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2013

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Citation of this paper:

Sumpton, Kathleen, "Education, Culture and Identity in Rita Joe's "Keskmsi"" (2013). *Representing Aboriginality*. 5.
<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/aboriginality/5>

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English 4050F

November 18, 2013

Education, Culture and Identity in Rita Joe's "Keskmsi"

In her poem "Keskmsi" which means 'ahead of myself', Rita Joe discusses the topics of education, culture and identity. Specifically, in the structure of the poem Rita Joe reveals that education, culture and identity are interconnected through the power dynamics of the oppressor-oppressed relationship. First, in stanza one Joe discusses systematic order in relation to education, Aboriginal culture as marginalized as well as her personal lack of identity. Joe builds on these concepts in stanza two with the recognition of her identity with respect to the oppressor and the oppressed. Lastly, in stanza three Joe concludes her poem with an actualization of her identity and culture through education. She achieves this by taking action and using poetry as a tool and claims that writing is her purpose. Rita Joe's poetry thus seeks to find a balance or a better equality between the oppressor and the oppressed.

In order to understand Rita Joe's poetry, it is important to also know about the cultural and personal background that influences it. Rita Joe is from Wycocomagh, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, Canada (Joe 17). Rita Joe gives her own account of her life in her autobiography *Song of Rita Joe*. She dedicates it "to [her] children and their children's children, and to all people who read about and identify with [her] life" (5). "Keskmsi" specifically addresses this statement by allowing people from multiple cultures access to her work, namely Mi'kmaq as part of a

marginalized culture and the English-speaking Canadians as oppressors. Rita Joe states in her autobiography that she came from a family of seven children and that two died while they were still very young (17). Furthermore, Joe had ten children of her own and discusses many of the problems that they had living in a non-Aboriginal dominated society (101).

The *Canadian Encyclopedia* also discusses Joe's early life, stating that she left her home on the island in order to attend Shubenacadie Indian Residential School. A news report from CBC made in 2013 involves an interview with another woman who was part of an experiment at the school in the early 1940s. Although it is not Joe's firsthand account, it relates to the experience she also would likely have undergone there. This was around the time that Joe would have been there also. The woman recalls being forced to eat rotten food, even if it made her sick (CBC 2013). Aside from using Aboriginal people as subjects for questionable experiments, residential schools were opened in the 1930s with another purpose, namely that of assimilating Mi'kmaq as well as other Aboriginal cultures into Western society (Tripartite Education Committee 2007).

Significantly, the effects of the residential schools are still felt today in the debates over reparations for day students (Walls 362). Martha Walls discusses how students in day school endured the same treatment as students who boarded there, and yet there is a debate on whether reparations should be made for them too. Indeed, she states that for both residential and day schools the policies were coercive and damaging to the student, and the government should therefore offer reparations to both groups. However, Prime Minister Stephen Harper's apologies, previously announced in June of 2008, to the students of residential schools do not apply to day students, and reparations are considered appropriate only for boarding students (Walls 362). The Prime Minister thus acts as an example of someone who wields the oppressor's power over a

marginalized group. As a recognized authority figure, Stephen Harper has an enormous amount of power and control over all residents of the country.

Another text that deals with residential schools is *They Came for the Children: Canada, Aboriginal Peoples, and Residential Schools*. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada writes in this text that what happened in the Canadian residential schools is horrible and embarrassing for both the students who attended them and their families, as well as the government of Canada and Canada's historical reputation. The effects are embarrassing because Aboriginals were denied the right to express their culture and they were also prey to sexual predators because of the lack of care offered in the facilities. Some students even report that they were kept from seeing their families for years (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1). Furthermore, the attempt to assimilate aboriginals not only takes away the students' right to express their culture but also reinforces the values of another, namely, a Christian one, since the schools were operated by nuns, priests, and other religious members (2). Interestingly, the influence of religion is still dominant in the public schools of Canada today because schools still play the national anthem in the mornings the lyrics of which favour the Christian faith with reference to God. Similarly, Canada also allowed the Lord's Prayer to enter the daily curriculum, and there are still recent debates on whether or not it should remain in public schools (McMahon 2011).

