda Hutcheon and J. Edward Chamberlin) a passionate belief that theory, at its best, is expansively affirmative of intellectual and ethical values rather than defensively rejectionist in its advocacy of a single, monolithic, and rigid understanding. For those committed to social justice and the dignified participation of marginalized peoples and knowledges in the realm of scholarly inquiry, theory is an opening up of dialogue that, to some degree, forges and develops important intellectual and interpersonal relationships, and rethinks established and too-often-myopic creeds without silencing diverse voices, perspectives, or ways of knowing that dare to speak truth to power.

In Native literary studies I’m now firmly established as a literary nationalist, a designation I share with a diverse range of scholars, both Native and non-Native, in the U.S., Canada, and elsewhere. Though there’s no single definition that any of us uses (I much prefer “nationhood” to “nationalism,” but the latter terminology is the one that’s most widely used, so that’s the one we work with, imperfect as it may be), in general, Indigenous literary nationalism involves a firm commitment to understanding Indigenous literary expressions in part through their relevant Indigenous intellectual, cultural, political, cosmological, and historical contexts. Yet it’s a term that’s caused us no end of trouble, as commonly-held scholarly assumptions about “nationalism” are barriers that take a long time to overcome, even though literary nationalism as a theoretical movement offers important and nuanced distinctions from the nation-state nationalism that has given rise to some of the most
offensive and brutal political ideologies of the last two centuries (issues that Sinclair, Martin and others address in their contributions to this conversation).

There is vibrant energy in the field today, and the provocative and sometimes contentious debates between theorists of literary nationalism and other scholars speak to the health of our scholarly community. Amazing work is being produced by emerging and established theorists, both Native and non-Native, in Canada as well as the U.S., that asks and often compels us to reconsider our comforting understandings of—to borrow the title of Warrior's recent book on Native nonfiction—both “the people and the word.” Indeed, the work being done today by graduate students and younger scholars is as forward-thinking and rigorous as anything done to date, and this gives me much hope for the future of our field.

Yet, while we have much to celebrate, there are also challenges to the future health and development of both the critical lens of literary nationalism and the field of Indigenous literary criticism, in general, that demand intervention—the “ragged edges” to which I refer in my title. If, as suggested above, the best theory is that which creates a more expansive, inclusive, and engaging critical discourse, we must be vigorously attentive to both inadvertent and intentional exclusions that diminish our interpretive perspective. Among these are three that seem to me most pressing:

1. The dominance of male perspectives in Indigenous literary nationalism. Although we’re seeing an important shift in this area, as is evidenced by the strong women’s voices on the CACLALS panel and elsewhere, the most cited voices in literary nationalism are men, and this should cause us all to reflect on both the reasons for and the consequences of male critical over-representation. Indeed, there may well be some uncomfortable soul-searching if these anecdotal observations of sexual bias are (as I expect) borne out by more detailed analysis;

2. the lack of attention to or substantive engagement with the nationhood and peoplehood specificities of urban, pan-Native, or multtribal literary traditions and writers; and

3. the dangers of literary nationalists failing to challenge dehumanizing community politics in the misguided cause of an intellectually and morally vacuous version of “sovereignty.”

I don’t have room here to address all three important issues—and my colleagues do some of this work in their contributions here—so I’ll focus on the last one, which has been particularly in my thoughts and
recent work, as it emerges from some of the nasty politics taking place in the Cherokee Nation right now, where the same-sex marriage ban and the disenfranchisement of the Cherokee Freedmen have brought the issue of tribal sovereignty into a new and not particularly flattering light.

To be both viable and ethical, sovereignty can’t be just about our rights as Indigenous peoples and nations. It must also be about our responsibilities: to one another, to the earth and the web of kinship that binds us to the human and other-than-human world, to the ancestors and the spirits, to rational thought that is tempered with respect and an appreciation for mystery and the unknowable, to the cause of truth and the purpose of balance and growth, to our selves and our communities, and our mutually-constituting intellectual, spiritual, and moral integrity.

As such, it’s incumbent upon literary nationalists to bring not only the political and aesthetic to the conversation but also the historical and the ethical because the concept of sovereignty cannot be treated as the end-point of analysis or even as the final goal of necessary political action. After all, every tyrannical government, dictatorship, or despotism exercises its brutality as part of its “sovereignty.” So what do we mean by the term, and what is the role of the literary critic in articulating a sustainable Indigenous sovereignty of mind, spirit, body, and community, one that attends to the historical relationships of integrity, accountability, and kinship that are at the beating heart of the communitist ethos?¹¹

Whether in Canada, the U.S., or elsewhere, literary nationalists need to become, to some degree, intellectual activists for the very best Native intellectual traditions, not simply for traditionalism for its own sake. While community knowledge is invaluable to our understanding of Native literary production, it’s important to remember that, along with those traditions that bring healing and connection, bad medicine and witchery are very much traditional knowledges in Indigenous communities. Yet we’d be foolish to argue for the corrosive latter traditions to be the critical foundations of community-specific analysis. “Tradition” alone neither can nor should be the sole measure of our work’s articulation of Native communitism, any more than an unfettered, free-for-all idea of sovereignty can or should be the end-goal of our nations’ continuity and self-determination. Responsibilities must be paired with rights; without that connection, we have either tyranny or chaos, but not true community.

