WRITING LIFE AND OVERCOMING RACISM IN LEE MARACLE'S *BOBBI LEE INDIAN REBEL*

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RESUMO: Levando em consideração a posição da mulher nativa canadense atualmente, este artigo analisa como a obra autobiográfica *Bobbi Lee Indian Rebel* (1975), de Lee Maracle, denuncia práticas racistas, e, além de semear nos leitores a reflexão, traz também efeitos positivos para si e para sua comunidade. Através da escrita e da denúncia de práticas preconceituosas, Maracle é capaz de externar seus sentimentos e opiniões referentes às práticas preconceituosas não somente em relação aos nativos, mas também a outros grupos minoritários. Como resultado, Maracle traz para si e para o povo nativo canadense uma maneira de lidar com todo o preconceito que permeia suas vidas.

Palavras-chave: Literatura feminina, literatura nativo-canadense, escrita autobiográfica, Lee Maracle.

> *For autobiographers who belong to marginalized groups, on the other hand, who by definition do not enjoy social power, the act of remembering and inscribing their individual past lives might function as a way of affirming cultural survival and facilitating political self-determination.* – Linda Warley

> *Maybe if we just let the road to Oka red with blood of women, someone in this country will see the death and destruction this country has wrought on us.* – Lee Maracle

The Native Canadian people's first contact with White men goes back a long way and it has brought very little apart from diseases, exploitation and prejudice to the Natives' lives. Preceding this contact, life was quite different: despite being divided into several different communities, Natives did not share the same societal structure with the Whites. According to Stephanie Sellers (2008), "the governing, ceremonial, and social structures of most gynocratic Native nations are based on gendered halves: women's duties and men's duties. The purpose of this is to maintain harmonious *balance* with the nation" (SELLERS, 2008, p. 7. My emphasis). However, even though balance was highly valued by those nations

> this does not necessarily mean women and men had equal autonomy over their lives and similar opportunities for power. Even in some Native nations that were structured by a gender complementary system, women suffered from the effects of unequal power and experienced types of hardship present in patriarchal systems. However, in most gynocratic nations and certainly in the Eastern Woodlands [U.S.A.], women lived free of the constraints typically found in patriarchal systems (*idem*).

In fact, one of the bases of these nations' traditions were women as key elements in their creation stories: their bodily functions, their psycho-spiritual experiences, women as healers, as political leaders and as the source of all manner in life were ever-present traits in these stories (*ibidem*, p. 3-4). Sellers also posits there were animals, males and transgenders

along with women as well as a male god, resembling Western religions as Christianity, Judaism and Islam (*ibidem*, p. 6). It is crucial to state that each nation had its own story which framed that people's philosophy.

Furthermore, these nations' pre-colonial traditions considered all beings sacred, because of their relationship with the earth. This connection with the land is one of the main features that differentiate the Natives' from the Western culture. The way

> the earth is named, conceptualized, and the multitude of different ceremonies conducted to communicate with or revere her[1] vary widely among Native nations; nevertheless, all Native nations do indeed revere her and see her, literally and metaphorically, as the source of all life (*ibidem*, p. 11).

As soon as colonization started, most Native societal structure fell apart. And since colonization involves subjugation, the Whites have forced their values over the colonized because the former thoroughly believed the Natives' culture of worshiping the land, and having women play important roles in society was terribly wrong. And as a way to justify oppression, the colonized were seen (and treated) as "savages" and "uncivilized" for not fitting the Western modes. Not only were the Natives' values questioned, but they were soon undermined by the patriarchal system: the women, who were formerly essential to society and households, were now basically "second-class citizens". Concerning the Whites' patriarchalism, Sellers claims it

> is not simply the centralization of men but the simultaneous subjugation of women in order for the men to maintain that privilege for themselves and all subsequent male generations. Patriarchy features an exclusive class system where only a small percentage of males at the top of the system have wealth; however, all males benefit from the patriarchal

> system because of the inherent privilege of men, even if they are poor (*ibidem*, p. 84).

Other than the patriarchal governing and social structure imposed on the Natives, there was also the attempt to erase permanently these people's cultural background. In order to destabilize the basis of the Natives' way of living, the Whites, allied to Christianity, founded missionary schools and the "residential school system[2]".

