

“Among the Word Animals”: A Conversation with Marilyn Dumont

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Volume 29, Number 1, Spring 2004

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl29_1int01

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Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Andrews, J. (2004). “Among the Word Animals”:: A Conversation with Marilyn Dumont. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 29(1), 146–160.

Article abstract

Marilyn Dumont discusses the influence of her Cree and Métis ancestry on her poetry, with particular emphasis on the women who raised her. Stereotypical notions of the role of the Aboriginal writer, and misconceptions about the nature of oral tradition have both had their effects on the reception of Dumont's writing. Personal disclosure in poetry can have an important normalizing effect, alleviating the shame that often accompanies close observation of one's psyche and family. Dumont has developed a flexible sense of writing as ritual, quite apart from the communal rituals of Catholicism and Aboriginal belief with which she grew up.

“Among the Word Animals”: A Conversation with Marilyn Dumont

SCL/ÉLC INTERVIEW BY JENNIFER ANDREWS

MARILYN DUMONT, who is of Cree/Métis ancestry, has published two critically acclaimed volumes of poetry, *A Really Good Brown Girl* (1996) and *green girl dreams Mountains* (2001). Her work has appeared in numerous Canadian literary journals and been widely anthologized. She is the recipient of several awards, including the 1997 Gerald Lampert Memorial Award from the League of Canadian Poets and the 2001 Alberta Book Award for Poetry. A graduate of the University of British Columbia’s MFA program, Dumont has been a writer-in-residence at the University of Alberta, the University of Windsor, and most recently at Massey College, University of Toronto. This interview was conducted on 10 February 2004, the morning after Dumont read at the University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, as part of the Department of English’s annual reading series.

JA In your latest poetry collection you included a section called “Among the Word Animals” in which you explore the complexities of the English and Cree languages. Could you talk a little bit about your relationship to both?

MD Well, yes. Cree was the language that my parents always defaulted to. If it was something serious they spoke in Cree. If they were trying to comfort one another or one of the kids they would default to Cree. It was the language where you spoke about really important things.

JA But without teaching you how to speak Cree?

MD But without teaching us. The thing is, the sound of the language is part of that child, part of me, in the sense that when I hear it, Cree really can be quite haunting and can take me some place way back.

JA What motivated you to include Cree in your poems?

MD Well, it was partly my childhood experiences, but the other thing was that I wanted to ‘walk my talk’ if I was going to try to find some way of using Cree as part of my work.

JA Are there specific poems that you’ve written for a particular group of people whom you want to see and read these poems?

MD I’m thinking of the poem “That Tongued Belonging.” I guess the audience for that poem is people, like myself, who didn’t learn their own language. But the poem also addresses Cree speakers, who presumed that people like me who didn’t speak the language were inadequate or lesser; they assumed that if you didn’t try to learn the language it was because you’re ashamed of your language. So I think it was likely speaking to both groups.

JA What place does history have in your poems? Are you writing back to official versions of history or do you see your poems as creating new histories?

MD I think it’s certainly writing back to the history that I learned, but it is also a way of creating a new history too. The interesting thing about stories is that we think we write story based on something that’s happened in our past — it is a process of recollection. But it’s interesting what happens, because when we write stories we create worlds, and this is what I really notice in my family. Even though I’m the youngest, everyone comes to me now for stories.

JA So the pressure is on?

MD Well, I don’t think it’s so much the pressure. It’s just that I find it really fascinating. For some reason I’m the one who knows things.

JA You’ve become a resource for your family, which can be very empowering.

MD Exactly. Yes, that’s exactly it.

JA I think that would actually be a really good position to be in. Do your siblings read your poetry?

MD Yes. I mean they’ve read — I think they’ve read my books [*laughs*]. I hope so, but maybe they haven’t. I don’t know. But I’ve never really sat down and asked them, what do you think of this poem? In some

ways it's kind of scary. I don't really want to know what they think of some of it.

JA Especially because there are some very personal poems?

MD Yes, and they're family.

JA How much of your poetry is autobiographical?

MD I feel like it's all autobiographical.

JA So it's a way to talk about family, and a way to talk about identity.

