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Isabelle Courteau

Louis-Karl Picard-Sioui

Jean Sioui

J. R. Léveillé

Rénée Olander

See next page for additional authors

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The Great Round Table: Writing The Land

Authors

Isabelle Courteau, Louis-Karl Picard-Sioui, Jean Sioui, J. R. Léveillé, Rénée Olander, Peter Schulman, and Virginia Pesemapeo Bordeleau

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“The Great Round Table: Writing The Land”

Introduction by Isabelle Courteau

Director of La Maison de la Poésie de Montréal

(Translated by Peter Schulman)

It was in June 2018 during the Montreal Poetry Festival. We had the good fortune of bringing together some incredibly informed artists, poets, and scholars to discuss a return to nature writing—a literary groundswell that has continued to grow and expand. This groundswell has been impossible to avoid, in fact, as it has surged under the auspices of ecocriticism and literary geography. Our discussion on the role of territory and ecology in contemporary writing gave voice to poets who have been reconnecting with their culture thanks to poetic practices that feature nature. In this transcript, admirably rendered by esteemed translator Katia Grubisic, you will discover some lively exchanges with Roger Léveillé, Renée Olander, Virginia Pesemapeo Bordeleau, Peter Schulman, and Jean Sioui, along with poet Louis-Karl Picard-Sioui who moderated the hour-long session.

Louis-Karl Picard-Sioui invoked Jean Sioui and his poem “Between Me and the Tree” explaining as he paraphrased it: “The tree is there so that I can love it and I was created in order to love it...(he) appreciates this concept that the tree is not just for me; I was, in turn, made for the purpose of loving it.” The poem restores human beings not as centers of the world but as being part of an interrelation with all life. In these exchanges we can discover many different points of view based on all sorts of life experiences. Renée Olander’s vision was particularly emblematic as she posited the human body itself as the ultimate territory.

Transcript: June 1, 2018, Olivieri bookstore, Montreal

Moderator: Louis-Karl Picard-Siouï (LP)

Participants: Jean Sioui (JS), J.R. Léveillé (JRL), R  n  e Olander (RO), Peter Schulman (PS), Virginia Pesemapeo Bordeleau (VPB)

(Translated by Katia Grubisic)

LP: Writing the land can mean a lot of things depending on historical, epistemological, or artistic perspectives. There's a resurgence of what we call nature writing, and trends like ecocriticism or literary geography. Let's talk about these terms. Peter Schulman, let me ask you first: what are we talking about when we talk about nature in literature in general?

PS: There's a lineage in nature writing, which goes back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to Rousseau in France, for instance, or, in the United States, John Mewes, who found spirituality in nature, before and during the Industrial Revolution. Many literary critics or philosophers today are examining the notion of ecology—for example Deleuze, who tries to understand the world from the point of view of nature and anthropocentricity. There's this idea that the world is destroying itself or self-destructing. It's deeply philosophical. But always very simple: how do we appreciate nature, which on the one hand is being destroyed while on the other hand evolving. In literature, there are many poets who are asking themselves these questions, with a great deal of commitment. Even in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the United States, nature writing was a wide field, with many interpretations. Whitman, for example, loves freedom, the spiritual and tonic aspect. Dickinson also broaches these themes, though in a different register. Today, there's Wendell Berry, a farmer who writes poetry and who's watching large farms

eat up little ones and asks how we can resist the takeover of small family farms by mega-farms. Poets enact a form of resistance through their work. Many philosophers talk about nature or ecology; I come back to the spiritual aspect.

LP: Some nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors had a romantic or even naive vision of the “savage”... Looking back, some of these writings seem dated to us now. We don’t think or talk like that today.

PS: No. For example, *Poetry* magazine did an issue on Native American poetry, and there was a total rejection of these stereotypes. These are other stories now, other exiles; identities are being redefined.

LP: There’s a real link between humans and their environment, what we see in our own landscape, how we can study or denounce the changes in that landscape. I want to turn now to J.R. Léveillé, who’s from the Canadian Prairies, a unique landscape of vast, flat land. J.R. Léveillé, how does that landscape influence you? Do you see it, are you in dialogue with the landscape?

JRL: Yes, in part. It’s less a question for me of writing the land than of writing the territory of writing itself. For me, it all starts on the page, with the actual writing. I’m not going out in the wild to be inspired. On the other hand, over time, writing has led me to see nature or landscape as was just articulated—as a spiritual relationship with what surrounds us. It’s true that the Prairies are vast. It’s a cliché, but it’s still true—the horizon

as far as the eye can see, the big sky... I had a chance to give this some consideration, and I noticed that Franco-Manitoban authors and artists have found an approach, which I call a “horizontal–vertical” approach, of furnishing that space, that expanse that can swallow us because it has no end... It’s a way of setting a kind of vertical marker to define the human presence in the landscape.

