

FLETT

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By

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## ABSTRACT

This creative thesis examines and explores the point of first-contact on Turtle Island: the Eastern Coast of what is now known as Canada, now named Newfoundland and Labrador, through a braided poetry/prose narrative of three different cultures and times. The Vikings landed near L'Anse-Aux-Meadows in the early 1000's, the Beothuks were last seen in the 18th century, and today's cod fishery has been on a moratorium since the late 1980's/early 1990's. An assortment of the few recorded Beothuk words which have survived are also incorporated into the manuscript.

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For my family, especially my Bestefar Marvin

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## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

*In the title of this essay I ask, "Who speaks for extinct nations?" In conclusion I answer,*

*"Nobody and everybody."*

— Carl Leggo, "Who speaks for extinct nations? The Beothuk and narrative voice,"

*Literator* 16 (I) April 1995:31-49

Appropriation, and misappropriations, of voice are a troublesome topic. In his essay, as in other readings I explored, Carl Leggo points out that the Beothuk are often portrayed by the white male descendants of the white males who caused their extinction in the first place. Does being female, and only somewhat white, give me "carte blanche" ("carte rouge")? Although I am descended in part from Vikings, and my family tree contains French, Irish, and Aboriginal family members past and present, none of them are, to my knowledge, Beothuk. As is the case for most people writing of them. Mostly we can conjecture at an imagined people, or as Leggo puts it:

There is nobody to interrogate the ways they are re/presented except the people who choose to re/present them. The Beothuk are the silent Other, unattainable, unknown, transcendent, no more than a trace remains. It is easy to mythologize and fictionalize and make them in any image we want — they are a blank and clean slate, a *tabula rasa*. (38)

Although this dubiously lets authors off the hook in terms of audience, it still weighs on the conscience, and certainly there has been a longstanding history in

colonial Canada of the Aboriginal voice being misappropriated and misvoiced; to sing only one note, that of created stereotypes which prop up a two-dimensional caricature of “the noble savage,” something I was conscious of resisting, while trying to portray the imagined people in this work. As Leggo notes,

The Beothuk will always be silent. They will always be the object of another’s description and narration. They will always remain marginalized, oppressed, victimized, subordinate. The Beothuk will never be the subject of their story-making. They will never speak or sing or write in their voices of resistance and opposition and challenge. They will never reclaim their identities or reconstruct their memories or reaffirm their understanding as the Beothuk, the People. (40)

Like the statue that stands sentinel in the woods at Boyd’s Cove, “Spirit of the Beothuk,” all we can do is mine our imaginations bolstered only by the few facts that we know, the environment they knew, and the voices that whisper in the wind, what Leggo quotes as Lee Maracle’s description of the ability that allows us to hear that “our grandmother’s voices are still alive and in this room.” (39)

Once a character has appeared to you in your searching and your listening, your job as a writer is to follow it and keep out of the way as much as possible, to ensure you are liberating, not oppressing, voices (Leggo 39). Or, as Leggo quotes Joy Kogawa:

What matters is that you listen to the voice that calls you, whether it comes from the bottom of the well, or whether it comes from the distant stars, whether it comes from your community, whether it comes from within your own heart, whether it comes from your neighbour or from your mate, or whomever it comes from, your calling is to respond to the voice that calls you. Fundamentally, that response is the response of love, so that the writer’s role is no different than any other human being’s role, which is fundamentally to love and to respond to the voice that cries out to you. (Kogawa, 1990:96-97.)



It is my humble hope that I have listened to each character in love and respect, with response to their voices, and the limited knowledge I have as a human being of any others, whether it be life experience or landscapes not intimately known.

These critical questions informed the writing of *Flett* (a Norwegian word meaning 'braid'). I love words, poems, languages, and stories, and exploring their physical and cultural environments. This work explores the East Coast, in particular northern Newfoundland, in both the distant past and near present times, from three different cultures and vantage points, employing a poem/prose hybrid, a variety of voices, a translation component, and a threaded narrative in each strand.

Each section contains one of a few hundred Beothuk words recorded a few centuries ago, when speakers still existed in a small and dwindling remnant. This meagre list of random phonetically transcribed words and vague definitions is all that physically remains of their people and their nation. The pages alternate between three separate time streams, formatted as a visual cue to readers as to which time stream they are in. The Beothuk vocabulary word is not only more faded in the contemporary time stream, but also employs an ochre colour in the Beothuk time stream.

The Beothuk strand is dedicated especially to Shanawdithit, the last-observed Beothuk person, a young woman who became a Newfoundland housekeeper closely examined and interrogated as a curiosity by employer William Cormack. She would

die of tuberculosis in her late twenties, June 6 1829, last known survivor of the first wave of First Nations genocide that would continue through the centuries, in the colonial pursuit of land, wealth, resources, and dominion.

This project was an opportunity for me to explore historical and contemporary times, parallels, and intersections, given my heritage and family tree, which includes Irish, Norwegian, Métis, Cree, French, and Mohawk.

*A.L.*

*Shallow Bay, Cow Head, Newfoundland*

*July 2013*



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