MD And, I guess, to come to terms with that. The poems are one way of exorcising a lot of shame. One thing I've learned throughout this whole process is just how debilitating shame is, and it's not one of the emotions we associate with being most powerful.

JA And it doesn't get discussed.

MD It doesn't get discussed, exactly.

JA In your poetry, you explore the idea of being Métis and in particular, being visibly different. In *Really Good Brown Girl*, when one first opens the book, there's a picture of you and your mother. Where did the photograph come from, and why did you include it?

MD In the sixties there used to be people who would make money on the city streets by taking a picture of you and then trying to sell it to you. That's how we got the picture. I think the picture really illustrated for me, more just in the physical relationship, how large my mother looked and how small I looked. It gave the sense that she was there protecting me and how innocent I look and how vulnerable to shame we are as children.

JA Is the child in the photograph aware of the power of shame?

MD She's aware of discomfort, but she's not entirely aware. She has internalized it, but she doesn't realize yet it's not all her problem. Some of it, sure, is personal kind of dealing with it, struggles. But she doesn't realize yet the majority of it is just to do with the world we live in.

JA The poem you read last night about your father, "Ghosted," was a really fascinating poem for me. What do you mean by ghosting or ghosted?

MD I grew up hearing about ghosts. My parents didn't actually say

spirits, they said ghosts, but when they said ghost I knew they meant spirit. I certainly was aware of that world — the intangible world. There's that aspect of it, but the other was just a sense of loss, a sense of grief, and a sense of estrangement.

JA What's the relationship between your Catholic upbringing and whatever Native beliefs or spirituality that were also part of your family life?

MD Well, it's really interesting because the Catholicism that I grew up with was all formulated into doctrine. You could read it if you wanted to. You always heard it verbalized in the songs. But the Aboriginal part, the Native religion or belief that I grew up with, wasn't formulated in doctrine but it was equally present. It was equally present in the way my parents behaved and in the way that we always went down to Lac Ste. Anne. It was excusable if you missed Easter Mass, Easter Sunday, but it was not excusable if you missed Lac Ste. Anne. People will say what kind of traditional belief did you grow up with? Well, I can't put that into words. It wasn't a story. We didn't sit around in the wintertime listening to stories. It wasn't that. It was something that was quite different but very real.

JA That must have made you a lot more aware of the limitations of writing.

MD Well, yes. The other thing too is there's this misconception that — and I felt this for a long time too — if I didn't grow up with an actual story, then, somehow, I was deficient in my Nateness. That is really screwed up, because, if you think about it, if it's an oral tradition, I'm not going to come away with stories that I can narrate as if I had read them in a library.

JA For you, what relationship is there between poetry and song, and are there other modes of performance that you're interested in?

MD Well, I really envy musicians because they have that guitar. They can strum along for a while and engage you, but I think it's the sound of voice, even without words; just a chant can be so profound, so chilling. When I think about hearing the Cree hymns that were sung at the pilgrimage I can just hear a few bars from those hymns and it's just, whew, I'm somewhere else. Not just somewhere else, I'm in another world — even the sound of voice without words can provoke that response.

JA Which poets influence your writing? You mentioned Jorie Graham last night. Are you reading other Native poets? Other female poets?

MD Yes, I would say mostly other female poets. Sharon Olds is someone who has really influenced me, I guess because of the courage with which she was willing to look at things in her own family and her own psyche. I think there's a real power in saying some things because it normalizes, and it alleviates shame, for one thing. I pick up everything. Once you've read so much poetry you want to find some new voices. Basically, with any woman poet that I don't know I'll pick it up and look through her work. I find that I always want to know more.

JA Do you work with a writing group at all?

MD Yes, I usually do. With my first book it was the MFA program, and then with my second book it was a group of women that I met with in Vancouver. I am still in contact with those women. Some of them are published and some of them aren't published poets. I think for the first two books it was really critical for me to have those kinds of workshop situations. Now I feel like I'm OK with working with one other poet. And I prefer to work with women.

JA Because of your interest in other women poets, do you find yourself writing back to, or dialoguing with these authors?

