

"We're writing our own stories": An Examination of Youth Writing in *Our Story: The Canadian Aboriginal Writing Challenge*

Jennifer Hardwick

Volume 36, Number 1, 2011

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl36_1art08

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (print)

1718-7850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Hardwick, J. (2011). "We're writing our own stories": An Examination of Youth Writing in *Our Story: The Canadian Aboriginal Writing Challenge*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 36(1), 124–141.

**“We’re writing our own stories”:
An Examination of Youth Writing in
*Our Story: The Canadian
Aboriginal Writing Challenge***

JENNIFER HARDWICK

IN *READING YOUTH WRITING: “New” Literacies, Cultural Studies and Education*, Michael Hoechsmann and Bronwen Low examine an important, and largely overlooked, literary community: Canadian youth.¹ They argue that more consideration should be given to the “urgency and poignancy of youth voice” (2) and that “reading youth writing is an active approach to taking young people seriously and hence opening up horizons for them and vistas for us; it is a form of intergenerational dialogue and respect that invokes a willingness to learn . . . [and it] issues an open challenge for young people to step up and make themselves be heard” (167). Although scholars and theorists have widely recognized the value of expanding literary criticism to include marginalized voices, surprisingly few have made an effort to heed Hoechsmann and Low’s call. While new technologies have reduced financial and distribution constraints and allowed young writers to reach unprecedented audiences both in print and online formats, young people have received remarkably little attention as a literary community. Many scholars continue to regard youth culture as something that is consumed as opposed to produced, and as a result, critics have given far more attention to materials created *for* and *about* young people than to materials created *by* them. Social, cultural, geographical, and financial barriers, which can suppress entire communities, have the potential to add to the silence young people face, as these challenges are often harder to overcome for those who have yet to acquire the legal rights to vote, move, or drive. In Canada, barriers of this kind are especially prevalent in the lives of Indigenous youth; centuries of colonialism have robbed Indigenous communities of traditional knowledges and life ways, severing familial and community bonds, and leaving many disenfranchised from both their cultures and mainstream Canadian society. Given such pervasive

alienation, it is unsurprising that Indigenous youth are among the most at-risk populations in Canada. According to Canadian Policy Research Initiative publications, Indigenous youth are more likely to be victims and perpetrators of crime (Government of Canada, *Aboriginal Youth* 10), to drop out of school (*Aboriginal Youth* 3), to commit suicide (Chandler and Lalonde 68), and to live in poverty than their non-Indigenous peers (Guimond and Cooke 29).²

Hoechsmann and Low argue that writing can offer possibilities for overcoming the barriers young people face by “strengthening education, intergenerational communication, and the processes of citizenship engagement” (163). Additionally, writing has the potential to help Indigenous youth overcome feelings of disenfranchisement by encouraging cultural rootedness, social and political engagement, and self-awareness. Creek literary scholar Craig Womack contends that developing one’s own voice is integral to locating personal and political power, arguing that “a key concept of nationhood is a people’s idea of themselves, their imaginings of who they are. The ongoing expression of a tribal voice, through imagination, language, and literature, contributes to keeping sovereignty alive” (14). Kanien’kehaka scholar Taiaiake Alfred adds to Womack’s assertion, pointing out that the development of a strong voice is especially important for youth. He argues that if Indigenous communities are going to overcome the effects of colonialism, they “must add [their] voices to the narrative that is history, translate [their] understandings of history and justice, and bring the power of [their] wisdom to bear on the relationships [they] have with others. [They] cannot do this from a position of intellectual weakness” (178). As such, leaders and educators must

promote Native education both in the conventional Western sense and in terms of re-rooting young people within their traditional cultures. In time, such education will produce a new generation of healthy and highly skilled leaders who will be able to interact with the changing mainstream society from a position of strength rooted in cultural confidence. (168)