Aiming at sabotaging the elders' passing on of their knowledge, the educational system involved practices such as taking the children from the reservations – where they used to live among their fellow natives – to live *and* study in schools ruled by Catholic priests. When finally back to their families, after their formative years, these individuals wouldn't fit or even understand the purposes of their customs and values, rendering their familial structure and most of their practices obsolete. In fact, those youngsters were forcedly assimilated into the Western White culture and therefore internalized much of the prejudice and racism against their own people. Still according to Stephanie Sellers, internalized racism consists of making the victims of this prejudice take all that is said and thought against them as true. Throughout the centuries, the perpetration of all this prejudice went on leading the Natives to abuse alcohol and drugs, to prostitution and broken homes.

Taking into account that Natives were seen as inferior when compared to Whites, Native women were at least doubly discriminated in the patriarchal system – for being Native-American *and* women. Nowadays, these women in particular, have still been suffering the consequences of colonialism, especially in the late modernity, when people in general have been "characterized by 'difference', […] cut through by different social divisions and social antagonisms which produce a variety of different 'subject positions' –

i.e. identities – for individuals" (HALL, 2007, p. 600). Thus, women are not essentially the same; on the contrary, are interpelled by a myriad of factors which makes each of them unique.

Whenever a minority is mentioned, issues of gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality and social class (see CLIFFORD, 1997) are of utmost importance since being a Native-American, lesbian and poor woman is far more intricate than being a Native-American, heterosexual, middle-class man. So, the literary works of women are complex choices to be analysed for those are often the most subdued individuals nowadays because of the oppression they have had to face in the patriarchal society. Women writers have to come to grips with all the facets of themselves so their works can be read and granted some value.

As orality was the basis of Native culture, literature was, in its early moments, mainly oral, being written down only after the contact with the Whites. Writing to Native Americans, then, meant expressing themselves by a completely different means, in a completely different language: the colonizers'.

If one is to look for literary works authored by Native women there are few records, and, among these, are very few (if any, in the official records) that date from before the 20th century. Conversely, there were some works of *male* Native writers dating from the eighteenth century that were only published under the guidance of the Catholic Church. Complex as it seems, these men's works were not widely known, for their authorship was not seen as authentic or reliable whatsoever.

Under the scope of Native American literature, in the 19th and 20th centuries, autobiography was one of the most recurrent genres used by writers. Apart from the transgression of writing in the colonizer's language, they also appropriated the canonical

genre of autobiography, completely diverging from what oral tradition used to do: telling one's own story was not a common practice; actually it was seen as inappropriate by some nations. By appropriating this genre, the Native women intend to re-evaluate the concept of literary canon firstly by making use of autobiographical writing – which had been credited throughout years, but under the signature of a *male western* author, usually *white* – and then, because they are women and other[3], they are indeed doubly transgressive.

It was only in 1973 that the Native-Canadian writer Maria Campbell published *Halfbreed*, an autobiographical narrative encompassing her own life: from her birth to adulthood. This watershed work was soon followed by Lee Maracle's *Bobbi Lee Indian Rebel* (1975) which depicts events from her childhood until her mid-twenties. From then on, for Native Canadian women, writing started to rise as a key element for empowerment, once publishing stories about their people and laying bare much of the already internalized prejudice, brought to those communities a way to deal with their issues as individuals as well as a group.

Maracle's *Bobbi Lee* portrays the coming-of-age of a Native-Canadian woman writer who, despite having to deal with (and overcome) all the prejudice and hardship she had gone through, was still able to use her willingness to write and her political awareness as power. As the plot unfolds, Lee struggles to find her true self and enough strength to be able to cope with the rebel she was on the inside. If searching for one's identity is alone a difficult task, when it comes to Native American identity this path becomes even more winding.

Maracle managed to tell her own story making overt use of postmodern strategies. Even though the chapters that encompass her childhood, adolescence and early adulthood

are clearly divided, the events definitely do not follow a traditional chronological order. Moreover, the narrator's speech often blends present and past references, thoughts, personal recollections, along with the characters'. Postmodern times also brought many questionings such as what the criteria to render a work canonical were, and why patriarchalism was to rule.

One of the main features of postmodern times, the crisis of the narratives, is directly proportional to the problematization of identities we have been experiencing. Conversely, as stated by Liane Schneider (2008), many feminist theorists claim this problematization has to do with the rising of the voices of those who were once silenced. Either way, the narratives produced by minorities – that have started to reach significant audiences from the 1970's onwards – have raised people's awareness that there is no unique definition or single identity in today's world. The search for selfhood, then, became an issue to be thoroughly discussed in these minorities' writings.

As for that, while searching for their roots, the Natives tried to record creation stories – most of the times with the help of wise elderly figures – and give space to one side of history that History seemed to have forgotten: the Native people's deeds and accomplishments along with all the injustices they have suffered. Also, by writing, the Natives were able to criticize and denounce the attempts the colonizer made in order to make those communities lose their bases, their culture and values.