MD Yes, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton, Zora Neale Hurston are just a few....When I think about those women, particularly Zora Neale Hurston — I've read a lot of her work — I think it's almost like she and I grew up in the same town. It feels like that. I feel like I can talk to her. I feel this real affinity with her.

JA That's interesting. Hurston for the most part is known for prose, so what you're suggesting is that you are reading across genres quite comfortably. Your poetry seems to be experimental in form, and many of the poems are what you might call prose poems. Is that something that has happened over time or have you always written that way?

MD Yes, it's happened over time.

JA What's the motivation for it?

MD I guess experimentation. There was a time when I just thought, how do I say some of the things I have to say in the English language, which I find limiting. It's English, and I'm talking about things to do

with an Aboriginal worldview, so how do I do that in a single language? For me, it's been through trying to find a different form or being able to use my voice in a different way and then trying to put that on the page. Form has become another language for me.

JA You're very careful about the layout of the words on the page.

MD In the workshops I've done, I always find it really interesting that people don't think about form very much. It's a poem, OK, so it looks like a poem. We line it up on the left margin and there it is. It's a poem. Why is that a poem? And then other people have asked me, why do you set it up like that? Why is your poetry set up the way that, say, some of the poetry I've written isn't? I've said to them, if you think about your voice as putting marks on the page it would be like painting a page with your voice, and then it has made sense to them. But before that, people ask, Why do you do this? Is it arbitrary? Do you just decide that looks pretty there, and that looks really pretty there?

JA There are lots of assumptions about what poetry looks like. It must be hard as a poet because there is almost always a gap between the way people read poetry and the way the writer intended it to be read.

MD Yes, but when I think about it now I wonder why there ever was a division between poetry and prose? It seems to me we've spent the last however many hundreds of years trying to tell people it can't be defined. At some point an artificial divide has been created, and somehow you're supposed to know the difference between poetry and prose. It's really weird how we've spent so much time and energy telling people it can't be defined, but yet we continue to define it.

JA It's partly academics wanting to set boundaries.

MD Oh, definitely.

JA Poetry that is less easily defined may be less easy to sell, which makes it tricky. What has your experience been with publishers and editors?

MD I think overall it's been very positive. My second book was much more difficult to publish, and I know that the market at the time had a lot to do with it.

JA Meaning what?

MD It's just that the market was plummeting economically, and so it was really hard to find someone who would publish poetry. I think,

also, my first book was a lot more politically charged, and when I sent out my second manuscript people were looking for the first book even though maybe they didn't say it. Maybe they weren't even conscious themselves of what they were looking for in the book that they didn't find in my second manuscript.

JA You were saying that there is the sense that you have to write a politically charged poetry in order to be marketable.

MD Well, I guess what it does is, it makes one realize just how artificial publishing is and necessarily so — it's a business. Yes, definitely, that's been there. Also, with my second book I think I was more consciously withholding my politically charged persona in a way.

JA Are there publishers who are starting to challenge those stereotypes more?

MD Yes, I think they're starting to more. Aboriginal writers were new to the whole publishing industry, so I think publishers have matured.

JA And they are looking for work with more complexity and depth, rather than the political agenda, which I think is what readers tend to expect: this is how Native writing is supposed to be, which can be really frustrating.

MD Yes, it's frustrating. As I say, with the opportunities I've had, I've been very fortunate. Even though some of it has been frustrating, that's really nothing compared to people who don't get anything published at all.

JA Absolutely. Have you thought about writing fiction?

MD I've written a story. I don't know how short it is — it may not be a short story. It may be a lot longer than I really want it to be.

JA It could be a novel.

MD No, don't say that. I'm just curious about fiction. I mean, how do you do it? ... It's a different kind of writing.

JA And a more sustained single work.

MD My biggest fear of writing fiction is that I'm going to be imposing a larger vision, but you have to in fiction.

JA It's much more plot-driven.

MD Much more plot-driven, yes. I'm always wondering with fiction writers, what is too much imposition of my own will on this piece. It's a really hard thing for me to get my head around. OK, how do I do this stuff? I feel relatively comfortable with writing poetry because I know it's ambiguous, and I feel OK with that, but fiction is just like uhhhh ...

