

The Transition—Feeling Out Loud ... By Writing

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Our great oral traditions were handed down very carefully in the background of family activity, clan gatherings and nation-to-nation negotiations. We travelled far and wide to examine our territories and the state of those environments. We devised a diplomatic language for boundary disputes. Land, water and other resources came with very specific words to create precise meanings, so we could maintain harmony with the inanimate and animate beings. Those action words provide flexibility to our way of thinking. Great respect ensued into caring and sharing.

Aboriginal writers are now coming forward with every type of literature. The question is no longer can we write our own stories. Of course we can. How we do this is the paramount question. Our oral traditionalists were cautious but optimistic. We would be faithful to their memories and their array of wise words. We can look at other writing systems that got their history wrong because of careless behaviour. Some countries hired writers to invent enormous lies to make themselves sound superior.

In songs and fictional stories, in particular, it is important to write the truth of the times you are attempting to elucidate. On this continent within living memory, certain groups of people were forbidden to learn reading and writing. Aboriginal people as children were told to forget their history. Their languages informed them of their cultural norms. Other groups were designated to poverty by socially and politically restrictive laws.

We can name a few writers that did this in an entertaining manner while writing about some awful truths.

Helen Hunt Jackson wrote the novel *Ramona* to give life and emotional depth to a clash of three cultures, the land-owning Spaniards, the incoming invasion of starving

Americans, Mission Indians and the Mestizos known as Californios. It is worth our time to consider the Treaty of Hidalgo, 1848. This was the secularisation of the Franciscan Mission communities: The process of drawing in and absorbing the Indians as a source of free labour in exchange for domestication. The Treaty loosened the hands of landowners enough to begin the process of losing their estates to the incoming Americanos. *The Homestead Act* of 1863 allowed usurpers to give preference to white incoming settlers by way of a simple land survey. This was done to undermine the Mestizos that were too many in number for American Indian policymakers. The battle still exists today. Except the Californios (the half-breeds) are now called Mexicans without American visas. Before there was a defined American and Canadian border in what is now Manitoba, *The Manitoba Act* of 1870 achieved the same process except for good measure John A. Macdonald saw to it by paper theft the loss of birthright to the land for all Métis children. Some Métis families were savvy to that form of theft. That issue still exists but it does not embarrass the Canadian government. It should anger somebody enough. We also have *The Indian Act* that disinherited as many Indian people as possible for the full benefit for settler state of Canada.

William Faulkner wrote several short stories about Andrew Jackson's policy of forcefully marching displaced Indian tribes across the Mississippi River, displacing every Indian out of their usual territories and creating genocidal food shortages. You have to read each line of the stories because you will miss that fact mixed in with the fictional storylines. "Absalom, Absalom!" seems like it's all about really bad sons and fathers gone missing or dead in the American Civil War. But one startling fact shaped as a question remains: Exactly who is left to run the plantations when all able-minded are dead or badly crippled? How about considering addled-brained sons and overwhelmed women with no male support except for their black workers?

What can we do to be engaging while dealing with the harshest truths? We do want our books read. I want to offer one short story set in the middle 1950s, when as a people we knew who we were but existence was denied by government policy at so many levels. It was written in the early 1970s when the Quebec government did every

trick from indifference to denial of the James Bay Cree of basic human rights. I had disposed all my papers; however, I have retrieved it from my memory because basic truths of consciousness are told.

The first story is called "Avalon Road." The road is metaphorical for a way to somewhere else or maybe it is the end of any way of meaningful life. The way the main character handles his life and his insights of his emotional states gives hope and choice to discarded people.

The second story, "Veronica's Dress" is about a character trait of an old Métis family. I used incidents from my early school life to allude to that perceived trait. I admired and liked these people even though they were different in their ways.

The third piece is a long story-poem written to discuss death and disruption of a stable society by drugs. Substance abuse brings chaos to an already marginalized people pushing them into prison so conveniently built for them. It also examines the emotional toll on Native policemen. The drug industry, the police services, the health practices of throwing prescription drugs into the caldron represent a high percentage of real tax dollars. I think our economy would collapse if we all went cold turkey. The crooks do not want to be caught and the security systems don't want them to get caught either. You can do a lot of discussion on a single poem.

The larger question in all these stories when did we ever consider ourselves so non-human as not to have basic rights?