

Review of Doctoral Dissertation

Candidate: Mgr. Jana Marešová

Title of Dissertation: **Sky Woman, Trickster, Windigo: Reflections of Traditional Storytelling in Contemporary Canadian Indigenous Novel**

Supervisor: Mgr. Klára Kolinská, M.A., PhD.

Supervisor's Report:

Jana Marešová's doctoral dissertation is an outcome of the candidate's sustained, dedicated, and systematic research of many years in the area of contemporary Canadian literature and Indigenous studies. The candidate started developing serious interest in the subject area during her studies in the Master program, which resulted in successfully defending her Master dissertation titled *Putting Chopin and the Rez Together: Multicultural Features of Tomson Highway's Work*, in which she effectively combined her research and interpretive skills and applied them to both literary and music discourses representing two distant cultural contexts, which, in her discussion, came together in a meaningful manner and opened gateways for deeper and more thorough-going research in the future.

During her studies in the doctoral program Jana Marešová continued her research in the field of Canadian Indigenous studies, and focused her attention on the genre of prose fiction, and, within it, on the phenomenon of storytelling, which she perceives as: "an essential constituent of Indigenous cultures in Canada which transmits and preserves Indigenous knowledge and value systems". Her work has resulted in the presented dissertation, which examines the ways in which the practices of traditional oral storytelling are reflected in the works of selected contemporary Canadian Indigenous authors, and demonstrates how their texts are shaped by the cultural traditions of oral storytelling on multiple complex levels.

The topic of the dissertation is approached in a well-informed and minutely thought-out manner, resulting in a clear and well-arranged structure. The theoretical part is dedicated to an in-depth discussion of the concept of storytelling in Indigenous cultures; the author begins by describing the cultural functions of storytelling in the Indigenous context, and providing the genre typology of the stories. In the following section the tradition and practice of storytelling

is discussed within the larger framework of the “Indigenous worldview” – a minor objection may be raised here in the sense that the notion of the “Indigenous worldview”, is, at least at first sight, approached in a slightly too generalizing manner, which might partially obscure the immense inner diversity within the category in question. However, it eventually becomes clear that the author is well aware of the complexities of the concepts under scrutiny and of the dangers of cultural misapprehension. The author’s stance is already demonstrated convincingly in the preamble to the discussion, titled “Positioning,” which serves as a statement of intent, and determines the author’s position towards her material, and her interpretive perspective as a non-Indigenous person. While this may perhaps appear to be a mere rhetorical gesture or an undue acknowledgement of the obvious, in my view it manifests competent and insightful understanding not only of the literary texts in question and the corresponding theoretical premises, but also of the intricacies of the context of which they are an indispensable part, including the ethical ones. This kind of acknowledgement is a performative declaration of the correlation between the researcher and the chosen area of research, as well as that between different cultural contexts, in keeping with the principle or *relationality*, which the author identifies as the fundamental epistemological principle of this kind of work.

The author maintains that: “Indigenous lifeways and cultural practices across the world are grounded in epistemologies that value communication and relationality as a condition of existence,” and relates the premise to the practice of Indigenous storytelling, which is understood not as a mere pre-stage to written (and thus higher-level) literature, but continues to exist as an epistemological and discursive core of today’s communities, and informs their worldview. This positioning in the argument and its use for the interpretation of the prevalent cyclicity in the analysed stories, as well as for the explanation of the interpretive practice itself, motivated by the need of: “going back to the story repeatedly and gradually adding layers of meaning,” is, in my view, one of the strongest assets of the dissertation, and a point which, perhaps, might deserve some space in the discussion during the defence.

The theoretical and practical sections of the dissertation are bridged by a chapter focused on the discussion of the issue of cultural appropriation. The author starts with providing a historical background of appropriation practices, including forcible state policies, which have led to the suppression of Indigenous presence, and explains the: “correlations of colonial approaches to land and knowledge in which ownership of Indigenous knowledge is disregarded.” This is essential for understanding the current increasingly urgent: “call for

control over Indigenous representation,” and introduces the discussion of the following exemplary case studies. Among these, the “curious case of Joseph Boyden” is particularly illustrative in reflecting the many complexities of the ongoing debate – the author adopts a rather unusual, and, in effect, productive strategy in dedicating the chapter to the explanation why she decided *not* to include the discussion of Boyden’s novel *Three Day Road* in her dissertation, relevant as it may have been for her analysis of the windigo figure in the practical section, and uses the explanation, in my view convincingly, for demonstrating the outlined theoretical concepts in current, living practice. While this strategy can, indeed, be perceived as contentious, and a range of issues may be raised in this regard, it forms an inherently logical part of the author’s argument and methodology – and may perhaps constitute one of the points of the discussion as well.

The practical section of the dissertation is formed by three chapters focusing on the interpretation of several chosen texts of contemporary Canadian fiction by well-established Indigenous authors. The organizing principle for this part is provided by determining: “three characters significant and recurrent in Indigenous storytelling – Sky Woman, the trickster, and the windigo,” and observing: “the meanings created by their use in the narrative.” The author explains her reasoning behind the choices, and especially in connection to her discussion of the character of Sky Woman, one of the foundational characters in many North American creation myths, introduces her concept of “enstoried principles,” which she defines as “instructions” which are: “rooted within the story and form the core teachings of the Sky Woman story regardless of the version narrated.” The articulation of the concept of “enstoried principles” provides a meaningful, and a uniting referential framework for the discussion, connects its theoretical and practical parts, and represents one of the most noticeable contributions of the dissertation to the research field in question.

In this context, the author introduces another little-known concept: that of “Place-Thought,” which: “signifies the world’s or land’s animacy and agency and the inseparability of place and cognitive processes.” The concept stands in clear juxtaposition to the tradition of Cartesian dualism, proposing the separation of body and mind, and placing the latter hierarchically above the former. The concept of “Place-Thought” facilitates better understanding of some of the causes of cultural misunderstandings which mark the current debate concerning the place of texts by Indigenous authors in the canon of Canadian “national” literature and their interpretation by non-Indigenous readers and critics.

The reading of all three figures discussed in the practical section through the “enstoried principles,” relying nearly exclusively on texts of Indigenous criticism and theory, provides an innovative change of perspective, and creates space for an interesting and inspiring debate, including possible controversies and difficult moments.

For all the reasons indicated above, I declare that the presented doctoral dissertation meets all the standard requirements concerning both content and form and contributes in a valuable manner to the research in the field in question. I recommend it for defence with suggested evaluation of VÝBORNĚ.

October 29th, 2021

Mgr. Klára Kolinská, M.A., PhD.

Dissertation supervisor