

Posudek oponenta disertační práce Mgr. Jany Marešové
"Sky Woman, Trickster, Windigo: Reflections of Traditional Storytelling in Contemporary Canadian Indigenous Novel"

Jana Marešová's "Sky Woman, Trickster, Windigo: Reflections of Traditional Storytelling in Contemporary Canadian Indigenous Novel" examines the role of traditional storytelling in the work of contemporary indigenous writers such as Tomson Highway, Thomas King, Ruby Slipperjack, Eden Robinson and Waubgeshig Rice. The focus is on the figures of the sky woman, the trickster and the windigo; the main objectives of the dissertation are to probe "1) How is oral storytelling reflected in contemporary Canadian Indigenous writing? 2) In which ways do these three characters--Sky Woman, the trickster, and the windigo--contribute to the manifestation of orality in written texts, and what meanings does their usage create? 3) What are the specificities of Indigenous narratives informed by the oral tradition, and how do they differ, if they do, from Western narrative strategies?" (1)

Mgr. Marešová's approach to the subject is careful, considerate and systematic. The dissertation consists of an introduction, two theoretical/historical chapters, three chapters devoted to the aforementioned figures of the sky woman, the trickster and the windigo, and a conclusion. The text is eloquent and attentively edited, the choice of primary sources is always explained, the secondary sources are cited and employed rigorously.

The introduction and the first two theoretical/historical chapters, besides laying out the aforementioned objectives, consider a number of related issues, notably the notions of hybridity, adaptation, cultural appropriation and storytelling itself. For reasons explained in the dissertation, Marešová draws here (as well as throughout the entire dissertation) primarily on the work of critics with indigenous ties. She stresses the importance of situatedness in indigenous cultures, recalls various identity frauds, and also reflects on her own position by stating for example that "[t]he author acknowledges the right of Indigenous peoples to exert control over traditional knowledge and oral traditions and is aware of the fact that her readings carry the risk of violating this right" (8) or "I do not mean to clear myself of the fact that my work perpetuates the disbalanced and long-lasting approach to Indigenous texts in which mostly non-Indigenous critics assess Indigenous texts. Therefore, I would like to emphasize once more that seeking Indigenous voices and reading their views is essential and highly recommended" (9). In the context of her inspection of storytelling, Marešová offers a typology of indigenous stories and highlights the role of storytelling in the construction of memory, temporality, cognition and relationality (she argues, for example, that "[t]he teller [...] must feel the story and breathe in it their own energy for the story to be entertaining and appealing to the listener" [12]). Critics consulted in these chapters include Penny Petrone, Gregory Younging, Christopher B. Teuton, Simeon Scott, Suzanne Methot and Chelsea Vowel, among others.

In the opening passages of the fourth chapter--the first one focused on specific literary works--Marešová tells the story of the sky woman by way of a series of quotations from various indigenous sources (e.g. Thomas King's *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*, Sandra Laronde's *Sky Woman: Indigenous Women Who Have Shaped, Moved or Inspired Us* and "The Creation Story" as presented by Onondaga Historical Association). Subsequently, while discussing the importance of creation narratives, the author emphasizes differences between indigenous and Christian creation stories, and draws attention to the role of responsibility, reciprocity and creativity in their indigenous versions. She builds here significantly on the criticism of Vanessa Watts, Dwayne Donald, Tomson Highway and Thomas King, whom she cites as among other things arguing that "Biblical universe is hierarchical, competitive, individualistic whereas Indigenous world stands on values of egalitarianism, cooperation, and balance" (81). The remainder of the chapter is devoted to a close reading of Thomas King's novels *Green Grass, Running Water* and *The Back of the Turtle*, as well as Lesley Belleau's novel *Sweat*.

The fifth chapter opens with a review of critical debates that concern another character frequently present in indigenous storytelling: the trickster. The review again is well-researched;

