

WHERE DO I FIT? *LEE MARACLE'S "BOBBI LEE INDIAN REBEL" AND LITERATURE*

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RESUMO

A autora nativo-canadense Lee Maracle é atualmente reconhecida como um dos grandes nomes da literatura canadense. Contudo, até a década de 70, muito pouco era dito sobre literatura nativa, e foi só a partir de então que obras de autoria nativa começaram a ganhar visibilidade. O artigo em questão lida com a primeira obra de Maracle, *Bobbi Lee Indian Rebel* (1975), problematizando a diferença entre suas duas edições (1975 e 1990), tentando trazer evidências de que esta obra pode, de fato, ser considerada literatura.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura nativo-canadense, Lee Maracle, *Bobbi Lee Indian Rebel*.

ABSTRACT

Native-Canadian author Lee Maracle is a renowned writer in Canadian literature nowadays. Nevertheless, up to the 1970's, very little had been said about Native literature, and only from then on, Native writers have gained visibility. The current article deals with Maracle's first work *Bobbi Lee Indian Rebel* (1975), problematizing the differences between both of its editions (1975 and 1990), attempting to bring evidences that this work can indeed be considered literature.

KEYWORDS: Native-Canadian literature, Lee Maracle, *Bobbi Lee Indian Rebel*.

The writer, poet and political activist Lee Maracle is a granddaughter of Chief Dan George, daughter of a Métis woman and a Salish man. Born on July 2nd 1950, she attended school up to the eleventh grade, when she dropped outⁱ. Despite having left school at such early age, Maracle became a writer and stated, in an interview to Jennifer Kelly, she stated that she had done all kinds of writing, but after 1988 she decided to become a serious writer (KELLY, Jennifer. Interview with Lee Maracleⁱⁱ. 1993, p. 73).

Lee Maracle started her writing career in the 1970's – an important moment to the rising of the literature of minorities – and, because of that, she is seen as a “pioneer of sorts” (*idem*) since right after the groundbreaking *Halfbreed* (1973), by Maria Campbell, her autobiographical work *Bobbi Lee Indian Rebel* (1975) was published. After that, Maracle has published several works of fiction, poetry and non-fiction.

Despite not having adapted to school, Maracle was self-taught and has received awards several times, including the 2000 J.T. Stewart Voices of Change Award and an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, and in 2009, an Honorary Doctor of Letters from St. Thomas University. Besides, she has held some academic posts such as the Stanley Knowles Visiting Professor in Canadian Studies at University of Waterloo, Distinguished Professor of Canadian Culture at Western Washington University, Writer in Residence at University of Guelph, Writer in Residence in the Aboriginal Studies Program at the University of Toronto and Traditional Cultural Director for the Indigenous Theater School in Toronto. She is also a co-founder of the En'owkin International School of Writing, a learning institute with an Indigenous Fine Arts Program and an Okanagan Language Program, in British Columbiaⁱⁱⁱ. All the awards Maracle has won, along with the positions she held in universities, show how determined she was to write and give visibility to the plight of Native Canadians.

THE 1990 AND THE 1975 EDITIONS OF *BOBBI LEE INDIAN REBEL*

The 1990 edition of *Bobbi Lee Indian Rebel*, the most cited and also the most easily found edition of this work, includes the complete text of the first edition, and is the one used

in this article. The 1975 edition, on the other hand, cannot be easily found, and perhaps that is why it is not frequently commented on.