Isabelle Knockwood also discusses the experiences of the residential school system in her autobiographical text *Out of the Depths: The Experiences of Mi'kmaw Children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia*. She includes an account of her own experience as well as others in the form of letters. These contributions were written by students who attended the school and are therefore a direct source of the experiences such as Joe's poetry

and autobiography. Her book also contains reports on behalf of the parents who claimed that they lived in fear of the staff members because they believed that the priests in charge were raping their children. The fear addressed by the parents is directly addressed in Rita Joe's poem "Keskmsi"; it is the fear of the power that the educator has both in his or her professional occupation and role as oppressor. The control the authority figures had was so enormous that parents felt as if they had no choice but to subject their children to this treatment. There are also reports on the behalf of the children who claimed that they watched their parents walking away in tears after having to drop them off at the school (Knockwood 23). These reactions show that the parents also experienced oppression, a fact which reinforces the argument that reparations should apply to all students and their families because the oppression was so extensive and severe.

Although Joe did not begin writing poetry until the 1960's, it is evident in "Keskmsi" that her experience with education drove her to write about her life and express her culture through the medium of poetry. Joe's poetry is important and crucial for the Mi'kmaq people because some aboriginal languages are on the verge of extinction. Specifically, languages other than Cree, Ojibwe, and Inuktitut are all disappearing (Sarkar and Metallic 50). Indeed, Joe's poetry preserves Mi'kmaq culture in that it provides the Mi'kmaq perspective on their social, cultural, and political past. Mi'kmaq culture is also preserved through Joe's use of Mi'kmaq terms and phrases. When combined with English, the use of the Mi'kmaq language in the poem allows the material to be accessible not only to Aboriginals but also non-Aboriginal audiences. In effect, Joe is able to make her voice heard as an Aboriginal to members of the oppressor side of the relationship in order to balance the relationship and work towards equality.

The stanza structure of Joe's poem falls into a pattern that repeats multiples of three. For example, Joe's poem is 27 lines long, or 3 stanzas of nine lines each. The number three is thus multiplied by itself, or squared, and then that number is also multiplied by three. Additionally, when reading the poem, the reader realizes that each line is a complete thought on its own, but also every three lines together create a single idea or image. Read as a whole, each stanza represents a specific scenario and also shows a progression of time. Specifically, they are all written in present tense but their tone can be interpreted as a progression from unawareness to potential for awareness, to actualization.

The first stanza opens with an image of an educational institution and then suggests that Aboriginals exist in marginalized cultures. The stanza is also concerned with the issues of order and Joe's lack of identity. The poem directly addresses Joe's experience in the educational institutions of Canada by presenting her educator as her oppressor. In her article "Mi'kmaq Children's Perceptions on Education" Kim Critchley states that "The infusion of cultural identity into the learning process is required for robustness in education and health," (Critchley 218). This concept can be related to the opening of "Keskmsi" because Joe is not being infused with a cultural identity and hence is not achieving a healthy state in her education. For example, the title, translated as 'Ahead of Myself', refers to Joe's identity. In other words, because she has yet to realize who she is and where she fits in in the world, her identity is somewhere ahead, waiting for her to actualize it.

In the first stanza we also see that Joe's cultural identity has not yet been fused with her education because she does not understand what the teacher is saying (4). Her misunderstanding of what is being said to her reflects both the tension of oppression caused by forcing aboriginals to assimilate as well as the language barriers that exist between the teacher and the aboriginal

students, barriers which are emphasized by the word “contact” (5). Critchley maintains that Aboriginals do not do well in the educational system of Canada (218). This idea is evident in Joe’s poem as well, specifically in the limited terms used in the first stanza: for example, in line five the term “stubby pencil,” and in line seven “small words,” as well as the phrase “ones I know” in line eight. These terms are reflective of her identity as belonging to a marginalized culture. They also reinforce her statement that she doesn’t understand what the teacher is saying because she only knows *some* words. Indeed, Joe states that her “stubby pencil makes contact / With a scrap of paper,” (5-6), a statement of fact which seems to emphasize her small and inferior position in relation to her oppressor.