JA There's a lot more flexibility in poetry.

MD Yes, there is. Even in the process of working you can work the full-time job and still write poetry. It will take you a little longer to get a collection together again, but you can still do it.

JA And is that typically how you've written it?

MD Yes, it has been.

JA What are you normally doing? Are you normally teaching while you're doing that?

MD Well, let's see, what have I done? I guess it's been a little bit of teaching, a little bit of student services work. And then also film production. I haven't done any film production for a long time, but I'm thinking of doing something again. I've actually got a couple of film projects that I return to when I can.

JA What kind of projects?

MD Well, one thing I have on tape is some footage of my mother. It was a project I started probably in 1991 or 1992 where I wanted to explore the relationship and the difference between my mother's life and my life. In some ways there were some similarities, but in some way there were vast differences in her life. My mom married at eighteen, and she had ten kids, forty grandchildren, and thirty great-grandchildren. She's passed on now. Then I looked at myself: not married, no children, went to university, got two degrees. My mom went to school until grade six. So, you know, it's just an incredible difference in our lives. I'm exploring that. I did some video footage and audio footage of my mom, but I haven't worked on it since, and I want to finish that.

JA Besides the video, what other projects are you planning?

MD Well, the other project I'm thinking about is interviewing people who are descendents of Gabriel Dumont and exploring how they know their history. What's the relationship to their history now? I'm

interested in exploring those kinds of things, I guess, because of the kind of odd way I came to know my history.

JA Yes, because you were saying a relative ...

MD Yes, a sister-in-law —

JA ... had found out about your connection to the Red River Métis and specifically, Gabriel Dumont. It's interesting because it's often talked about now in biographies. When you read a biography of Marilyn Dumont that is something that's mentioned right away, and yet it sounds to me as if it's something that is quite peripheral, in your mind, to your identity?

MD Yes, right. That's the other thing that happened with marketing my first book. When I was new to publishing I had no idea how foregrounded that heritage would be in the whole marketing of my book. Now I would be much more careful to ensure that that didn't happen.

JA You didn't have much control over that first book.

MD Well, the thing is I could have, had I known more about publishing, right? But as I say, publishing is a business.

JA Well, you tend to trust that the people you're working with will do what they need to do.

MD Well, and I think Brick did what they needed to do. I don't begrudge them for it. We sort of assume that we know people, based on certain things and so that was an assumption, a profitable assumption, for a publisher to make. Now I'm thinking I might as well take advantage of that [*laughs*]. I mean it's like everyone else has written about Riel or Gabriel Dumont, but I haven't. I've been careful about how I approach that subject because I wanted my poetry to be looked at more than my heritage or connection to Gabriel Dumont, although I'm very proud of that. The kind of documentary thing I want to do is just exploring. How did you find out that you were related and what does that mean to you and how has that affected your life? I think there appear to be some interesting answers to that.

JA Oh yes. Especially given the changing perceptions of Louis Riel.

MD And it will differ from generation to generation just because of that. But I'm really curious how it's affected other people's lives.

JA Is humour part of your poetry?

MD Well, yes. I think it is a real rhetorical strategy. It's being kind of sly, kind of tricksterish. It's the way to point at prickly kinds of issues and to get at them through humour. I guess it's one of the most powerful ways, though I don't want to say easiest way to get to people, but it's pretty powerful, and I think it maybe has to do with gender in terms of who uses it.

JA What do you mean by that?

MD I think women use it. Who was it? Somebody I was reading said, "If a man says something he's a man of ideas, if a woman says something, she's opinionated."

JA I've seen that. I think it was in the newspaper ...

MD John Kerry's wife.

JA Yes.

MD And I thought that's really true. I mean, my mom was extremely sarcastic, I think brilliantly so, and I think I learned of that from her. It's interesting because the women of her generation had to find other ways of being able to say something without alienating themselves, and I think this is one of the ways that my mom did it.

JA And a way that was accepted within the local community and within her relationship with your father.