In fact, while searching for a copy of the first edition of *Bobbi Lee*, it can be noticed that Lee Maracle's name is not the one on the cover. In fact, at times Donald Barnett's name is filling the space destined to the author alone, as well as followed by the word "Editor"^{iv} – showing how unclear the authorship of this work is. There is even a website in which the description of the book brings the author's name as Bobbi Lee – which is the name of the main character and narrator –, along with both editors of this first edition^v. Another website brings Bobbi Lee, Lee Maracle, Don Barnett, Liberation Support Movement and Rick Sterling as authors^{vi}. The point here is that the first edition and consequently the second were written collaboratively, as Maracle writes on the Prologue to the 1990 edition:

There are two voices in the pages of this book, mine and Donald Barnett's. As-told-tos between whites and Natives rarely work, when they do, it's wonderful, when they don't it's a disaster for the Native. Don never intended it to be a disaster for me. The first *Bobbi Lee* was the reduction of some two hundred pages of manuscript to a little book. [...] We had disagreements over what to include and what to exclude, disagreements over wording, voice. In the end the voice that reached the paper was Don's, the information alone was mine (MARACLE, 1990, p. 19).

This kind of work is called collaborative life writing by theorists Smith and Watson (2010), who state that we usually think of two people involved: the investigator and the informant; the first would be the one to interview and put together material from what was told, the second is the one who tells the story (p. 67). This seems to be what happened in the writing of *Bobbi Lee Indian Rebel*, as states Jeannette Armstrong in the Foreword to the second edition: "This book, spoken and then edited into written form, is reflective of the wonderful orality that the spoken version must have been delivered in" (MARACLE, 1990, p. 15). Originally, Maracle's life story was tape recorded as part of a life writing project sponsored by the Liberation Support Movement – a Marxist political group to which she belonged – which was entitled "Life Histories from the Revolution Series"; then, Don Barnett and Rick Sterling transcribed the 80 hours of tape and a manuscript three inches thick was edited – all of which became the slim volume under the title *Bobbi Lee, Indian Rebel: Struggles of a Native Canadian Woman* (1975)^{vii}. Before the publishing of her life narrative,

Lee Maracle had joined Barnett's group "[...] at the lowest level of their highly structured, centralist group" (*ibidem*, p. 221). On the epilogue of the 1990 edition, Maracle states:

It wasn't before long his structure, top heavy and undemocratic, began to weigh on the Native members and one by one left. I really tried to stay. It seemed ridiculous we could all have the same set of political principles and not be able to work together. I didn't realize then but the style of organizing that people choose is also intensely political. [...] [The] [t]aping and transcribing of *Bobbi Lee* had already begun and I left somewhere in the middle of the process of transcription (p. 221).

With the reduction of about 80 hours of recording and about two hundred pages of manuscript to a little book, it is clear that a lot has been left out. But the main issue is: what was the criterion to edit that material? Why were incidents deliberately left out by these editors? And was this edition out to benefit any of the people involved in the process?

In fact, while working on the writing of this book, Maracle claimed she didn't, she couldn't tell Barnett everything, there were too many obstacles in her path (*ibidem*, p. 19). Nevertheless, she also claims how much Barnett inspired her to get command of her voice, but because "[...] his idea of political struggle was riddled with arrogance [...], [she] jumped ship before [she] got too caught up in his style of organization with its centralist leadership" (*idem*). Besides, she criticizes much of his "white male narcissism that kept him arrogantly rooted in autocratic behavior [...]" (*ibidem*, p. 20). Still, she dedicated both volumes of her life history to the memory of Don Barnett (*ibidem*, p. 18).

BOBBI LEE INDIAN REBEL AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO LITERATURE

According to Professor Agnes Grant, "'Native literature' means Native people telling their own stories, in their own ways, unfettered by criteria from another time and place" (1990, p. 125). If we take this definition and try to apply it to *Bobbi Lee Indian Rebel*, we can say it is not Native literature. The intervention of her white male editors certainly did not allow her to say it all, or say it in her own way. Besides, this autobiographical work was intricately bounded to the time it was published: there was a crying need to make a statement about the situation of her people in the 1970s. So, many questions may come to

contemporary readers. Is this work not Native literature? Can it be considered Western literature? What is there of literary in this text?