references range from the "trickster criticism" (124) of Tomson Highway, Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, Basil Johnston, Neal McLeod and James (Sákéj) Youngblood Henderson to Gerard Vizenor (the dissertation pays considerable attention specifically to Vizenor's contribution). After discussing these authors' different views of the trickster's appearance, role and moral ambivalence, the author offers her own reading of the figure as one that "mirrors the complexity of human life and human character and that is why he is the most suitable teacher for humankind and also our relative. The trickster is evasive and manifold, manitou and humanly weak at the same time, clumsy and sacred, comic and dangerous, liberator and oppressor. He also inhabits all the spaces in between these categories since he is not dependent on binary oppositions. The trickster is a representation and embodiment of human power to transform and re-envision the world and a warning that such a crucial process must be done with vigilance" (122). The chapter then analyzes Ruby Slipperjack's *Weesquachak*, primarily the novel's eponymous trickster character, along with "the motorcycling trickster" (140) of Drew Hayden Taylor's *Motorcycles & Sweetgrass* and the protagonist of Eden Robinson's *Son of a Trickster*. The conclusion states among other things that "[d]espite demonstrating several postmodern features such as undermining normative values and Western modes of thinking, use of sarcasm and irony, and incorporation of popular culture, all the three novels discussed seem to convey the belief in Indigenous perception rooted in traditional concepts of interconnectedness of creation, relationality, and balance and they advocate human creative and transformative ability. Therefore, the trickster does not ultimately function there deconstructively but rather reconstructively" (155).

The sixth chapter moves to the "evil, horror-inducing creature" (157) windigo. Once more with references to authors such as Simeon Scott, Floyd Favel, Neal McLeod, Suzanne Methot, Margaret Noodin, Basil Johnston and Robin Wall Kimmerer, the author reviews not only how the character functioned as "a haunted and haunting demon in the old stories but [how the windigo] has been effectively transplanted to explicate the horrors of contemporary society" (164). This chapter likewise analyzes contemporary novels featuring the windigo character (specifically *Kiss of the Fur Queen* by Tomson Highway and *Moon of the Crusted Snow* by Waubgeshig Rice); in addition, three stories are discussed: Richard Van Camp's "The Fleshing" and "On the Wings of this Prayer," along with Leanne Simpson's story "gezhezahwazh." In all these contemporary works, it is finally argued, the windigo "represents the importance of values of reciprocity, respect, relationality, and responsibility. Despite being an evil entity, the windigo serves to emphasize these concepts by negative exemplification, showing what happens when one does not follow these values" (192).

Besides summarizing the main points of the dissertation and highlighting the continual importance of orality in contemporary indigenous cultures, the conclusion points towards lingering problems, notably the legacy of colonialism, the power dynamics between indigenous and non-indigenous cultures, and the ethics of research. Here it is emphasized again that: "The issue of to what extent a non-Indigenous researcher can study Indigenous cultures and on what terms has no clear answer either. Nevertheless, the core values of Indigenous epistemologies stressed throughout this work, relationality and respect, represent important guiding points for the study of Indigenous literatures" (194).

As someone not familiar with Canadian indigenous writing and the novels analyzed in the dissertation, I can only confirm that the dissertation on the whole appears to me as an interesting, thorough and thoughtful contribution to other studies that highlight the continual vitality of traditional oral heritage in contemporary indigenous literary works. My few questions for the defense stem mostly from the theoretical/historical chapters. Some of them are touched on in the dissertation already but could the author nevertheless elaborate on the following:

1) In the author's view, does the study of indigenous cultures by non-indigenous cultures always take place in the framework of cultural appropriation? Would she see this as specific to the context addressed in this dissertation?

2) It is argued that for the writers under review here, "implementing traditional storytelling is a way of self-expression, manifestation of continuance of Indigenous cultures, a way to cope with the legacy of

colonialism and to reconnect, and help others to reconnect, with their Indigeneity" (2). Can the employment of indigenous storytelling have other functions besides those mentioned (for these and other authors)? Also, since in chapter six particularly, it is stressed that revitalizing indigenous storytelling in contemporary indigenous writing has a decolonizing function, by what other means can decolonization be struggled for? And, in transition to my next question, could Marešová compare the role of storytelling in indigenous cultures, as outlined in the dissertation, with the role of storytelling in non-indigenous cultures, e.g. via Walter Benjamin's well-known essay "The Storyteller"?

3) Could the author perhaps elaborate on the following statement, providing specific examples: "Of course, there are many streams in the Western thought, some perhaps more attuned to Indigenous flux, and the characterizations described above are necessarily somewhat simplifying" (82).

4) Finally, given that "rougarou, Little People, Chahkabesh, and Sasquatch" (202) could have been addressed in the dissertation as well, what would be examples of contemporary literary works featuring these characters?

In conclusion, I recommend the dissertation for the defense. **"Předběžně klasifikuji předloženou práci jako prospěla."**

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Pavla Veselá, PhD.