Given that creative writing can encourage cultural exploration, social engagement, and personal expression in a space that is not dominated by (or necessarily at odds with) Western educational frameworks, it must be recognized as a viable way for Indigenous youth to overcome bar-

riers and introduce their ideas, concerns, and experiences to the broader Canadian public. However, in order for Canadians to be reached, they must be willing to read. While writing can be an empowering act in and of itself, young Indigenous writers' ability to engage socially and politically, to assert their identities, and to challenge systems and structures is limited without an active readership. In order to truly benefit from what writing has to offer, young authors must reach readers who are willing to take their contributions and concerns seriously. As such, reading young Indigenous writers is a way for Indigenous and non-Indigenous adults alike to act as allies, and to help to open the "horizons" that Hoeschmann and Low speak of. As the two critics are quick to point out, this process is not as simple as adults benevolently agreeing to acknowledge their younger counterparts; reading youth writing is a reciprocal endeavour, and it can also open vistas for adult readers by providing opportunities to engage with new experiences, knowledges, and creative methodologies.

In an effort to embrace the possibilities offered by writing and to take the social, political, and artistic contributions of Indigenous youth seriously, this paper engages critically with online texts from the Historica-Dominion Institute's *Our Story: The Canadian Aboriginal Writing Challenge*, a contest that program coordinator Eliana Tizel says was "launched in order to discover a new generation of young, Aboriginal writers and give them a chance to explore their heritage and have their voices heard" (Tizel). Using Alfred's goals as a framework, this essay will examine three stories — "Fight" by Julie-Dean Chartrand, "The Hiatsk" by Trevor Jang, and "The Might of Oneness" by Maynan Robinson — to illuminate the ways in which Indigenous youth are employing writing to negotiate traditional and contemporary cultures and locate personal power. Their texts are, consciously or not, heeding Alfred's call to "interact with the changing mainstream society from a position of strength rooted in cultural confidence" by calling on cultural histories, traditional pedagogies (such as storytelling, ceremony, and guidance from elders), and kinship bonds in order to tackle problems associated with colonialism, including social disenfranchisement, residential school trauma, and racism. While "Fight" and "The Hiatsk" both explore the ways in which youth can utilize cultural knowledges in order to navigate crisis, "The Might of Oneness" goes one step beyond this, depicting how youth who have successfully rooted

themselves in their traditions and communities can then reciprocate by taking on leadership roles. Together, the three stories model the form of integration that Alfred envisions, with youth first becoming embedded in their traditions and cultures, and then using their knowledges as a foundation for leadership and social engagement. The authors' abilities to highlight how their cultures can be mobilized to resist and challenge colonialism are especially poignant given that their writing appears within the Western framework of Historica-Dominion Institute, an organization that privileges Canadian citizenship over tribal identities and celebrates a singular history of the Canadian nation. While the ideology of the institute is undoubtedly problematic, stories such as "Fight," "The Hiatsk," and "The Might of Oneness" prove that this does not, and should not, invalidate the success of the *Our Story* program, or diminish the importance of the authors it publishes.

While Womack's assertion that the "ongoing expression of a tribal voice, through imagination, language, and literature, contributes to keeping sovereignty alive" may be beyond the political ambitions of some Indigenous youth, concepts surrounding sovereignty — self-determination, identity, and resistance to colonial ideologies — are at the heart of many of the texts on the *Our Story* website, suggesting that young Aboriginal authors see some of the same potential for strengthening personal and collective voice that Womack does. In an author's note introducing her story "Fight," seventeen-year-old Métis writer Julie-Dean Chartrand contends that

The message of this story is what makes it significant — we are making our own history, we're writing our own stories. We're making the world a better place through our actions and choices. Although we're faced with the problems and consequences of yesterday, we are the future of today. We can't change what's happened (although we can learn from it).

Chartrand positions herself in relation to historical legacies through a discussion of "yesterday," but she also asserts her role as a representative of the "future." In this sense, she is contributing to the "ongoing expression of tribal voice" and the pursuit of sovereignty that Womack argues for by exploring her community's shared experiences and looking for ways to ensure its survival. Chartrand's statement also indicates an investment in Alfred's goal of utilizing Indigenous culture as a founda-

tion for problem solving and leadership; both her use of “we” and her reference to learning from the “problems and challenges of yesterday” suggest a collective approach to overcoming obstacles that is informed and strengthened by shared histories and knowledges.