On the one hand, Marta Dvorak, in her article “Yes, but Is It Literature?” (1995), posits that it is questionable whether *Bobbi Lee Indian Rebel* (1990) should be included in the literary canon. In Dvorak’s opinion, its “[...] linear time frame with conventional chronological markers (four months later, when the summer came, after we moved, by the time I was nine, for the next week or so...), and banal use of ellipsis, with no distinction made between diegetic time and narrating time” (2009, p. 23), show how much this work brought nothing new. Dvorak is actually right in pointing out all these elements from *Bobbi Lee*, and in fact, this work is absolutely straightforward (which can be understood as lacking any aesthetic appeal to readers), but still, this work was appreciated by readers so much so that it was re-issued and revised. On the other hand, Brazilian professor, researcher and theorist Liane Schneider, in her article “Entrelaçamentos entre o estético e o político na literatura de mulheres de grupos não-hegemônicos” (2006), has stated that Maracle, due to her life-history marked by oppression, wrote about her life as a way of self-organization to show resistance, not representing any search for “literary excellence” (pp. 179-80). Schneider claims that by questioning the literariness of Maracle’s work, Dvorak is also questioning those who read and study it (*ibidem*, p. 179). Besides, Dvorak’s perspective, just like the canon, can be thoroughly discussed, and in disqualifying *Bobbi Lee* due to its register and the lack of the author’s control over the narrative, the critic isolates it, making impossible its dialog with postmodern works, whose authors sometimes “lose control” over the narrative on purpose (*idem*).

This narrative is written in chronological order, telling Bobbi Lee’s life history from her birth to her early twenties. It is narrated in the first person and it can be said to fit the genre called *Bildungsroman*, that according to Eliane Campello in her doctoral thesis, *O Künstlerroman de autoria feminina: a poética da artista em Atwood, Tyler, Piñon e Valenzuela* (2003), consists of a narrative encompassing the learning, education of a character from his/her childhood to maturity (p. 25). Indeed Bobbi Lee’s formative years are depicted throughout *Bobbi Lee*, and considering that we are dealing with a representation of Lee Maracle, a writer who has published several other works of fiction and non-fiction, as well as articles in newspapers as the book mentions, it is possible to classify this work as a

Künstlerroman, a narrative that represents the figure of an artist or a work of art playing an essential role in the story, narrating (or not) the physical and psychological development of the protagonist or of any character (*idem*).

Even though the *Bildungsroman* has traditionally been considered as the novel of the development of a young man, since the 1970s, the female *Bildungsroman* has been recognized as a genre, a novel that comprises the development of a woman character (FUDERER, 1990, p. 1). Before the 70s, there have been several mentions to *Bildungsromane* of women, such as Mme. De Staël's *Corinne*, but the rise of contemporary feminist movement, in the last decades of the twentieth century, has contributed to the recognition of this genre (see FUDERER, 1990, p. 1-2).

According to Eliane Campello, the *Künstlerroman* is a German term for the novel of an artist, but it does not exclude the *Bildung* in it: it is possible then, to have a narrative depicting the coming-of-age of a character who is/becomes an artist (CAMPELLO, 2003, p. 25). Campello then defends the (most common) notion about the relationship between both genres: that the *Künstlerroman* usually deals with the blossoming of an artist, attaching then, the *Bildung* to the *Künstlerroman*. As stated by Mary Eagleton, with the renewed interest in the *Künstlerroman* authored by women "the female author is achieving a sense of her coming-into-being and her validity in what is represented as both a self-authorising and a wider social acceptance" (2005, p. 2). Nonetheless, some critics state that "[...] if individual development and integration into the community have appeared difficult for the female protagonist, the obstacles are greatly compounded when that protagonist faces racial prejudice in addition to restrictive gender roles" (FUDERER, 1990, p. 4).