MD It must be a cultural thing too, because I notice that when I'm with a Native crowd the women are quite often making fun of the men and can do it in a very kind of sarcastic way. It's something that's kind of admired — a woman who can undercut something that's been said. There is this kind of wrestling that happens. I think it's cultural, the joking, the kind of competition between men and women about who can be the wittiest and undercut the other ones. As I say, my mom was very good at it.

JA So you had a good teacher?

MD I had a very good teacher.

JA So that was something you would describe as being part of a childhood experience?

MD Yes, I mean she was very spirited and she had a wicked tongue. [*laughs*]. It was really her strength. It was great.

JA So within your community there was a lot of joking behind closed doors.

MD Yes, absolutely. Actually, in this film footage I have of my mother we've gone home to visit her aunt, who actually is younger than my mom. Her aunt married a man who was quite a bit older than her. There are these two elderly women and me, and we go into this room, it's like a bachelor suite, and my mom's aunt has this little single bed. So we're sitting at the kitchen table, on some chairs sort of facing the bed, and there are these women. My mother is in her eighties and this other woman might have been in her seventies, and they start talking in Cree and pointing at the bed, making dirty jokes and laughing in way that is both playful and acknowledges their sexuality. And it was a moment that was both outrageous and poignant for me — it reminded me of these women and their vitality, their community, their ability to find humour everywhere.

JA Your poetry deals quite effectively with pain and shame through humour, but you even use it to tackle econological issues, especially vis à vis pollution.

MD Yes, and the other thing I criticize is our complicity in it.

JA Absolutely.

MD Yes, our complicity. I think we kind of pride ourselves on our individual freedom and our ability to act independently. But at what cost? We may care but ...

JA To the degree that we don't have to act on it.

MD Yes, yes, right. And we would like to do something about it but we also know that we won't.

JA One of your poems I really enjoyed was "Circle the Wagons," where you talk about the construction of the circle as this stereotypical way of talking about Native time.

MD The use of the circle to talk about Native time is really superficial.

JA Absolutely.

MD Well, and I guess it goes into that whole pan-Indian thing too. All Indians are Plains Indians and all Métis are Red River Valley Métis. It's just so erroneous. It's just lazy.

JA Assuming one size fits all. The other thing I was thinking in relation to space and place which is something you talk about quite a bit, is your poems which pay tribute to cities and in particular your poems about Vancouver. There, when you talk about individual streets — you talk about Hastings and Main, you talk about Powell, you talk about Robson — I was curious about what led you to write those poems? What's the significance of those streets?

MD Well, they're boundaries of class and race. Why did I write them? Well, I guess one of the things I had thought about was recognizing that the first book has this kind of nostalgic sense about land and about nature. At some point I realized I'm not ever going to go back to that, and I don't want to because I like the city. I've now lived in the city probably close to twenty-five years of my life, and that's what I know. I'm going to write about where I am and my connection or disconnection to it. That's why I wrote those poems about Vancouver. I think those poems really demonstrate how alienated and how foreign I felt there. It's a beautiful city, but I just don't feel any connection to it.

JA Were they places you had been to and responded to personally?

MD Yes, definitely.

JA Ok. So it was through living in that space for a while and thinking about how you were interacting with it. It turns out, as a city it was alienating, but cities in general don't sound like they are alienating to you at all.

MD True, this is true. Yes, I don't know why. I know what it was. I had spent ten years in Edmonton and it felt like it was home and then I moved to Vancouver. That was dramatic and I think those poems reflect a time in my life when moving about was a pretty dramatic shift. Now I've moved so much ...

JA You are aware that being on the road is constantly dramatic or not dramatic at all. It sounds actually like it's not much of a transition anymore.

MD No, it doesn't feel that way.

JA The shock is probably going home?

MD Well, and the other thing too is, we talk about globalization, but somehow we feel it happens out there. It doesn't happen to us. But the more I move around the more I talk to people the more my own ex-

perience about moving around is very common. So, there's an example of how globalization is affecting us personally. I could go to several cities now in Canada, and I feel relatively at home because I've been there before. I've walked the streets, and I know people. I have friends there. To me it's really interesting how that happens.