For authors like Chartrand, rooting oneself in these histories and knowledges means embracing traditional pedagogies, which offer guidance and promote resilience. In Chartrand’s story “Fight,” the unnamed narrator turns to her mother for these very things after a bully named Tommy calls her a “dirty Indian.” The mother responds to the situation by reassuring her daughter, and situating her within her community. The child is told,

You aren’t just a seven-year old girl. You are one of the Ojibwa, which is something Tommy will never be able to say. . . . It’s the reason you can hold your head high and put your shoulders back. It’s what makes you who you are. . . . [W]e are wise. We are beautiful and handsome, we are blessed with many gifts from the moment the Creator puts us on the earth. We love our families and we love life. We respect the world around us and are a happy people. . . . No matter how you are treated, you have the blood of great men running in your veins. (Chartrand)

These comments, which root the young girl in her heritage and help her to embrace her different appearance, are in line with traditional Indigenous pedagogies. In *Shingwauk’s Vision*, historian J.R. Miller discusses traditional Aboriginal teaching models, noting that Native “education, as distinct from schooling, . . . aims, first, to explain to the individual members of a community who they are, who their people are, and how they relate to other peoples and to the physical world around them” (15). Miller argues that while this education is extremely important, it is drastically different from Western models, and he observes that there was an “absence of anything approaching the European’s institutional approach” (16) in Indigenous communities until missionaries and governments took it upon themselves to educate children. Traditional Indigenous teachings often occur on a one-on-one basis, with parents and elders offering guidance in home and community settings to children and adolescents as issues arise, in a manner that is akin to the mother’s response in Chartrand’s story.

In addition to telling youth “who they are,” traditional teachings also emphasize values. Miller argues that, like most forms of education,

Indigenous pedagogies “[reflect] values the adult community share[s], and [instill] them in the next generation” (38). In “Fight,” the mother’s teachings not only provide her daughter with a sense of identity but also seek to guide the young girl’s responses and actions. The mother uses a simplified story of European invasion to provide her daughter with a historical understanding of colonialism, and to offer a lesson in ethics. She explains, “When white men came over from Europe, everything changed. At first it was exciting and new, but they treated us like animals. We thought our people had made a new friend but they hunted us and took our land, our homes, and our families” (Chartrand). When the young girl responds vengefully to the information, saying, “So let’s get them back,” her mother steers her in a different direction, saying, “But that’s not the point of this story my darling. That is the kind of attitude that brought about all this pain.” She continues with the following explanation:

Although you know that no man is any better than you are, not everybody does. You will prove this when you do not punch back, when you show kindness to those who have shown you none, when you make a name for yourself. It will not be easy. Every day will be a struggle, but you are the future of our people. You want to fight for our freedom, my little sparrow? Fight with the goodness of your heart and a forgiving nature. Fight with a gentle hand and flexible spirit. Fight even when you want to give up, even when you are humiliated and scorned. Fight for me. Fight for all those who haven’t learned that the best way to fight it by being a friend. (Chartrand)

It is important to note that the mother’s discussion of colonialism takes a decidedly different form here than it would in a Western classroom; colonialism is told as a story, which focuses on concepts like friendship and respect instead of on dates and facts. As a result, it is general enough to parallel the racism the young girl faces, while enabling the mother to engage with a significant element of her lesson: a discussion of why colonial ideologies and actions — including racism and violence — are damaging and not to be emulated. By showing the impact of unkindness, violence, theft, and racism on the Ojibwa people, the mother demonstrates to her daughter that, while their nation has survived a great deal of cruelty, each individual can, and must, rise above colonial ideologies to live ethically and mindfully. The mother thus

employs a traditional pedagogical approach to “draw out lessons buried in daytime activities and to transfer forms of knowledge from one generation to the next” (Miller 25). The methodology proves successful, and the narrator takes her mother’s lesson to heart. Years later when again confronted with racism, she recalls the teaching and chooses to respond accordingly:

I opened my eyes and looked straight at the girl asking for the wrong kind of fight, getting in my face and pushing me backwards. I smiled and she hesitated for a second. “Don’t mess with me,” I held my head high and put my shoulders back, “I was born to fight.” (Chartrand)

These lines, which are the last in the story, show that internalizing Indigenous identities, histories, and values can help young people solve problems and confront contemporary issues. Despite the racial slurs hurled at her, Chartrand’s protagonist is confident in her identity as an Ojibwa woman and secure in her ability to behave according to the ethics she was raised with, and not with the ethics she encounters externally. She knows that her heritage provides her with knowledges and skills, and she is ready to use them to “fight” on her own terms.

Fifteen-year-old Wet’suwet’en writer Trevor Jang’s story “The Hiatsk” also explores the ways in which cultural knowledges and pedagogies can aid Indigenous youth in problem solving. Jang’s story focuses on Jon, a young Nisga’a with a passion for basketball, who saves his chief, Joseph Gosnell, after an accident. While the story is set against the backdrop of Gosnell’s real-life negotiation of the Nisga’a Treaty with the British Columbian government, it is primarily concerned with the fictional Jon’s evolution from a troubled teen into a confident athlete. When the story begins, Jon is a young thief struggling with his alcoholic parents and his own lack of self-worth. After saving Chief Gosnell, he is rewarded with a position on the Nisga’a basketball team, which is set to compete in the upcoming all-Native basketball tournament. Chief Gosnell, who coaches the team, uses the game as a way to encourage Jon’s growth, not just physically, but mentally and emotionally as well. He warns the young man, “You’re very physically fit. . . . But that is not all there is. There has to be balance. You must be strong spirited, emotionally stable and mentally alert” (Jang). Miller notes that a “subtle guidance towards desired forms of behaviour through the

use of games" (17) is a longstanding tradition in Indigenous communities. It is unsurprising, therefore, that Chief Gosnell would turn to a sport to encourage and direct a teen in need of support. However, while Jon's rigorous training initially helps him progress toward balance and stability, he is still angry and uncertain, and he quits the team after a disagreement with Chief Gosnell. His disenfranchisement only increases when he returns to his family's small house, where "bits of garbage clutter the yard" and his father comes home drunk from work at the local mill. Jon sees no way out of cycles of poverty and substance abuse that have enveloped his family, and after a chance encounter with Chief Gosnell, he unloads his frustrations, saying, "what [is my] future? I'm just going to grow up, go work at the mill, and come home and yell at my family. There's nothing else, nothing else that'll ever come" (Jang). Recognizing that more than athletic participation is needed to help Jon overcome the barriers he faces, Chief Gosnell engages in a traditional teaching in order to offer the boy a new perspective. He inquires what Jon's Nisga'a name is, and upon finding out it is Hiatsk, he explains the word's meaning and importance: "The Hiatsk is a symbol of wealth, power, and prestige. It will be our nations [sic] symbol when we win our fight. When we gain our recognition and independence. We need you. You're our Hiatsk. You're your parents' Hiatsk" (Jang). When Jon argues that he "is nothing to [his] family," the Chief attempts to show the young man that his name is an expression of his family's love, saying, "You're everything. You are the wealth and power that they don't have. You are their most [prestigious] gift. They love you, they just don't know how to show it" (Jang). By gaining the understanding and context of his traditional name, Jon slowly comes to understand that it was given to him for a reason, and he begins to re-examine his potential and his relationship with his family. He comes to see that while they struggle with poverty and substance abuse, his family has one great asset: him. He is the source of their power, and it is up to him to work toward a better future.