As an intensely self- and community-reflective theoretical approach to the expressive arts of the People, the best literary nationalism is not only embedded in the intellectual, political, historical, and cultural matrix of localized communities and contexts, but it directly engages prin-
principles of accountable kinship within that constitutive matrix. In doing so, it demands of its practitioners the responsibility of challenging—respectfully, but unequivocally—the material and imaginative failures (both those imposed by colonialism without and paracolonialism within) that keep the People from participating in communitist relationships and responsibilities in a healthy way. By attending to the specificities of history, expression, and political action, maybe even spirituality, the literary nationalist is to some degree obligated to “speak truth to power” with health and wholeness as the end purpose of that action, even when it’s controversial or difficult to do so. To be committed to a sustainable political and intellectual Indigenous sovereignty is necessarily to be committed to the responsible exercise of that sovereignty and its full integrity. With care and attention, and no small degree of humility, the best literary nationalism seems well placed to do this in a good way.

Sam McKegney

Committed to Indigenous Communities while Keeping the “Literary” in Literary Nationalism

Near the beginning of his contribution to American Indian Literary Nationalism, Weaver invokes a lengthy passage from Blaeser’s “Native Literature: Seeking a Critical Center” to outline some of the movement’s political goals and ethical commitments, quoting approvingly Blaeser’s assertion that she has been “particularly…alert for critical methods and voices that seem to arise out of the literature itself (this as opposed to critical approaches applied from an already established critical language or attempts to make the literature fit already established genres and categories of meaning)” (qtd in AILN 3). Literary nationalism at its best—in imaginative, sophisticated, anti-hegemonic, and self-reflexive iterations like those envisioned by each of my collaborators—responds enthusiastically to Blaeser’s call by employing critical strategies that emerge from Indigenous communities while resisting the uncritical application of externally constructed Western theoretical tools (like those identified by Sinclair, Martin, and Justice above) to Indigenous literary studies.

In the spirit of this paper’s collective investment in the development of what Justice terms “the best literary nationalism” and what Fagan calls “a truly inclusive and expanding form of Indigenous literary nationalism,” I wish to analyze in my brief remarks the potential for the movement’s political goals to overshadow and de-emphasize literary analysis such that the din caused by its inspired critical machinery might actually obscure what Blaeser calls “voices” within “the literature.” As literary nationalism develops its “critical language” and “categories of
meaning” (even if that language and those categories are non-prescrip-
tive and evolving), its application to particular iterations of Indigenous
literary production might reflect less and less an active response to criti-
cal cues present in the texts themselves. Just like postmodernism or
any other ‘ism,’ literary nationalism can be imposed on a piece of litera-
ture in a manner that forwards the critic’s agenda—however ethically
laudable, politically generative, or socially empowering that agenda might
be—while disregarding the creative autonomy of the piece itself. For
“the best literary nationalism,” I wonder if critics of Indigenous litera-
tures might need to retain a literary (or storytelling) focus along with our
commitments to community; in fact, I want to suggest that true commit-
ment to “the literature itself” is a commitment to community, nation-
hood, and sovereignty.

In AILN, Womack observes: “What is, in fact, becoming apparent to
me is that two schools have emerged: those who teach Native literature
as NAS [Native American Studies] practitioners and those who teach
Native literature from English department perspectives” (153). Womack
champions, and views literary nationalism as emerging from, NAS per-
spectives in which the primary commitment of the researcher, critic, or
teacher is to the healthy continuance of Indigenous communities. Un-
like English department perspectives, which conceive of Indigenous lit-
erature as a discrete field of critical inquiry that can be addressed ade-
quately without recourse to its interconnectedness with the lived ex-
periences of Indigenous individuals, communities, and nations, NAS per-
spectives employ literary analysis in the service of political goals like
decolonization, sovereignty, and self-determination. On the one hand,
the shift to NAS perspectives is crucial to understanding how Indig-
enous stories build from, represent, and potentially affect Indigenous
lives. On the other hand, while philosophical commitments to Indigenous
intellectual traditions remain essential to ethical criticism of Indigenous
literatures, we need to be cautious about literary criticism in which
literature is valued foremost for its utility. In other words, we risk doing
violence to the literature when we require it to be a tool for political
action. The danger involves approaching literature with predetermined
goals and agendas, the urgency of which encourages us to be less re-
sponsive to the literature’s creative insights, thereby disregarding Indig-
enous artistic agency. Stories and storytellers seek to move us in unique
and unpredictable ways—such is their power—and Indigenous literary
criticism needs to maintain an active posture through which it can re-