LP: Anchored in the landscape, like a beacon, or a landmark...

JRL: Yes, these aren’t things that are decided ahead of time. You don’t say, *I’m going to create a vertical dimension in the immensity that surrounds me*, but the practices of human beings have made it possible for them to rise up... We have to build a house somewhere, we have to live in our surroundings. The work of Franco-Manitoban writers and artists shows gestures made to inhabit this space, which otherwise has no identity, since it’s just expanding forever.

LP: I came across an article on Radio-Canada that quoted Jean Sioui: “*L’indien est un poète de la nature*”; Indians are nature poets. Jean Sioui, may I ask you to explain that thought?

JS: I was often invited into schools to give poetry workshops to children. I would suggest a theme and tell them to write about it. I realized that it was automatic: young people wrote about nature. It’s natural for them [Indigenous peoples] to talk like that. Even for me, nature isn’t a science project, it’s an experience. It’s normal for me to live like this.

My parents have had me surrounded by nature very early on. My grandfather was a guide, and he talked about what he had seen, his encounters, the beauty... I've never really asked myself about nature; it was there, I was part of it. Even when I was very young, I needed space. I remember writing to the government to ask for land in Abitibi because I'd heard they were giving out land there. I had a need for grandeur. I lived on a tiny reserve, and I couldn't imagine being confined to that. I actually went away to live with family on a farm to have more space. For me, that's how it flows: life, space... When I write, I don't force it, words come to me all the time. I don't do a lot of research. It comes naturally.

LP: By instinct. Animals, plants, water—they're everywhere in your poems.

JS: They're part of my community. I talk to the trees and to the animals because they talk to me too, they're alive. You just have to watch, see them, listen.

LP: There's a poem, "*Entre moi et l'arbre*," that says—if I can paraphrase—the tree exists for me to love it, and I was created to love it. I find that notion interesting, that the tree isn't just there for the speaker; the speaker in turn exists in order to love the tree. It's a symbiotic relationship.

JS: Right, The tree isn't just some hydro pole! It's alive, it's just as present as I am.

LP: Renée Olander, in the chapbook you gave me, there are a lot of poems about different places... I read that you were a child of the military. I was wondering how growing up in different places would influence your work?

RO: It did. Both my parents met in the Navy. I was born on a base in Corpus Christi (Texas) and then I lived in Detroit, where my mother was from, in a White community, obviously English speaking, Roman Catholic. Then we learned we were going to Honolulu and I was so excited, I was four years old, and I thought, *I can wear hula skirts and live in a grass shack!* So we flew there and I remember making circles over Oahu and it looked just like Detroit! It's a massive city! Before our Navy housing was ready, we lived for six weeks in the Waikiki Hilton on the sixteenth floor. It was really great! My father was in Vietnam, I was the second oldest of five children, and we would stroll down with my mother in Honolulu where there were male hula dancers jumping through hoops of fire, all kinds of foods.... I began kindergarten there and I really think that my literary imagination began there. As a kindergartener, the first things that I became aware of were the colonization of Hawaii and the imprisonment of Queen Liliuokalani. Also I began to learn Hawaiian. My first teacher was Japanese and we learned Hawaiian songs. I think it made me acutely aware of conquest, of both people and territory, and also of the relationship of language to conquest. For many years the Hawaiian language was outlawed. Then, after six years there, we moved to Virginia. Although it was 10 years after the forced integration of the public schools, it felt like it was right there. I had lived on the military base and my best friends were Puerto Rican, Hawaiian, African-American... This was 1966–67, my dad had a Black colleague with whom we had dinner

often, so I naturally gravitated in Virginia to reaching out to people of color. Some of the first things that were said to me were why do you talk so funny? I had consciously perched myself on the Hawaiian language as a fourth grader. Also one of the very first things I was called in VA was “n— lover.” It gave me much of an outsider sensibility. People ask me where I’m from and I don’t know what to say. I feel acutely empathetic to dislocations and oppressions.

LP: Virginia Pésémapéo Bordeleau, as we were saying earlier, you were first recognized by your work as a painter, for figurative work with these wide spaces, as well as with animals. In *L’amant du lac*, it’s interesting to see how present the landscape is, and more specifically the lake. From the very first page, it’s obvious that the lake has a personality. The novel opens on young Indigenous women watching and laughing at a young, White Métis boy on the lake. The women are betting on when he’ll fall in and drown. The natural object seems endowed with a will, which is close to the animist tradition of our ancestors. Did you intend to foreground the lake from the beginning? Is the face of nature a character in its own right?