Chief Gosnell's teaching methodology demonstrates the adaptable nature of traditional pedagogies in the face of change; he essentially provides Jon with a modernized rite of passage ceremony. According to Miller, young Indigenous males are often welcomed into adulthood through a quest, which can involve physical and mental hardships, prayer, and teachings. The hope is that the young man will "receive

a special revelation” as a result of the process, and that that revelation will then guide him (33-34). Jon’s experience in Jang’s story follows this pattern; the young man undergoes mental, physical, and spiritual hardships, and experiences teachings as he prepares for the tournament. In the end, he has a moment of revelation about his place and purpose, which allows him to move forward. As he internalizes the knowledge that Chief Gosnell offers him, Jon realizes he has a decision to make. In a moment of clarity, he suddenly understands that not only is he a Hiatsk, “The team is the Hiatsk. The team is the Nisga’a. The team will show the world how rich and proud the Nisga’a people are. It was up to them. The Hiatsk” (Jang). He recommits himself to basketball, and at the all-Native tournament, he finds himself feeling confident in his abilities and place: “Hundreds of people are packed into the gym. The Nisga’a take part in the opening ceremonies. Jon looks into the crowd. They are part of a historical event. They are representing their people. . . . He’s where he needs to be” (Jang). Jon is not only where he needs to be literally, he is also where he needs to be mentally and emotionally. He has passed through a series of challenges, and he is now rooted in his identity and community. He has overcome his anger and apathy, embraced his family’s (admittedly imperfect) love, and made decisions that will allow him to use his skills on behalf of his people. Cherokee writer and literary critic Daniel Heath Justice argues that the type of adaptation and modernization that allows Jon to reach this point should be expected. He contends that Indigenous national identities are not “predicated on essentialist notions of unchangeability” and notes that essentializing Indigenous traditions to static “then,” which exists in the past, is highly problematic, as it calls upon “primitivist Eurowestern discourses that locate indigenous peoples outside the flow and influences of time” (151). Instead, traditions such as pedagogies and rite-of-passage ceremonies should be viewed as practices that can adapt to new conditions. “The Hiatsk” provides a particularly poignant example of this adaptability.

The fact that the central characters in both Jang’s and Chartrand’s stories learn their most important lessons through dialogue, stories, ceremonies, and play, and not through the Western educational system, is significant, as it suggests that traditional pedagogies remain important and powerful in the lives of Indigenous youth; these traditions can, in fact, even be employed to combat damage wrought by and within

Western institutions. The mother in "Fight" and Chief Gosnell offer their guidance on a one-on-one basis, and ensure that their teachings are age appropriate, suited to the youth's personality, and directly related to the challenges that are being faced. Additionally, both teachers share personal bonds with their young students, which takes their lessons beyond the depersonalized dissemination of knowledge modelled on Western curricula, and into the realm of kinship and connection; teaching is not simply a process of passing down information, it is also a process of connecting young people to their families and communities.

The importance of these connections is central to eighteen-year-old Maynan Robinson's story "The Might of Oneness," which deals with residential school trauma. In the story, Robinson's narrator struggles to help her grandmother, whom she calls "Nookomis" (the Cree word for grandmother), after the Canadian Government's residential school apology reawakens trauma. As a residential school survivor, Nookomis is deeply troubled by the "reminder of her past, a past she had worked hard to leave behind" (Robinson), and the narrator is at a loss at how to help her cope with nightmares and depression. As she attempts to find solutions, the narrator continually returns to her relationship with Nookomis, which gives her the strength to continue:

I learned all I know about my ancestors from her. She would tell me stories of traditional ways, give me the teachings I now know to be my truth, my choice. I went to my first sweat lodge with her. I discovered a connection with my past that otherwise would have been cast asunder. Learning about events in school had a new meaning because of what she taught me, not just through her words and wisdom, but also through her life. She is the strongest woman I know, and I cannot let her fall deeper into her own psyche, left alone with her terrors, her nightmares. If she must face them she will not face them alone. (Robinson)