Another complicating factor is the potential ambiguity of the term
Indigenous literary nationalism, which is designed to reflect commit-

Critical Approaches in Canadian Indigenous Contexts
ments and strategies on the part of critics of Indigenous literatures but can also be applied to a literary movement. For this reason, literary nationalists risk indicating not just what critics should do in the service of “an ethical Native literary criticism” (Acoose et al. 94), like that theorized by the critics in Reasoning Together, but also what Indigenous creative writers ought to create. This terminological slippage is evident in Womack’s contribution to AILN. As one of his “flexible tenets for...literary nationalism” (168), Womack argues that “the compassionate nationalist cannot simply walk away from those things that are killing us in Native communities.... It should be obvious by now that casinos...are not going to save us; thinking must save us, and this is where critics come in” (170). With this call out, Womack identifies the critic’s role in dealing with crises befalling Indigenous communities; however, he goes on to argue in the same paragraph that “a major strategy for the compassionate literary nationalist is commenting on social policy and articulating community strategies for increased health, in one’s art, while keeping it artful. While finding ways to increase his or her commitment to social realism, the compassionate literary nationalist will also strive for artistic excellence and experimentation” (my emphasis, 170). Using the same term he had applied to critics of Indigenous literatures—“compassionate nationalist”—Womack here seems to describe producers of Indigenous literature; how else to explain the repeated uses of “art” and “artful”? The categories of “artist” and “critic” are, of course, not mutually exclusive, as evidenced by Sinclair’s list above of Indigenous critics in Canada, each of whom is also a renowned creative writer. Yet Womack’s conflation of categories can be unsettling insofar as it posits a definition—a flexible one, but a definition nonetheless—of what makes Indigenous art valuable: “comment[ary] on social policy,” the articulation of “community strategies for increased health,” and “commitment to social realism.”

Literary nationalists need to encourage the writing and publication of politically relevant texts, while studying, teaching, and reviewing favorably Indigenous texts that align with sovereigntist goals. However, I worry about the inference that Indigenous texts that are themselves literary nationalist are the texts of primary value to Indigenous communities and the idea that critics should suggest to writers what the content of their work ought to be. When I interviewed Taliai A Alfred in 2007 about the state of Indigenous literature in Canada, he lamented, “Unfortunately, now I find most [writers] disengaged.... They’re just not politically committed.” “[W]hat’s been written lately,” he asked, “that’s... alive in terms of the political struggle?” (personal interview). Janice Acoose explains along similar lines, “With great expectations, I fervently search...
the pages of Indigenous texts for reflections of an author’s nation of origin, ancestors, language, and expressions of national sovereignty. Often I am saddened to ‘discover’ Natives...who have ceded not only vast territories of land, but also the territories of imagination and voice” (RT 221). These are real and urgent concerns. And critics have a role to play in validating texts like those Alfred longs for with identifiable political goals and those Acoose desires with discernible connections to ancestry, culture, and language by teaching and studying them. However, these are by no means the only Indigenous texts we should be teaching and studying in Canada or elsewhere, nor are they the only texts that serve the needs of Indigenous nations.

When asked at a conference what he saw as “the future of Native American literature,” Womack reportedly replied, “‘More and funkier’” (qtd in Weaver, AILN 74). In the same book, Womack argues that literary critics “have a role in facilitating the work of Indian writers who are innovative, subversive, [and] deviant” (93) and states that he is “interested in the kind of work...that continues to function as a catalyst for new forms of Native literature” (168). I worry that a literary nationalist movement that neglects to “chas[e] its tail,” in Martin’s terms, could encourage literary conformity that is actually antithetical to the “more and funkier” Womack and others desire (particularly if it devalues works that are not socially realist, for example). This is why I feel that ethical critical work in this field, while building from a solid foundation of the critic’s commitment to Indigenous communities and sovereignties, needs to be committed simultaneously to the autonomy of Indigenous literary production and attentive to Indigenous voices as manifest in literary art. Going back to Womack’s earlier distinction, while we may not want to approach Indigenous literatures from English department perspectives, it remains significant that critics of Indigenous literatures remain open to the insights of literary artists; in those insights new pathways will be mapped out, political strategies envisioned, subjectivities validated, and roles and responsibilities re-imagined. My own hope for a compassionate Indigenous literary nationalism foregrounds ethical commitments to the continuance of Indigenous nations, to historicization, and to communitist activism, but remains guided in various ways by Indigenous artistic creation. Respecting Indigenous voices by truly engaging with the cues to criticism embedded within texts themselves is, it seems to me, among the myriad ways of respecting and catalyzing Indigenous sovereignties.
Deanna Reder (Cree/Métis)