Maracle's *Bobbi Lee Indian Rebel*, then, portrays the coming-of-age of a Native-Canadian woman author who, despite having to deal with (and overcome) all the prejudice and hardship she had gone through, was still able to use her writing and her political awareness as a great source of strength. As the plot unfolds, despite rebelling against "White" institutions and imposed ideals that still survived after colonization, Bobbi Lee tries hard to find her own self amidst all the turmoil of her life. Maracle's text does not follow Native notions about storytelling, since, as it is claimed by Paula Gunn Allen (1992), the Indian tends to view time as cyclical and space as spherical, whereas non-Indians see time as chronological, sequential and space as linear (p. 59). It is quite possible that Barnett and

Sterling have determined *Bobbi Lee*'s chronological order, and that the story should be told in a linear fashion. Even so, Marta Dvorak points out that the work brings a "lexicon of oral speech, colloquial mixed liberally with slang [...]" (2009, p. 24) showing the strong presence of orality – what can be seen as a representation of Maracle's nativeness.

More important than the structure of the narrative, the relevance of the period in which it was written is crucial. As Maracle underscores in the Epilogue to the 1990 edition, back in the 1970s, "[y]oung Native people from all parts of the province and the country were coming together, tribalism, the village focus was breaking down. [...] A ground swell, a tide, everywhere in the country little groups of Red Power youth were springing up" (1990, pp. 208-9). And she goes on:

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. By some sort of miracle, we recalled the response of Native people to their early civil rights movement. In our kitchens, those without television came to our house to watch the news from Birmingham and the young preacher, M. L. King Jr., that led his people to grand and glorious civil disobedience and somehow we all knew that this had everything to do with our own lives. Somehow we were all connected (*ibidem*, p. 209).

The time this work was first published is meaningful because the narrative itself has as its main purpose to denounce the appalling conditions Native Canadians were living in. This purpose, then, might have contributed to one's misreading the text as strictly political, with no contribution to literature whatsoever. Nonetheless, based on the historical panorama, *Bobbi Lee Indian Rebel* was a way (it might have been the only way, at the time) Maracle had to make a statement. As she was involved in political groups such as the NARP (National Alliance for Red Power) and the previously mentioned LSM, the urge to speak, be heard and perhaps help others with it was immense. Actually, this urge is added to the "void" in literature felt by Natives, that is, the lack of literary material available about them. So, even though Native works are often considered not to be literary, Grant points out that most of the critics' concepts and ideas about "good style" are actually framed on Western traditions (see GRANT, 1990, p. 124). Thus, is it fair to reduce *Bobbi Lee* to a political work, with no contribution to literature? And when we do so, do we take into account the fact that it was a collaborative work? It is very complicated to work with such a hybrid text^{viii}, literarily

speaking, and judge it from the eyes of either Western tradition or Native traditional literature.

There have been several attempts to define literature, and according to literary theorist Terry Eagleton (2003), it can be defined as “imaginative” writing, when it comes to fiction, but it is clear that there is much more in literature than just fictional works (p. 1). In fact, the line between fiction and non-fiction is too fine to use that as an argument to define literature. Eagleton, then, tries to define it from a different perspective, claiming it uses language in peculiar ways that differ from ordinary speech (*ibidem*, p. 2). So, if these two points raised by Eagleton were to be considered, *Bobbi Lee Indian Rebel* could not be literature in the Western sense of it either. It is not completely imaginative writing, nor completely fiction; and the issue of language differing from regular speech is actually what this work does not bring: the presence of this “ordinary” language, as if the narrator were speaking, actually telling the story, is one of the features that may lead readers and even theorists to link it to Native culture, as orature is predominant among Native people.

Luckily, Eagleton has established a definition which very much applies to *Bobbi Lee*, since he argues that:

Some kinds of fiction are literature and some are not; some literature is fictional and some is not; some literature is verbally self-regarding; while some highly-wrought rhetoric is not literature. Literature, in the sense of a set of works of assured and unalterable value, distinguished by certain shared inherent properties does not exist (*ibidem*, p. 9).

Eagleton goes on claiming that there is no “essence” of literature, once any piece of writing can be read “non-pragmatically” – that is, serving no specific purpose – as well as “poetically” (*ibidem*, p. 8), just to corroborate his position that “the definition of literature [is] up to how somebody decides to *read*, not the nature of what is written” (*ibidem*, p. 7). This power given to the readers, then, also opens up a place in literature for *Bobbi Lee*.