JA Well, and then home becomes a much more nebulous space.

MD Yes, exactly.

JA Can you talk a little bit about the poetry you're writing now, including some of the poems you read last night. For example, "The Breed Women Who Raised Me." Where did that come from? Do you see it as being part of a section or just an individual poem?

MD I think it might be just an individual poem, but I'm not entirely sure. There's one other poem I read quite often with it, which I didn't read. I guess the whole thing about "The Breed Women who Raised Me" is trying to get at what we just talked about: the really strong and powerful Native woman — that image of my mother. Put her in a situation when it was mixed company of men and women, and she was very adept at playing these vocal games. She's a very strong character and a strong individual. I guess I want to try and get at that through the poem. Just how colourful and funny and tenacious and courageous those women were and are.

JA And to make a link probably between the past and the present. My sense of that is that you're a representation of that next generation. You're out there carrying on those traditions, in a different way, but still doing that.

MD It's interesting you say that, because I think it's really true. I think of myself now, I'm forty-eight, soon to be forty-nine and not married, no kids, and I often feel like this anomaly in the situation. Who is this woman blabbing on about things? You know what I mean? Yet I really do identify with those Cree women who raised me.

JA Well, in a way though, even if you're not individually raising other people, you're out there reading, and in a way that has impact. I mean, for example, there were a lot of students in the audience last night who are quite young. They're in their early twenties and they're listening. They're going to go away with a different vision, I think, of Native female identity.

MD Yes, that's true. Yes, that's interesting. Yes, that's true, that's really true.

JA You probably forget what impact you might have through readings and through other things where people are reading their material and maybe you're not raising them in a personal, private space but more public space. It's a different kind of value, but it's not meaningless.

MD This is really interesting because I think I've transferred the maternal instinct into the residences that I've done. I really love it. I love meeting with students one-on-one. Also, with my student-services work at university I feel like the coach, the mother. So I guess that's really met that need for me.

JA Do you go back to do pilgrimages at all?

MD You know, I tell myself every year I'm going to get there and then something comes up — something like work and I need the money — so I haven't been able to get there. It's certainly something I don't want to eliminate from my life. It's more for the cultural and spiritual part of it. At the same time, those women were outrageous and might be very explicit, you know sexually; they were also extremely spiritual people, and they were the ones always doing the hard stuff. If someone was dying they were the ones that were there because the men couldn't handle it and weren't really expected to.

JA Do the people at Lac St. Anne know you're a poet? Do they know what you do?

MD My relatives would, and there are some members of my family who are very diligent about going every year still, I mean not many, but yes they know I'm a poet. But other people, I mean people I don't know well, don't.

JA I think being a poet is a bit of a mystery to lots of people.

MD A lot of mystery. My family has no idea what I do *really*. I take these residences and they ask what is it that you do? Are you teaching?

JA It seems to me there's a sense of ritual in some of the things you're talking about, particularly pilgrimaging. What does ritual, as a term, mean to you?

MD Well, I find the whole writing process in a way ritualistic, and it has to be. There's a relationship you have with a creative process, and

one way to enter that is to do some sort of ritual. Not in the kind of grand sense of ritual you might think, but definitely there is ritual. Really the only kind of prayer I have in my life is by the journal-writing that I do, and sort of taking pause, because I don't go to church. I used to go to sweats but I haven't been in the last six or seven years. I felt I was doing it because I felt I had to. The other thing is, I didn't recognize or didn't value enough the tradition I came from, which was a mix between Catholicism and Aboriginal belief. I certainly don't see myself as Catholic, but I might go to midnight mass with my sister, and when I go there I go in the way that my parents would have gone to Lac St. Anne. A lot of times I just sort of tune out the stuff that I hear. I don't believe it. I can't stomach it, but I still go because there's a sense of connection there to my mom and sisters.

JA And familiarity. There's a certain amount of feeling that this is something you've done before and will do again. Ritual is a much larger and much more flexible concept.

MD Well, I think in the end that's what happens to writing, period.

Thanks to Erin Whitmore for her careful transcription and to SSHRC for their financial support of the research for this interview.