The Strategic Potential of Indigenous Literary Nationalism

I write from the perspective of somebody, who—while a relatively junior scholar—has been in the field, it seems, since its inception. I don’t think this is an exaggeration. Throughout the 1980s I started and stopped and re-started my studies, depending on my income, first at the University of Alberta and then at the University of British Columbia, only to be finally successful at Concordia (aided, I might say, by the tuition freeze and Montreal’s relatively cheap cost of living at that time). Indigenous literature, as far as I can remember, was never on the curriculum. However, because I had never studied the work of an Indigenous author (other than Pauline Johnson’s famous “The Song My Paddle Sings”) in all my years of public school education, this absence at university didn’t strike me as unusual. It wasn’t until the late 1980s when Anne Cameron’s Daughter of the Copper Woman (1981) made its way to Women’s Studies syllabi, accompanied by controversy, that I began to recognize the need for change.

Of course, what I understood to be my personal conclusion was in fact a realization being made across the country. With the advent of postcolonial studies, scholars began to ask about the function of the image of, and then of work by, the indigene. Others relied on discussions in postmodernism to identify Indigenous challenges to nationalist metanarratives and, influenced by Gerald Vizenor, the role of the trickster. By the 1990s, anthologies were compiled, Native literature courses were developed, and a “first-generation” of doctoral students produced dissertations in the field (including such scholars as Sophie McCall and Kristina Fagan; I would call their work ground-breaking, except I don’t want to employ a term so rife with colonial implications).

The fact that a mere decade later it is now considered legitimate in departments of English literature to use Indigenous frameworks to examine Indigenous literatures suggests a transformational moment in the academy, and to this I credit the influence of Native American literary nationalism. This is not to ignore the fact that, as my colleagues have pointed out, these new approaches have tripwires and flaws. All theoretical models act as lenses that help clarify an area of focus, while at the same time obscuring other aspects of a scene, and this movement is no different. But before we jump to point out the blind-spots of this approach, I would encourage us to take a long and leisurely look. Indigenous literary nationalism offers a way to shift the focus of research away from the effects of colonization to the contributions and potential of Indigenous worldviews. It also offers a strategic position from which
to critique and alter the structure of English studies. Even at this present date, literature departments across Canada offer courses for almost every century of writing in Britain, while at the same time offering only one or two catch-all Native literature courses that are somehow supposed to cover the entire literary output of all of Native America’s disparate nations over time. As a result, most curricula only offer a cursory glance at a few token texts. But Indigenous literary nationalism celebrates the variety of specific national or tribal interpretations of the world, a point that suggests unlimited possibilities. Imagine creating courses that, for example, discuss the differences between Coast Salish and Anishinaabeg literary traditions and perspectives. This is not to insist that every author fits perfectly into a national tradition or that epistemes are easily evaluated and adaptable for comparative work. But Richard Atleo’s *Tsawalk* (2004), a Nuuchahnult analysis of traditional stories, and Basil Johnston’s many volumes on Anishinaabe culture are rich and often untapped sources that can help us understand everything from George Clutesi’s early work to Drew Hayden Taylor’s recent young adult vampire novel. Of course, Taylor’s *Night Wanderer: A Native Gothic Novel* (2007) begs to be compared to Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (or at least the Twilight franchise), and considered, as Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach* has been, as an example of Canadian Gothic. But just as *Monkey Beach* is situated in a Haisla context and formed out of a Haisla imaginary, *Night Wanderer* can productively be examined as Anishinaabe. Instead of the inevitable discussions of the subversiveness of heteroglossia, scholars can focus on the various interpretations and intellectual contributions of specific words and phrases. Instead of the now conventional conclusions about agency or inter-subjective hybridity, scholars can craft new ways to access these texts that interpret the influence of literary traditions specific to each nation or develop evaluative techniques and vocabulary to discuss such things as the role of ceremony or challenges to genre.