Maracle's writing style, while appreciated by some, made others uncomfortable as the following excerpt aims at showing:

> Some readers might argue [it] is too confrontational for comfort. Comfort, however, is not her point. Readers willing to allow themselves to be

> Raven[4] will find that transformation through narrative can move them from discomfort to enlightenment. (THOM *apud* FEE; GUNEW, 2004, p. 208)

And it is by enlightening her readers that Maracle brings forward crucial issues to Natives while portraying her own coming-of-age, intermingled with her perspective on historical moments, the discrimination and racism indigenous communities suffer from, along with the rage and disregard Indians channel towards the whites as well. Moreover, Lee Maracle's readers are able to follow her political maturity as the plot unfolds. Maracle becomes a politically aware woman and even describes herself as a political activist – this trait makes her even more eager to write and fight for her people.

This autobiographical work overtly deals with the prejudice ethnic groups have been going through. In fact, even the Whites – who are supposedly the source of prejudice towards the non-whites – are also victims:

> If a gringo came to the Mexican side of town he would get the same snipe I got: they'd just ignore him; nobody would serve him; he'd be treated like he wasn't there. It was something that would happen to a Mexican on the white side of town. It was just the accepted way of life. (MARACLE, 1990, p. 54)

This contempt towards white people by certain minorities described in Maracle's work is a consequence of mutual prejudice. In fact, while writing about her childhood, similar passages deeply-rooted on prejudice can also be found:

> Then there was Jimmy Waddel. His family lived above the store and his father worked at McKenzie Barge and Derrick, a boat-building outfit. Jimmy and the older Korris boy down the street always picked on my brother and the younger kids from the Reserve. Whenever we played they tried to bully us around. So one day we decided we'd had enough. It was

> quite funny. Ten of us little kids were making faces at Jimmy from around the corner of a house, calling him 'dirty old man', 'whitey', 'whitey boy', and things like that. (*ibidem*, p. 27)

Even though the Native children, later on in this very passage, are mean enough to chain this white child to a tree and leave him there crying until the police and his mother come looking for him, this trick they played against the boy was one way the "Reserve children" found to fight back.

The narrator mentions the fact that young Maracle wasn't aware of the existence of different races. And in a description of the children in her neighbourhood, she states:

> Six families, most on welfare, lived in boathouses built up on stilts. The dredger's house was on stilts too, but it was really nice. He was from South Africa and his wife was mulatto. She talked a lot about racism back home – about how they'd had to leave because her husband, a white, has married a coloured woman. They moved into the neighbourhood when I was four and I played a lot with their son, Brian. I didn't know what Blacks were then; I just knew they were different, much friendlier to us. (*ibidem*, p. 26)

At this time of innocence, the young girl would still consider herself the same as others. Perhaps, she was aware there were boys and girls, as well as men and women, but the social strictures and racial issues hadn't become part of her reality yet. Not for long, though. In the same chapter, the narrator mentions the first time she realized she was an Indian:

> Three months after I entered school I became aware that I was an Indian and that white people didn't like me because of the colour of my skin. I talked about it with kids on the reserve but they would just say "We don't like whites either". Even the older people didn't like whites. Many worked in the white communities, around white people, but they had no

> white friends. Like most of the kids, when some white called me a name or abused me, I fought back. But otherwise I just ignored them like everyone else, fighting their contempt with my silence. (*ibidem*, p. 33)

Other than facing the whites' contempt in the streets, this child also had to cope with the fact that her "old man" was white, and at moments of anger he called her "dirty old squaw" (*ibidem*, p. 34) – an offensive slang used to refer to Native women, especially wives. For being different, young Maracle was often harassed by her drunken father-figure, who, by calling her a "squaw", with only one word would place her as the worst kind of "second-class citizen" possible.

At school, Bobbi Lee even tried hard being friends with white girls, but was soon disappointed at them, reaching the conclusion that "all the whites were the same: creepy, cruel racists that […] [she] wanted nothing more to do with" (*ibidem*, p. 37). However, after having taken up Drama lessons at school, she made friends with a white girl named Donna, but she did not know the white children's families could be so hateful towards her people:

> Her brother would sometimes come up to us and make like he was a TV Indian doin'a little dance and saying 'Hoo, hoo, hoo'. And that was pretty typical. Sometimes we'd make friends with white kids, then they'd tell us after a while to stop coming over because their parents didn't want Indians around the place. (*ibidem*, p. 48)

The narrator also criticizes the way society feeds prejudice against Indians by means of the media, with stereotypical and essentialist depictions of that people, especially from a child's viewpoint:

> You know, like when you're eleven and watch TV stuff about cowboys and Indians you just don't associate the racist crap with your own existence or with your parents' attitudes; it's just exciting and something to do after dinner. (*ibidem*, p. 49)

As a consequence, this stereotypical Indian figure is internalized by the Natives, who start feeling as the allegory or token the cinema and literature make of them. In fact, this criticism relates to how unaware of racism the youngsters usually are. How do the media get to show racism on prime time and still make it acceptable by society? This apparently harmless cowboy movie shows the Natives as ignorant and mere obstacles of greater deeds to be accomplished by the white cowboys.

