

Posudek oponenta disertační práce Mgr. Jany Marešové

“Sky Woman, Trickster, Windigo: Reflections of Traditional Storytelling in Contemporary Canadian Indigenous Novel”

předkládané v roce 2021 na Ústavu anglofonních literatur a kultur FF UK

I. Stručná charakteristika práce

Mgr. Jana Marešová's doctoral dissertation focuses on the multiple and complex ways in which traditional oral storytelling of First Nations' cultures is manifested in contemporary (mostly 21st century) Canadian Indigenous fiction. The first two chapters introduce the theoretical concepts as well as contexts of traditional storytelling, the philosophical principles of Indigenous worldviews and, finally, the issue of cultural appropriation. The remaining, analytical chapters identify three characters/figures which feature as recurrent tropes in Indigenous traditional storytelling—namely the Sky Woman, trickster and windigo—and employ them as illustrative examples for a detailed examination of narrative strategies in several fictional stories, among them the novels by Thomas King (Cherokee), Tomson Highway (Cree), Ruby Slipperjack (Anishinabe), Drew Hayden Taylor (Ojibway), Eden Robinson (Haisla/Heiltsuk), Lesley Belleau (Nishnaabeg), Waubgeshig Rice (Nishnaabeg) and short stories by Richard van Camp (Tficho) and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Nishnaabeg). Marešová argues that the long-time tradition of Indigenous storytelling, although being modernized and even appropriated by contemporary Indigenous writers to suit their own purposes, continues to function as a fundamental component of contemporary Indigenous fiction, and its values are being integrated into both thematic and narrative structures as significant frames of reference.

II. Stručné celkové zhodnocení práce

The dissertation presents an important contribution to existing Indigenous studies scholarship and to Canadian literary discourse as such. While the debates on the significance and functioning of traditional Indigenous storytelling and orality may seem already slightly exhausted today, Marešová has managed to infuse this kind of research with new meanings and perspectives and, quite literally, re-map the territory for the 21st century. Above all, she has decided to ground her methodology primarily in Indigenous theories of storytelling and applies these theoretical underpinnings to contemporary, in some cases very recent and therefore yet thoroughly unexamined narratives. I find her discussions of the theories as well as the fictional narratives highly informative, well-organized and convincing in their conclusions.

III. Podrobné zhodnocení práce a jejích jednotlivých aspektů

Argumentation and methodology:

The first two chapters, which provide a theoretical context and conceptual background to Indigenous theories of storytelling, cover the basic definitions and explications of the most important functions and principles: relationality, spirituality, preference of cyclical time and balance-based plots, or using stories for theorizing. Some of these principles are later more specified and elaborated on in what

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Marešová calls “enstoried” principles, particularly reciprocity, relationality, responsibility and creativity (p. 75) which are identified as key elements for the examined narrative strategies. I am aware that these theoretical premises and methodologies may sound very distinct and ungrounded for scholars outside Indigenous studies but I believe that Marešová, while clearly writing from within the field and addressing readers familiar with the discourse, always manages to explain clearly the motivations and reasons for adhering to Indigenous theories. The section on classification of Indigenous stories demonstrates that using Indigenous terminology, however alien and unpractical it may sound to non-Indigenous scholars, offers a possible and relevant alternative (pp. 17-23). Having said that, I also believe that the research methodology and its justification, even though it is implied throughout the dissertation, could have been more pronounced in the Introduction.

While the issue of cultural appropriation is very important in Indigenous studies discourse and cannot be underestimated, the section dealing with two forms of cultural appropriation, namely appropriation of stories and the so called identity frauds (p. 53), may be perceived as slightly misplaced. At first I was not sure how exactly this particular section relates to the main focus of the dissertation, apart from emphasizing the risks of appropriation in the face of its long history and justifying the selection of primary materials (i.e. the Boyden case). Also, I find the focus on the two appropriation patterns (of stories and identities) limiting because there are of course many more or less nuanced cases of cultural appropriation (most notably among sports clubs, EuroIndians, New Age movements, etc.). Thus I perceived the author’s debate around cultural appropriation to be rather a part of positioning herself in relation to the research field (as is done earlier in the dissertation), in other words, *vis-à-vis* the debates which can no longer be ignored.

The analytical part presents a very competent discussion of the selected primary materials. I particularly highlight the creative and confident approach to presenting the three figures/tropes: the oral story(ies) of Sky Woman, for example, are re-told by using fragmented citations from different Indigenous sources, doing justice to the multiplicity and variability of Indigenous oral storytelling (p. 71). Similarly, “the trickster debate” is mapped with all of the nuances, complexities and controversies, including the the peculiar paradox of postmodernist attempts to confine and capture this unattainable element as a fixed sign of “Indianness”.

Formal standards:

In terms of formal, stylistic and bibliographic standards, the dissertation follows a consistent and transparent system. The system of referencing and footnotes is also consistent. The level of language and style is very good, save a few occasional typos or overlooked mistakes, which in a work of this extent is almost inevitable. Generally, the formatting, division into coherent sections and visual style are clear and easy to follow.