Furthermore, the relevance to community inherent in literary nationalist critical approaches could attract Native students to the study of literature. As someone who is housed in both a First Nations Studies program and a department of English at Simon Fraser University, it seems to me that a key factor differentiating students of the two programs is ethnicity. While the majority of my students in FNST (otherwise known as NAS) are Native, almost none of the students in my English courses are, which has profound implications for the future of the field. Jo-Ann Episkenew, an English professor and former Dean at the First Nations University of Canada, recalls being approached by a Canadian university recruiting for a Tier 1 Canada Research Chair in Aboriginal literature;
they contacted her looking for names of potential candidates who not only had a PhD and an eminent record of scholarship, but were also members of an Indian nation in Canada. She laughed when recounting this story and asked me, as she asked them, “How many Indigenous scholars has your department produced?” In fact, if you were to list all the Indigenous scholars who teach Indigenous literature in English departments, while counting only completing PhDs at Canadian universities, a precious few names emerge: Fagan, Warren Cariou and Jesse Archibald-Barber, Paul DePasquale, Cheryl Suzack, and a few others (including myself). This is not to discount the importance of scholars like Episkenew (trained in Germany), Justice or Thomas King who received their PhDs in the U.S., or Emma LaRocque who has an interdisciplinary PhD; neither do I mean to exclude the important contributions of non-Indigenous scholars like Martin, McKegney, Renate Eigenbrod, and many others. Nor do I want to dismiss the crucial work of creative writers without PhDs who have been instrumental in opening up this field – particularly Armand Garnet Ruffo and Daniel David Moses. The point I am trying to make is that the number of Indigenous faculty trained by Canadian universities is one way to evaluate the infrastructure that supports the study of Indigenous literatures in Canada.

While this seems to be a plea for inclusion of Indigenous scholars, it is in fact a call for changes to improve the status quo in our field. Right now, whether I am teaching a second-year course or a graduate course, I always have to allot some time to go over “the basics,” for reasons that have nothing to do with the intelligence of my students (they are very bright) but rather speak to their woeful preparation. For example, I can never take for granted that students have ever read a text by a Native author or have even a simple understanding of “status Indian” or the Indian Act of Canada. Even the most elementary of literary conversations is hampered by this lack of basic information. In a recent fourth-year class, I planned ambitiously to discuss the influence of Cree literary genres and Cree concepts of family in Gregory Scofield’s *Thunder Through My Veins*. While introducing the text, I made a simple gesture about influence, citing Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed*, one of the most seminal texts in the Native literary canon and the model on which Scofield’s autobiography is based. Before I could proceed with Scofield, however, I discovered that few students knew who Campbell is, and even fewer had even a cursory understanding of Métis history. This made my contextual claim of a historical trajectory of Métis literary output in Canada – positioning Scofield’s text as emerging from a generation influenced by Campbell—meaningless to them. Of course, in our teaching we need to go over key points, (and I did); at the same time, however, most En-
English professors do not have to explain the significance of Shakespeare or Virginia Woolf to their students and by fourth year can expect some familiarity with the field.

There is great potential in the approaches of Indigenous literary nationalism, not only because of its call to rethink Indigenous intellectual history, as Martin directs us to in this essay, but also because of the emerging generation of critics, both Native and non-Native, engaging in conversations that hopefully will support creative production. Eventually, I predict that the next generation of literary critics will return to pan-Indian approaches in the discussion of literature, not because they wish to return to a monolithic, homogenous notion of “Indian” but because such approaches hold within them possibilities to theorize aspects of common experience and common aesthetics, especially given the growing presence of urban Native populations with little connection to home communities, languages or cultures. That being said, my hope is that they will be inspired to study in literature departments, that there will be various course offerings giving them options to consider, that they will be able to study their languages and literature in their languages, that they will have the chance to study with Indigenous professors as well as non-Indigenous experts, that their perspectives will be respected and that they will be mentored. Also, I hope that the knowledge base about Indigenous literature and Native history in Canada increases, so that the basics that we need to repeat in university become common knowledge routinely taught in public school, thereby creating room and imagination at the university level for deeper analysis.

Kristina Fagan (Labrador Metis)

Concluding Thoughts: Doing Theory and Doing Community

In his contribution to this collaborative essay, Justice writes that, as a graduate student, he considered himself to be a “proud citizen of the Cherokee Nation,” though not, at that time, a “nationalist.” I want to consider this distinction between the experience of being part of an Indigenous nation and the theoretical position of nationalism. The latter has grown out of the former, and yet they are not the same. The Indigenous literary nationalism movement has been largely driven by Indigenous scholars seeking to relate their academic practice to their sense of what it means to be part of an Indigenous community. But what happens when we try to turn the complex experience of community into academic theory and practice? Or, as Womack concisely puts it, “[w]hat is the relationship between our theories and the people we are theorizing about?” (Acoose et al. 369). I would argue that there is a tension
between Indigenous experience and Indigenous literary nationalism that, while perhaps inevitable, needs our ongoing attention if we are to create nationalist work that is inclusive and engaged.

