Margery Fee, *Literary Land Claims: The “Indian Land Question” from Pontiac’s War to Attawapiskat*

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Margery Fee. *Literary Land Claims: The “Indian Land Question” from Pontiac’s War to Attawapiskat*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2015. 326 p. ISBN: 978-1-77112-119-4. CA\$ 38.99

- 1 If we believe that literature and culture are intimately entangled, if we believe that to read a literary text without attention to its historical, social or cultural context is invalid, then the central pressing question is how we identify and describe the relationship between text and context, the mechanism or process by which one reflects, conforms to, or is shaped by the other. This is an issue that all literary critics face. But it is particularly cogent for critics of colonial, postcolonial and Indigenous literatures where a central tenet of the reading experience is a recognition of the power relationship between the writer and the society they inhabit.
- 2 In *Literary Land Claims*, Margery Fee addresses this problem as she sets out to trace the ways in which a group of Canadian literary texts lay claim to – or fail to claim, or confuse or pervert the act of claiming – the central ground of Indigenous colonial and postcolonial complaint, land. In doing so she chooses not to confine herself to colonised or Indigenous voices but instead demonstrates, with as wide and contrasting a scope as possible, the ways in which a diverse group of authors and variety of forms of literary discourse deal with the issue of land possession, alienation, and stewardship. Her examples range from the 1830s to the 1990s, from the formal genres of published fiction and poetry to speech transcripts, oral performance, and recorded reminiscence.

- 3 Fee's first chapter deals with John Richardson's *Wacousta*, the bogey man of Canadian postcolonial literary criticism, generally used as a pat demonstration of racist stereotypes of the "Red Indian" as savage and primitive. Fee reads this and Richardson's other novels as far more intricate and inclusive accounts of the complex and shifting relationships of the period. Her next focus is the trial transcript of Métis leader Louis Riel – a markedly different kind of text from the rest of the book, rhetorical rather than literary, one constructed in terms of the immediate audience rather than a future readership. Fee then deals with Pauline Johnson, Tekehionwake, the "Mohawk poetess." She examines Johnson's actual performances onstage and the more metaphorical performance of her public persona throughout her career – as journalist, poet and short-story writer, collector of legendary material. What counts as "authentic" in these diverse and hybrid contexts?
- 4 Fee's next choice is almost deliberately provoking on this score. Grey Owl, actual name Archie Belaney, was denounced as a fake but popularised an environmental accommodation between human and natural world he claimed to have sourced from his association with the Indigenous world as well as from his reading. Fee asks whether the invented nature of his claim to origins affect the content, even the authenticity of what he argued. And with her final choice, Fee brings her discussion into the near-contemporary with Wendy Wickwire's transmission of Sylix storyteller Harry Robinson's oral narratives, modern, lively adaptations which adjust traditional forms to contemporary agendas.
- 5 Lurking behind these subtle, flexible and immensely informed readings is the uncomfortable problem of Indigenous literary criticism, that of identity, authenticity, or, put crudely, blood. Fee writes, "I believe that no one has a pure or innate identity. Identity is always produced through discourse, law, social convention, and embodied experience and then anchored by the belief that authentic identities exist – impossibly – outside power relations." Grey Owl is an obvious case study of this conundrum but so is Johnson. With Mohawk father and English mother, she was Indian in the eyes of Canadian law but not in the Mohawk matrilineal system. Hence her negotiations with the received stereotypes of late colonial Canada, her strenuously constructed persona in her writing as interpreter of one side to the other. In her transmission of the legends of Vancouver from Salish Chief Joe Capilano to the readership of the local newspaper and magazine culture of European British Columbia, she suggested that mainstream Canada could access remote and, as she pitched it, truly authentic material belonging to a vanished past.
- 6 *Literary Land Claims* is not just bedded in Canadian history and Canadian literature; it situates its argument within the critical conversations of Canadian literary and scholarly world, Indigenous and non-Indigenous. The introductory chapter in particular includes a very personal account of the author's relationship with her material and with Canadian nationalist literary modes – the latter difficult to critique in a settler culture where one wants to celebrate the severing of the bonds with the mother country but at the same time to recognise the suppressed narratives within the nationalist success story. Part of the energy of *Literary Land Claims* comes from its registrations of and at times confrontations with current local critical conversations and debates that surround these authors and the issues they bring with them. To a non-Canadian reader such as myself these discussions can at times feel a little inward-looking and self-referential. There are many places in this book where I noted highly

suggestive parallels – and contrasts – with the context I know best, that of colonial New Zealand. And yet it is the specificity and the range of detail that grounds Fee's discussion so magnificently. It is a problem for colonial literary criticism: how to strike a balance between the particular histories of a particular place, and the desire to construct a general argument about the colonial literary world, linked as each part is by not just membership of the political and social networks of empire, but also by the English literary canon. It is to be hoped that Fee's work, its content but perhaps more specifically its methodology, will be taken up by critics in other locations in the former empire, settler and non-settler.

AUTHORS

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Jane STAFFORD is professor of English at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. She is the author of *Colonial Literature and the Native Author: Indigeneity and Empire* (2016), the co-editor of *The Oxford History of the Novel, volume 8, the World Novel to 1950* (2015); the co-editor of *The Auckland University Press Anthology of New Zealand Literature* (2012); and the co-author of *Maoriland: New Zealand Literature, 1872-1918* (2006).