VPB: Yes, it was deliberate. I want to point out that the title, *L’amant du lac*, also refers to him as the lake’s lover. When he dives again and again into the lake, he’s like a big penis making love to the lake. In the book, what I tried to do was make all of nature part of the entities that are loved by Gabriel, the Métis man, and Wabougouni, the Algonquin woman. I wanted nature to participate in those relationships, for the landscape to be sensual. In one striking image, I write (I’m paraphrasing), it is very hot, the young man

is alone on the lake after leaving his lover and wind lifts through the branches as if they were a woman's skirt, the leaves shaking with pleasure. Everything is thought out so that the characters become sensual, but also sentient. Like the lake, at the beginning, that tries to tip the boat. It's as if evil spirits at the bottom of the lake wanted to attack this man, whose blunder would go against his own tradition. He was raised by Whites, so it's forbidden for him to go join this woman who's already married and pregnant. So, yes, the lake itself is a character; some critics have even said that the lake is the main character.

LP: You bring us back to a sensual nature. The novel has been described as erotic, but, beyond eroticism, if we simply return to sensuality in how we talk about nature, how we talk about our instincts, about life, and therefore about reproduction—it's utterly natural...

VPB: Actually, the book in a way is reclaiming her body, because even if women today are liberated, the novel is set in the 1930s. What I meant in the book is that the body is the only territory left for us Indigenous people now that all our physical territories have been invaded. That's why she allows herself the freedom to have this love affair. She's married to an old man. Her grandmother pushes her toward the young man too because she knows she's going to die soon, and that her husband will die soon, and she wants to create a new bond, a commitment, to protect her in the future. She's a girl who's rejected by her community because she was born of rape (a priest raped her mother). The grandmother wants to protect her granddaughter so that she has a future—a future she knows is going to be managed by Whites.

LP to RO: We're talking here about territoriality. Often territories are colonized and the only territory left is our body. Renée, I was reading your poems and I found that they, too, talk about the body, the female body. You're talking with different approaches: how you are a tired of being a White woman, how men perceive you... Could you maybe say a few words on that?

RO: Well, I would say certainly there's a lot of relationship between the ways we—meaning the Western, Judeo-Christian civilization—have approached the earth and the body, especially the female body. So I think you're right, the body is the last territory we have, but it's also under siege, we have to figure out how to renew our understanding of ourselves and our place. It is the critical question for the future of humanity. How do we recognize what is sacred? I have a good friend who's an oceanographer who rants that, in the United States, so much more funding and curriculum is devoted to the study of outer space than to the oceans. We dump into the oceans these massive plastic fields and this is now coming back to us. I'm hopeful with the young people: they have claimed the territory of their bodies through all kinds of tattoos and piercings. I think it has to do with personal empowerment and ownership, what they can be in charge of.

LP: This is reminiscent of Vincent Franklin's work on "Pocahontas syndrome," referring to the way White men, by subjugating an Indigenous woman, seized territory—in a sense, conquering an Indigenous woman just as the land is raped to appropriate it.

PS: Pocahontas was from the part of Virginia where I live. Though no one ever talks about her.

RO: I must say also that Pocahontas is not the name that this woman was given by her community. That name means a potential traitor to the community. Her given name is Matoaka. In the neighborhood that I live in in Virginia, there is a street named Matoaka. It is a very wealthy street. I think most people in the cities where there are names of last vestiges, they just have no idea what territory they're in.

LP to JRL: We're talking about naming and I wonder, given that Franco-Ontarians live across a wide territory... In Africa, Asia, Europe, the average person speaks four or five languages, which provides a broader access to reality. In North America, meanwhile, we master only one language, which limits our access to what is real. In Manitoba or in Winnipeg, several languages overlap in the same territory.

JRL: Manitoba is very mixed. There are large Ukrainian, Russian, German populations. I want to point out that the idea of Franco-Manitobans as part of a Quebec diaspora is not at all accurate. French speakers in Manitoba include descendants of the Métis, Whites, voyageurs, coureurs de bois... Earlier we were talking about the men who took Indigenous wives and called themselves Métis: they were the first in the Red River region to qualify as a nation. They spoke French and several Indigenous languages, and also a mixture of the two called Michif, a mix of French and Cree. Then there are people who came from the St. Lawrence valley—not from Quebec, but from Lower Canada—to

colonize the region. There weren't enough of them, so they called on France, Switzerland, Belgium... The unique thing about French in Manitoba is its plurality. It's not a single offshoot of Quebec, it's a mixed Francophone identity. This may also explain why Manitoba writers aren't very consistent in their writing, because their sources come from everywhere. I think that's one of the things that makes Manitoba attractive. We say "Friendly Manitoba" because we're surrounded by others. The individual is always face-to-face with the other, which ultimately shapes his views about himself.