Indigenous literary nationalism aims to understand Indigenous literature within its Indigenous contexts, that is, to understand how stories work within communities. But as we move to define Indigenous communities in an institutional context, pressures to delineate the borders of the nation and its relevant forms of expression arise. I would like to illustrate these pressures with a brief story from my own experience as an Indigenous nationalist researcher. I am currently working on a project with my own people, the mixed-blood Inuit of Labrador (sometimes called the Inuit Metis). To carry out this work, I applied for an “Aboriginal SSHRC,” which requires collaboration with an Aboriginal organization. There are two political organizations in Labrador that represent the Inuit Metis: Nunatsiavut, which calls its members Inuit, and the Labrador Metis Nation, which calls its members Metis. My decision to partner with the Labrador Metis Nation has had profound implications for my study. For example, one day I sat down with Max Blake, an Inuit Metis Elder, in his kitchen over bowls of caribou-heart soup. As is customary among Labradorians, the conversation began with Blake figuring out who I was and how I fit into the interwoven Labrador families. After some discussion, he declared with satisfaction, “Sure we’re related!” and he launched into a story of one of our mutual Inuit ancestors. It is in part through these kinds of stories that the Indigenous people of Labrador remember and maintain their relationships with one another. Yet, despite our relatedness, and despite the fact that Blake was one of the founders of the Labrador Metis Association (now Nation) in the nineteen-seventies, he is now an official member of Nunatsiavut rather than the Labrador Metis Nation. As a result, he is neither “Labrador Metis” nor part of the group represented by the Labrador Metis Nation. This presents a real dilemma for me as I imagine the scope and purpose of my research project because my experience of Labrador Metis community and the official definition of who is Métis are at odds.

This example is meant to show, in the simplest of terms, the ways in which defining an Indigenous nation is a complicated and contentious task. And I would argue that our understandings of Indigenous nations must be based in Indigenous experiences of community rather than in institutionalized definitions. Yet interpreting the experience of nationhood is no easy task. To belong to a community involves many forms of connection: shared identity, relationships, emotional and physical support, shared work and responsibilities, and rich cultural and linguistic inheritances. Yet it also involves conflict, difficult relationships, pres-
sures, feelings of exclusion and inheritances that we would often rather do without. Of course, by focusing closely on particular Indigenous communities and moving away from pan-tribal generalizations, Indigenous literary nationalism is more likely to see the complex ways communities define and express themselves. It is for this reason that Reder, in her contribution to this essay, asks us to take a “long and leisurely look” at the advantages of Indigenous literary nationalism before poking holes in it. So, for instance, a nationalist approach can potentially reveal the variety of ways in which we can understand Labrador Métis identity as a form of kinship, as an official designation, as a response to historic influences, et cetera. This is the kind of complexity that Justice is getting at when he says that his study of Cherokee literature explores “varied understandings of what it is to be Cherokee” (Our Fire 6).

The potential problems with Indigenous literary nationalism arise when it becomes detached from this experience of community. Institutionalization of a particular theoretical approach leads, perhaps inevitably, to efforts to define and stabilize it. And to work with the concept of Nationhood means that we must, on some level, define the Nation. However, this defining process can, as Tol Foster writes, work to “close off voices that do not obviously seem to be part of the tribal community and to privilege the more conservative voices in that community” (Acoose et al. 270). Moreover, funding agencies, ethics boards, Aboriginal organizations, and other institutions can exert stabilizing influences on how Aboriginal communities/nations are defined. Several of the contributors to this essay discuss the dangers of defining Indigenous nations and nationalism too narrowly. Martin warns, for instance, that when analyzing literature from the massive Inuit homeland, notions of a unified Inuit nation and literary tradition are “problematic in their singularity,” Justice calls for a literary nationalism that considers the experiences of Indigenous women, urban, pan- tribal and multtribal Indigenous people and those excluded or oppressed by Aboriginal community politics. And McKegney worries that Indigenous Nationalism will exclude or obscure particular texts or aspects of texts that do not fit the nationalist agenda. What these contributors have in common is a concern that nationalism not lose touch with the complexity of Indigenous experience and literature.