Finally, in the last line of the stanza Rita Joe discusses the topic of order (9). The connotation of the word can reflect the order of institutions such as schools, governments and societal order. The concept of order connects education, culture and identity because they are all concepts that require a specific order within society. Specifically, Mi’kmaq were regarded as a threat to the societal order established by the non-Aboriginals, and their identity was therefore targeted and controlled through residential schools. The authority of her teacher reinforces the desired order of society, namely of those who are in power. Alexis Wright discusses education in her novel *Carpentaria* in the character of Kevin. Specifically, Wright maintains that Kevin must go to school because, for Aboriginal people to succeed, they must be educated. By education, Wright implicitly means a non-Aboriginal educational school system (Wright 15). Kevin’s character relates to Joe’s because both of them are subject to the societal demands imposed upon them by the oppressive culture.

Stanza two also discusses the topics of identity with respect to the oppressor and the oppressed. In this stanza, Joe begins to discover her identity through the non-Aboriginal

education system she is participating in. More specifically, stanza two deals with the recognition of her identity, but it is not until the third stanza when Joe reaches the actualization of her identity. First, the alliteration of 'my' in the words "myself, my head, my heart," in line 14 emphasizes the moment at which she comes to recognize this identity. This is further emphasized by the 'h' in the words "head" and "heart" because these are places of the body we associate with our two most vital capacities, namely the mind and the soul. In the following line, "The fear lessening," (15) suggests that Joe is no longer as afraid as she had been at the beginning of stanza two when she described herself as "[t]imid" and "trembling" (11) in front of the authority of her teacher. In this stanza some contact has been made between Joe and her teacher, emphasizing the contact made between her pen and paper in the first stanza (5-6). Indeed, the progression from unawareness to awareness is evident in this direct contact where the teacher reads the poem that she has written (16).

Pedro Tabensky discusses the nature of power dynamics in his text "The Oppressor's Pathology." Tabensky attempts to show that the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed is based not just on moral issues but also on psychological ones. He states that "the distorted relationships between oppressed and oppressors lead to and are partly a consequence of widespread mutually reinforcing psychic pathology on both sides of the oppressive divide" (78). In other words, the relationship is two-sided. I argue that Joe recognizes this fact in the second stanza and has become aware of how her culture, education, and identity are connected through the power dynamic.

Another text which discusses the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed is *We Were Not the Savages: A Mi'kmaq Perspective on the Collision between European and American Civilizations*. In his text, Daniel Paul tells history from the perspective of the Mi'kmaq

people. In one important section, called “The Struggle for Freedom,” Paul relates the perspective of the Mi’kmaq to a poem by Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy’s “What Then Must We Do?” written in 1886 reads,

“I sit
on a
man’s back
choking him
and making
him carry me
and yet assure myself
and others that I am sorry for him
and wish to lighten his load by
all possible means—except by
getting off his back.” (Paul 291).

This poem reflects the difficult struggle the Mi’kmaq have had in trying to overthrow the oppressor. Specifically, the “I” in the poem is the oppressor, the focus of the piece, and the other person in the poem is like the Aboriginal. In addition, lines 8-11 state that the oppressor acts as if they are not in fact being oppressive and that they will do everything, except, of course, relinquish control over the Other. Tolstoy’s poem relates to Joe’s poem because she has recognized her identity as a member of the oppressed and the power dynamics present but has yet to do something about her position in relation to her oppressor.

In the final stanza of the poem, Joe has not only recognized that the relationship between the oppressor and oppressed is two-sided, but she has decided to take action. Indeed, in the first line of the stanza she states, “I’ve caught up with myself,” a line which relates directly to the poem’s title “Ahead of Myself.” These statements reveal the theme of progression in Joe’s poem as well as the theme of identity. Indeed, her identity is no longer ahead of herself because she has recognized it as part of the power dynamic present in the oppressor-oppressed relationship. The following line, “That is why I am here” (20), reveals that the purpose of her writing is to make

the voice of the Mi'kmaq people heard. The third line of the final stanza, "Poetry is my tool," (21) emphasizes that writing is her way of taking action and that this is part of her identity. This line of the poem reveals the actualization of her identity because she is doing something with the knowledge she has acquired in the second stanza.