The usage of sources and materials:

The dissertation employs sources which are highly relevant and not outdated. The deliberate strategy of giving preference to Indigenous sources must be highlighted, given that in the field of Indigenous

studies this has become a norm. The range of secondary sources covers both established theoretical contributions by well-known Indigenous theoreticians (among them Vizenor, Heath Justice, Maracle, Johnston, LaRocque, Sarris and others) and the new generation of authors such as Deanna Reder or Christopher Teuton. In mapping and privileging such sources, the author indicates that she is very well aware of the multilayered debates around the history of silencing Indigenous voices; following certain protocols; the sensitivity of cultural appropriation and the demands of doing ethical research.

In terms of the selection of primary materials, even though at first sight the decision to include canonical Indigenous narratives may seem a little counterproductive because the critical scholarship has already exhausted that material, ultimately such selection can be justified because it proves the continuity of employing certain strategies across the generations of Indigenous authors. So the choice to combine in the analysis the work of established Indigenous authors, such as Thomas King, Tomson Highway, Drew Hayden Taylor and Ruby Slipperjack, with the middle generation authors such as Eden Robinson and Richard van Camp, and younger, emerging authors, such as Lesley Belleau and Waubgeshig Rice, makes sense.

Contribution to the scholarship:

The dissertation makes an original contribution to the scholarship in the following sense: first and foremost, Indigenous perspectives, concepts and principles are presented and employed wherever possible, often in juxtaposition or even contrast to the Western approaches, so that it is always clear how exactly they deviate from classic literary-critical approaches pertinent to our own cultural background. Here I want to highlight Marešová's careful explication of the reasons for frequent applications of particularly postmodernist and postcolonial theoretical perspectives to Indigenous literatures. While not refuting the influences of postmodernist discourse (e.g. in Gerald Vizenor's work), the dissertation always makes it clear that these applications must be made with respect and awareness of Indigenous discourse. I also appreciate the synthesis of relevant, diverse theoretical Indigenous sources (e.g. Heath Justice, Warrior, Maracle, Vizenor, etc.) that, I believe, cross the boundaries of the field of Indigenous studies. As a result, Marešová has conducted rigorous research and presents the results in meaningful and coherent ways. The originality of her contribution to existing scholarship also consists in the corpus of selected narratives which combines the classics of Indigenous literary canon with emerging authors and only recently published works – an approach that attests to the relevance of Marešová's central argument about the steady continuity of given concepts and frames of reference.

Questions for discussion:

1. The dissertation focuses on Canadian Indigenous fiction only. Can the author justify this focus and explain how would the theoretical premises and arguments about the narrative strategies change (if at all), if they were to be applied to contemporary Indigenous fiction as such, e.g., in North America? In other words, is there anything about the conclusions that is specifically 'Canadian' about them? In relation to this question, how would the author comment on some of the recent tendencies to anchor,

theoretically, a particular aesthetics and poetics within a larger field of Indigenous studies, through, for example, approaches such as Chadwick Allen's concept of the "transindigenous"?

2. In *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, Craig Womack has famously argued for abandoning the then dominant critical approaches to Indigenous literatures (especially postmodernist and postcolonial) as inadequate and advocated developing (tribal) critical models and research methodologies grounded in Indigenous theories, philosophies, worldviews. What has later become a movement can be, however, also interpreted as a call for cultural nationalism, if not separatism. Is this approach justified? Shall we, as non-Indigenous scholars and critics support such movements for cultural sovereignty, or rather insist on academic freedoms? Such a debate has very practical implications, visible, for example, in the demands to use terminologies grounded in Indigenous research methodologies: is it realistic and should we expect the scholars in the field employ such methodologies, as was illustrated in this very dissertation on the Indigenous typologies of stories?


3. How would the author comment on the implicit question of authenticity in relation to contemporary Indigenous cultural production? On p. 2, she reflects on the growing number of Indigenous authors, the diversity of their genres and styles, as well as an interest from the global readership – how do contemporary Indigenous writers respond to the demands of the book market and the publishers' and readers' expectations of what Indigenous fiction should be like?

In conclusion, I evaluate Mgr. Marešová's dissertation as complying with all of the standards (formal, stylistic, argumentative, theoretical and literary-critical) pertinent to doctoral research and PhD dissertation. The candidate has demonstrated a solid awareness of the relevant discourses and existing scholarship and proved her skills to conduct independent research, evaluate adequate sources while theorizing, analyzing, and synthesizing them. Certainly, some aspects of the dissertation could have been more elaborated on (for example a broader contextualization of histories of Indigenous cultural production and the developments in Indigenous studies over the time – but this can be added if a book manuscript based on the dissertation is considered), but I believe in spite of these minor shortcomings this dissertation would stand the test of international competition.

Therefore, I recommend this dissertation for passing.

Předběžně klasifikuji předloženou disertační práci jako *prospěl/a*.

In Brno, November 1, 2021



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