Experience of Indigenous community, with all its trouble and all its richness, can act as a corrective to any over-arching theory and to the academic tendency to define and conclude. Some recent and exciting examples of Indigenous Nationalism have pushed towards opening up our ideas about Indigenous community rather than putting boundaries around them. Justice suggests in Reasoning Together that we look to
the practice of kinship as a way of understanding how Indigenous communities create and maintain themselves. Foster advocates paying greater attention to the relations among communities within a region and "acknowledging dissent within the community in a muscular fashion, as well as pointing out unsavory elements of our home community's practice openly" (RT 273). I would also suggest that we reflect on our own experiences of Indigenous community and allow those experiences to inform our work. As Womack writes, his views of Muskegge Creek experience are built, not only on research, but on "a lived relationship that is a lifelong process and never an easy one" (RT 369). In emphasizing experience in this way, I do not exclude non-Indigenous scholars. Experience includes not only the theorist's personal experience (though I believe such personal experience has great value and should be more often acknowledged) but the experiences of others, past and present, near and far. While we cannot completely know the experience of another, it is surely part of our human gifts to seek to know and to try to understand. And we can all look to the literature, where the diversity and complexity of Indigenous community is reflected and explored. As Chamberlin writes, "Culture is always threatened by anarchy, as belief is by doubt. That's the essential nature of both conflict and belief…. Conflict is at the heart of the way language works, and therefore the way stories work as well" (25). If we acknowledge the tension between connection and conflict that is inevitably part of the experience of community, then we can move towards a truly inclusive and expanding form of Indigenous literary nationalism.

Kristina Fagan teaches Aboriginal literature and storytelling in the English Department at the University of Saskatchewan. She co-edited Henry Pennier's autobiography, Call Me Hank: A Sto:lo Man's Reflections on Living, Logging and Growing Old, which was recently launched with a traditional Sto:lo feast and book burning (so that the dead can read the book). She is a member of the Labrador Metis Nation and her current project is a study of Labrador Metis narrative and identity.

Daniel Heath Justice is an enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation and the author of Our Fire Survives the Storm: A Cherokee Literary History (University of Minnesota Press), The Way of Thorn & Thunder trilogy, all published by Kegedonce Press, and numerous essays on Indigenous history and literary criticism. He is currently the submissions editor of Studies of American Indian Literatures and is Associate Professor of Aboriginal Literatures at the University of Toronto.
**Keavy Martin** is Assistant Professor of Aboriginal Literatures at the University of Alberta. She completed her PhD in Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto in 2009, and is currently at work on a book-length study of Inuit literature in Nunavut.

**Sam McKegney** is a teacher and scholar of Indigenous and Canadian literatures. He received his doctoral degree from Queen’s University, to which he recently returned as an Assistant Professor. His book, *Magic Weapons: Aboriginal Writers Remaking Community After Residential School*, examines the ways in which Indigenous survivors of residential schools mobilize narrative in their struggles for personal and communal empowerment in the shadow of attempted cultural genocide.

**Deanna Reder (Cree/Métis)** received her PhD from the Department of English at the University of British Columbia in 2007 and is currently an Assistant Professor at Simon Fraser University. She is working on a book on Cree and Métis autobiography in Canada and is co-editing an anthology with Dr. Linda Morra (Bishops University) entitled *Troubling Tricksters: Revisiting Critical Conversations* (forthcoming 2010). Her work has appeared in *Studies in Canadian Literature, American Indian Quarterly*, and *Creating Community: A Roundtable on Canadian Aboriginal Literatures*. An article entitled “Writing Autobiographically: A Neglected Indigenous Intellectual Tradition” is forthcoming in *Contexts in Aboriginal/Native American Writing in Canada and the U.S.* (Broadview, 2009).

**Niigonwedom James Sinclair (Anishinaabe)** is a graduate of the Native American Literatures graduate program at the University of Oklahoma and is currently a PhD Candidate in the Department of English at the University of British Columbia. His dissertation is an Anishnaabe Literary History. Niigon is originally from Ste. Peter’s (Little Peguis) Indian Reserve in Manitoba, Canada, and his creative work has appeared in *Prairie Fire* and Totem Pole Books’ *Tales from Mocassin Avenue: An Anthology of Native Stories*. His scholarly work will appear in three upcoming critical texts with Broadview Press, Michigan State University Press, and Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

**Notes**

1. After the spirited discussion, all of the panelists—and several in the audience—agreed that further dialogue, debate, and discussion were needed on this important topic. This collaborative essay seeks to
contribute to that conversation. The contributors would like to thank the Musqueam Nation (on whose unceded territory the initial roundtable took place), the University of British Columbia, CACLALS, the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and each of our respective “home” academic departments for providing time, space, and financial support. Thank you as well to the many scholars, storytellers, and activists who take up these important issues and by whom we continue to be inspired and challenged. And, of course, our families, communities, nations – the reasons we do this work.