The theme of voice through the medium of writing can be related to other texts by authors concerned with aboriginal issues, namely Margaret Orbell's "The Maori Tradition" and *The Sapphires*, directed by the Australian aboriginal artist Wayne Blair. Both these texts suggest that, for the aboriginal people of Australia, singing is a way of dealing with grief and of participating in the struggle against the oppressor. In the film *The Sapphires* singing American rhythm and blues songs is more than just a form of entertainment for the four girls performing for the troops in Vietnam. After Martin Luther King's death, it becomes clear that it is a symbol of the struggle against racism. Orbell shows in her text that historically Maoris engaged in song to demonstrate their triumph over their circumstances (Orbell 8), just as Joe does in her writing (Joe 21). Orbell also maintains that for the Maori song is a means of assertion in times of hardship, an affirmation of the human will, and capacity, to survive adversity (Orbell 9). Rita Joe enacts this concept of voice in her poetry, particularly in the third stanza of "Keskmsi".

Towards the end of this third stanza, Joe states, "I create as I go," (22), and here she seems to be claiming that she will write poetry throughout her life and speak out about and for Aboriginals. This is evident in her autobiography *Song of Rita Joe*, which is divided into different segments of her life from childhood until late adulthood. Furthermore, the last section is left as a cliff-hanger because Joe does not want to end her tale until her death. Lastly, in line 26 of the poem, "and you too may 'do,'" the word "do" can be read as Joe's way of stating that other Aboriginals or other members of oppressed groups can also speak out. In addition, because

the piece is written for both Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals, Joe allows for the “you” of this line to apply to non-Aboriginals to speak out as well. Referring back to line 25, Joe is telling the reader to remember her struggle and that other Aboriginals or members of a marginalized group can also overcome the boundaries created between the oppressor and the oppressed.

Moreover, Joe plays with time in the final stanza of the poem in order to reveal the progression of events that led up to this moment and that the sum of these events is greater than each individual event because of the result, namely the discovery of her identity. Specifically, the present is referred to in line 23 as “now”; the future is suggested in line 24 as “tomorrow” as well as implied in the line 26 as “may”; and the past is referenced in the middle of these two in line 25 in the word “remember.” Joe’s discussion of the present and future in the final stanza emphasizes her recognition of her identity and her desire to continue to produce literature in order to create awareness in others.

As I stated previously, Joe’s poem follows the pattern of three, a significant motif in Western literature. However, she states in her text *Lnu and Indians We’re Called* that in Mi’kmaq culture importance is placed on the number four because it represents balance and unity, internally and externally (Joe 70). Specifically, Mi’kmaqs believe that the sun is the origin of life and that there are four primary colours: red, yellow, blue, and black. Interestingly, Western culture does not classify black as a colour but sees it rather as the absence of colour and not a positive. So why does Joe write her poem to follow very closely the pattern of three? This structure can be as a deliberate action on behalf of the author. I argue that Joe means for her text to operate within both aboriginal as well as Western culture because she writes her piece in such a way that appeals to both. The poem is also written in English as well as Mi’kmaq, a technique which makes the piece available to both cultures.

Unity is lastly evident in the term “Lnu” from the title of the text in which “Keskmsi” appears. Specifically, “Lnu” from *Lnu and Indians We’re Called* means ‘Mi’kmaq.’ The title implies a recognition that Rita Joe as well as other Aboriginals are called two things: a term they identify with and a name they are given by the colonizers. The title is therefore another example that her writing operates within both cultures.

In conclusion, Rita Joe’s “Keskmsi” reveals that education, culture and identity are implicated in each other through the power dynamics present in the oppressor-oppressed relationship. From the first to the final stanza Joe discusses how her culture and her education affected each other from the moment her teacher perceived her as the Other in the oppressor-oppressed relationship. In addition, she discusses how her education then influenced her identity because it allowed her to recognize her position in the oppressor-oppressed relationship. Joe’s poem “Keskmsi” can also be read as a text that operates not only in Rita Joe’s own culture and reflects her experiences as Mi’kmaq but also in relation to Western culture. Indeed, the unity of these cultures reveals Joe’s purpose in life, which is to create awareness in others for a harmony of all cultures.

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