As Bobbi Lee grew up, school became a place she no longer wanted to be in. And as it happens quite often among Native Americans, she eventually dropped out of school and getting into trouble became a rule. Abusing drinks and being thrown out of her mother's house triggered her rebellion years.

At the age of sixteen, she moved to California with her sister and faced a whole new kind of racism, in the narrator's words, "blatant racism" that "was so common, so much a part of everyday life, that people never even thought about it" (*ibidem*, p. 53). In the United States, she also encountered disregard, but this time, not only related to her own people, but also towards Mexicans, as can it be perceived in the following passage:

> Once, soon after I'd arrived in town, I went into this store and asked a white woman for the time. She just stared right through me; didn't say a word. So I asked some guy and he did the same thing. I began to wonder: "What's going on? Do I have leprosy or something?" Then the owner said, "Get out Mex. No one's got the time for you in here!" It finally

> dawned on me: "They think I'm Mexican and the racist bastards won't even give me the right time!"
> It would have been worse if they'd know I was Indian. (*ibidem*, p. 54)

Racism towards the Blacks, on the other hand, is said to be different. Unlike what happened with Mexicans and Indians – there would be certain reciprocity – when it came to the African-Americans there was not:

> There were just no good "niggers" in Visalia. Whites rarely passed a black man without saying something vulgar to him or his wife. There were always subject to racist attack. Not like the Mexican, who would be passed in the streets as if he wasn't there. I don't know how to say it, but with Mexicans and whites it was more like a reciprocal relationship whereas black people seemed to be subjected to a more one-sided racism. (*ibidem*, p. 55)

After having been exposed to blatant racism, it is on the peak of the *hippie* movement that Lee gets involved in politics. The narrator then depicts the blossoming of this woman whose faith kept her from overdosing or simply ending her life, as she claims "[f]ortunately, I never completely lost hope that there was some way to change all this shit around" (*ibidem*, p. 107). At times, she considered going back to school, but she declares it is as mechanical and demoralizing as working, so to enhance her vocabulary, she starts reading often. Among the works read were *Malcolm X Speaks*, and Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks*, which very much contributed to her political growth and awareness during her youth. Furthermore, it was by means of literature that Maracle shaped her own notion of Native self: she became a writer – whose empowerment and agency were directly connected to overcoming all she had been through.

In general, Native Canadian women have to deal with racism, and to learn how to cope with all the oppression the patriarchal system imposes on them. Moreover, besides the difficult life most of these women had to lead due to lack of opportunities, they were also victims of beatings by their husbands and of rape, so they abused drugs, alcohol and sometimes went into prostitution as a way to earn a living. As for that, Maracle, managed to write her way out of her "fate" as a Native woman.

So, taking into account that this autobiographical narrative has as main purpose to "enlighten" its readers, this work – even though it focuses on a single life – definitely encompasses many of the issues affecting women in Native Canadian societies who, in spite of their differences, also share similarities.

ABSTRACT: Considering the position of Native-Canadian women on the last decades, this article analyses Lee Maracle's *Bobbi Lee Indian Rebel* (1975), a work that denounces racism, invites readers to reflect upon it, and also contributes to Maracle's personal growth, as well as to her community's. Through writing and therefore denouncing prejudice, the author is able to externalize her feelings and opinion towards racist practices not only related to Natives but also to other minority groups. As a result, Maracle brings to herself and the Native community a way to deal with all the prejudice that permeates their lives.

Key-words: Feminine literature, Native-Canadian literature, autobiographical writing, Lee Maracle.

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[1] In Native culture, the earth is often referred to as a woman.

[2] The Residential School System was a practice aimed at Native Canadians. It started in the 19th century and pervaded until the mid-20th century.

[3] By other in this passage, I mean "not white, third world, from the South, colonized, lesbian" (SCHNEIDER, 2008, p. 24).

[4] Raven is a mythological character also known as a “trickster”.