2. Some timely examples of this would be Geary Hobson’s ethical choice to combine critical and creative Native-authored works in his 1979 anthology *The Remembered Earth: An Anthology of Contemporary Native American Literature*, Paula Gunn Allen’s illuminating forays into a pan-tribal, Native-centered “gynocentrism” in Indigenous literary output in *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions* (1986), and Kimberly Blaeser’s calls for a “tribal-centered criticism” in her 1993 essay “Native Literature: Seeking a Critical Center.” Other scholars of this time who made similar calls included N. Scott Momaday, A. LaVonne Brown Ruoff, Gerald Vizenor, Simon Ortiz, Arnold Krupat, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, Emma Laroque, Lee Maracle, Marie Annharte Baker, and Jeannette Armstrong.


4. Such struggles include US Supreme Court decisions and Native American confrontations with the United States government, while models of Indigenous cultural productions by such tribal nations as the Cherokee, Muskogee Creek, Acoma Pueblo, Crow Creek Sioux, and Osage become focal points of the study.

5. See, for example, Sam McKegney’s *Magic Weapons: Aboriginal Writers Remaking Community After Residential School* (2007),


7. At the time of the original roundtable, Keavy Martin was a PhD student at the University of Toronto studying Comparative Literature.

8. See Nunavut Arctic College’s invaluable five-volume Interviewing Inuit Elders series. The introduction to the first volume, by Alexina Kublu, Frédéric Laugrand, and Jarich Oosten, contains a very useful discussion of the highly specific and contextualized “nature of Inuit knowledge” (Angmaalik et al. 8).

9. This includes stories that represent the rich and occasionally less-than-idyllic political lives of Indigenous nations; see, for instance, the Inuit stories of displacing the Tunuit (Dorset) people in the Eastern Arctic.

10. For example, Nilanjana Deb, a scholar at Jadavpur University in Kolkata, India, has done a remarkable nation-specific study on Anishinaabeg literatures.

11. Jace Weaver’s neologism “communitism” is a term particularly responsive to Native expressive contexts. As he describes in That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community, “[communitism] is formed by a combination of the words ‘community’ and ‘activism.’ Literature is communitist to the extent that it has a proactive commitment to Native community, including what I term the ‘wider community’ of Creation itself. In communities that have too often been fractured and rendered dysfunctional by the effects of more than 500 years of colonialism, to promote communitist values means to participate in the healing of the grief and sense of exile felt by Native communities and the pained individuals in them” (xiii).

12. I use the term “philosophical” here in gratitude to the intellectually sophisticated yet clear and accessible discussion of literary nationalism on Justice’s publicly accessible website, http://www.danielheathjustice.com/scholarship.html, which contains the following definition: “Indigenous literary nationalism is a philosophy that places Indigenous intellectual and cultural values at the center of analysis, rather than the margins.”

13. I invoke here the term “call out” from Sean Kicummah Teuton’s book Red Land, Red Power, which he employs to describe the moment in
which “American Indian scholars awaken politically and begin putting their ideas to work” (161).

14. Womack is himself the author of a profoundly nationalist Creek novel, *Drowning in Fire* (2001), and Justice has authored the Indigenous epic fantasy trilogy *The Way of Thorn & Thunder*, which is heavily influenced by Cherokee intellectual traditions and history.

15. I must stress that Womack is careful, here and throughout his critical oeuvre, to be neither prescriptive nor limiting, as noted in the emphasis above on “experimentation.” The admission in Womack’s groundbreaking work *Red on Red* that its critical methodology “is merely a point” on the spectrum of “legitimate approaches to analyzing Native literary production” and “not the spectrum itself” (2) resonates with his articulation of “flexible tenets for a compassionate American Indian literary nationalism” in *AILN*. However, the desire to characterize what makes Indigenous texts most beneficial, like the exaltation of “social realism” which potentially devalues alternative creative modes, risks being interpreted as unnecessarily rigid (and, at its worst extension, discriminatory).

16. It was only once I began my Master’s that I discovered the work of Penny Petrone whose *First People, First Voices* appeared as early as 1983. Still, my English professor at the time, a Canadianist, was unfamiliar with this text also.

17. This is not to contradict Sinclair’s chronology of the influence of Indigenous literary nationalism as early as the 1970s; while he traces the continuance of such nationalist ideas by Indigenous intellectuals, I am commenting on the uptake in the canon and in the classroom, particularly by (almost unilaterally) non-Indigenous academics in Canada.

18. I attribute this point to Jennifer G. Kelly, who made it to me in conversation.

19. This division of the Inuit of Labrador is a result of a series of political decisions that have left a single, culturally-unified and related community sorted into different categories, a process that is beyond the scope of this essay to explain. In some cases, one sibling is Inuit while another is Metis, depending on their place of birth.
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