CONCLUSION

Such a broad definition then, was able to encompass what has been happening with literature ever since the 70s: the inclusion of several works into the realm of the literary. In

Canada, the great watershed moment was the 1967 Centennial of the Confederacy, which inspired nationalist feelings and “[...] witnessed an explosion in Canadian publishing of multiple voices trying to come to terms with their past” (DVORAK, 1995, p. 22). Ever since, works of minority groups such as Natives, Blacks, immigrants and women have started to be recognized and included in renowned anthologies of Canadian literature. In *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (1997), the first entry on letter A is “Aboriginal legends and tales”, soon followed by “Aboriginal literature: Native and Métis literature”, and “Inuit literature”, for instance. All the same, professor Liane Schneider (2006) comments on the fact that this recent visibility does not mean the literature produced by Native writers did not suffer with prejudice (p. 178). Marta Dvorak, for instance, claims the works of minorities are focused on content, have undeniable sociological value and very often helped to denounce the injustices done to minority groups, they usually don’t bring many new features, or much of literary^{ix}.

Even though *Bobbi Lee Indian Rebel* does not fit definitions of Native, or of Western traditional literatures, it is important to state that the concept of literature has been changing, and we now have room for works by Native writers in literature as well. Maracle’s *Bobbi Lee* might be seen by some as a cliché, and even nonliterary, but the point is that this work has opened doors to many other literary works by Natives, and, thanks to its political engagement it has encouraged many other Natives to share their stories, be it through fiction or non-fiction.

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ⁱ From: "Coming out of the House: A Conversation with Lee Maracle", by Jennifer Kelly. Available in: <https://www.google.com.br/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&ved=0CC0QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ariel.ualgary.ca%2Fariel%2Findex.php%2Fariel%2Farticle%2Fdownload%2F101%2F98&ei=wtXmUtS4BKjksATcqYGGdQ&usg=AFQjCNGagdeBQZdqL6GFwbys4VPw7DJxg&sig2=zWPfO_PY_BnM4whuj3fHgA&bvm=bv.59930103.d.cWc>. Last accessed on January 27th 2014.

ⁱⁱ From: "Coming out of the House: A Conversation with Lee Maracle", by Jennifer Kelly. Available in: <https://www.google.com.br/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&ved=0CC0QFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ariel.ualgary.ca%2Fariel%2Findex.php%2Fariel%2Farticle%2Fdownload%2F101%2F98&ei=wtXmUtS4BKjksATcqYGGdQ&usg=AFQjCNGagdeBQZdqL6GFwbys4VPw7DJxg&sig2=zWPfO_PY_BnM4whuj3fHgA&bvm=bv.59930103.d.cWc>. Last accessed on January 27th 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ All the content of this paragraph was taken from: <<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/en/article/lee-maracle/>>. Last accessed on January 27th 2014.

^{iv} Sites such as <<http://www.biblio.com/book/bobbi-lee-indian-rebel-don-barnett/d/5927422>> and <<http://www.amazon.com/Bobbi-Lee-Indian-Rebel/dp/B000PS8MN4>>. Last accessed on January 31st 2014.

^v From <<http://www.worldcat.org/title/bobbi-lee-indian-rebel/oclc/1878018>>. Last accessed on February 6th 2014.

^{vi} From <<http://www.isbns.im/isbn/9780919914629>>. Last accessed on February 6th 2014.

^{vii} Information taken from http://press.anu.edu.au/aborig_history/indigenous_biog/mobile_devices/ch09s02.html Last accessed on February 2nd 2014.

^{viii} By hybrid, I mean a text influenced by both Native-Canadian and non-Native cultures.

^{ix} While it is undeniable that Dvorak is a respected critic, her generalizing posture, evaluating *all* work produced by minorities as not “literary” is reductionist at best.