LP: If ecocriticism calls for a return to the land, then there is diversity in movement, in the renewal of elements and ideas.

PS: There is a renewal. It goes beyond observing or questioning nature. We have to acknowledge the vitality of nature, not as a center, but in dialogue, as synergy. There has to be a sense of urgency. I think ecocriticism currently isn't just a poem about nature that's beautiful and lyrical. It's the idea that there's an urgency right now, since the planet is on the brink of destruction. I'm thinking of the United States in the 1950s, when the rhetoric was so politicized and Manichean... There was such a political phobia, and now it's the opposite! All these threats are real and the government is trying to hide or cover up the dangers.

LP: We see that in Quebec too, we see it in Canada, with some extreme right-wing movements—the media here use the term "identity groups." We're going to mix up the identity groups and those who are fighting against them, which is a problem. The

movement is growing in Quebec and Canada, perhaps less than in the United States, but it's still present, since these groups are generally very vocal. As writers, especially as Indigenous writers, is it our responsibility or our duty to respond? When you see these reactionary social movements, coming from settlers, and Indigenous people no longer have a say... I've sometimes found myself participating in somewhat odd places, reciting militant anti-fascist poetry... I don't feel I belong there, but I tell myself someone has to do it, we have to fight these far-right movements. I turn to you, my elders: do you have any advice?

VPB: I've had similar experiences, and it's quite strange. I gave a lecture at Kingston Military College, and a professor asked me, "How do we save the land? Is it your responsibility as an Indigenous person?" I replied, "I think you're asking us a lot. First you took our land away from us, you treated us like less than nothing. You wanted to exploit Mother Earth. Obviously you didn't listen to us, we didn't have a voice. So I'm surprised you would ask me that. What do you want us to do? You haven't been hearing us for centuries. Indigenous leaders have been saying it for a long time, but you don't listen to them. And now you want us to tell you how to save the land you helped destroy?" It's so strange, I felt, like, despair... They also asked me if there is still time to save the earth. I said I thought there was not. I called on the young people in the room. I think we can only do what we can do. I went on to say: I hope you will find a way to dispose of plastic, for example. Don't ask us Indigenous people to do that, because everyone has to do their part to make a difference. When I was young, I was a seasoned politician, even if no one knew it. I fought to stop a factory from dumping mercury in the river. My husband

worked at the plant; he was the one who took water samples. One day, he said to me, “Virginia, they changed my results.” So I picked up the phone and called the Ministry of the Environment. I told them, “I think I found out why Crees have problems with Minamata disease.” Then they did something, the Ministry of Environment forced the company to set up a system to prevent mercury from being released into the river. No one really knew that I was the one who reported them. I think that’s the right thing to do. Now it’s harder, because even the government is crooked. They talk about the purity of nature, but then they destroy it to make money. We have to do what we can, in our own way. And cry! And write beautiful texts!

JS: Maybe I’m going to shatter your expectations of the “noble savage,” but you have to be self-critical... I remember going to a remote community, and people asked me if I had found the trip long. I told them I knew I was getting closer when I started seeing the chip bags and soda bottles on the side of the road. You can’t be a dreamer, you can’t think you’re better than everybody else. There’s a need for education in our communities. Personally, I’m not the kind of person who’s going to walk through town waving signs to save the planet. But I do it my way, by writing. In my next book of poetry, I write, “Don’t throw your waste into my river.” This line refers to a situation where the mayor of Montreal dumped waste into the river and tried to make us believe there was no damage. In another passage I write, “Water can see me.” I was thinking about the stream on my land. When I go fetch water, I go with a bucket and I put my hands in the water. The water touches me, and it sees me. I was thinking about when I was a child and we swam in the Saint Charles River... Today you can’t, because the water is brown. The water can

see me, but I can't see the water. That makes me deeply sad. Maybe I'm the only one who thinks these things, but I think other people will understand. Here's another anecdote: my best friend, Russell, is from Texas. We were always together, we were neighbors, his farm was next to ours. Another friend's son once told his father: I don't understand how Jean and Russell can be friends... A cowboy and an Indian can't be friends! I thought it was funny to be identified like that.

PS: Listening to you confirms the idea behind my review project, *Green Humanities*. At the outset, *Green Humanities* came from a desire to listen to the power of words. We believe literature can change the world. It's our chance to fight. I'm not a politician, but I know that we poets can influence people. Writing is our form of resistance.