The narrator's connection to Nookomis increases her anxiety, pain, and concern, but it is also a source of strength for her. Nookomis provides a link to the past, to a community, and to the teachings and life ways that guide the narrator's choices and push her to act on her grandmother's behalf. The statement that these connections "would have been cast asunder" (Robinson) without Nookomis is significant, as it once again shows the incredible importance of relationships with elders, who are an invaluable guiding force. However, it is important to acknowledge

that, despite this watchful guidance, the narrator identifies her path as “my truth, my choice” (Robinson), which indicates that the decision to embrace the connections and life ways Nookomis offers is ultimately hers. Nookomis’s pedagogical approach invokes traditional educational principles, which Miller notes are “indirect and non-coercive” (18); while she seeks to provide a strong foundation for her granddaughter’s choices, there is an understanding that the girl will ultimately make her own decisions about how to live and act. The fact that Nookomis is able to offer her granddaughter any connection to the past is also important, and it is a testament to the strength of her traditions. Despite the ways in which her residential school experience undermined life ways and sought to absorb her into Western social frameworks, the narrator notes that Nookomis remains connected to her traditions: “The aggressive assimilation policy of these residential schools did not accomplish what it had set out to do. Nookomis clings to the past that was ripped away from her, and forgets the past that was forced upon her” (Robinson). This does not mean that Nookomis did not lose *any* of the elements of her culture, or that she was unaffected by her schooling, but it does suggest that traditions have the ability to survive the effects of colonialism. Despite what she has endured, Nookomis is still able to look inside herself and offer her granddaughter access to her own tribal teachings and values.

Robinson’s story suggests that these traditions remain strong precisely because of interpersonal connections like those that exist between Nookomis and the narrator. After worrying about her grandmother, the narrator has a dream that highlights the importance of kinship bonds:

Two animals are drinking from the same creek, but on completely opposite sides. A bear, and a wolf, drinking the fresh water, will then separate and continue on their journeys, along their separate paths. But, that is not at all what happens. They drink together; they take their time, enjoying the richness of the water. Then for a long moment when it seems that it is time for their journeys to continue, they look at each other. The wolf does not know where to go, and the bear was looking for a companion on his journey. The wolf crosses the creek, where they each take one more drink of the sweet water, and then continue on together. Together. (Robinson)

The dream has immediate meaning to the narrator, as it harkens back to her relationship with Nookomis and the values and life ways that

form the foundation of her community and family. The narrator realizes that the bond between the animals, and their ability to move forward together, are indicative of the power of her own personal bonds. She suddenly realizes that “[t]he answer has been so simple all along. She has spent so long helping me find my inner spirit, giving me what was taken away from her. No, it was not taken away, just a failed attempt” (Robinson). She recognizes that the older woman’s love has strengthened their family and allowed for the continuity of knowledges and practices. The narrator also realizes that these same traditions can provide tools to heal the wounds of the past and to continue moving forward. She goes home and sits with Nookomis, “telling her the stories she used to tell me, giving her all the love she’s given me” and is pleased to see “the light in her eyes” (Robinson). Here we see the young girl taking on a leadership role, and acting in reciprocity by offering to her grandmother what had previously been offered to her. The narrator knows that community bonds will carry on the process of healing that she begins with this act, and she looks to ceremony to pick up the work that she has started:

Tomorrow we will go to a ceremony as a family, we will cry and face the demons together. Tomorrow she will see just how much she is not alone. All the people at the ceremony who went through what she did, who endured the same pain, loss and loneliness will unite, and accept the apology as a groundbreaking gesture, and the healing can continue, together. Her family that was so lost to her and out of reach will be with her in spirit, as she holds the hands of the elders, and sings with the brothers and sisters who will be there with her tomorrow. (Robinson)

The way in which family, community, and ancestors come together to heal and keep traditions alive suggests that interpersonal connections are a source of strength and a means of overcoming challenges and traumas. Just as Nookomis was able to call on bonds and traditions to guide her granddaughter, the broader community will be able to call on bonds and traditions to heal the wounds of their collective past. For the narrator, the community connections and traditions are deeply entwined; traditions require kinship and community in order to persevere, and the community ceases to exist without an attachment to, and recognition of, tradition. One cannot exist without the other, and both must be maintained.

Togetherness and connection take on many meanings in Robinson's story, as exemplified by her title: "The Might of Oneness" points to the power individuals have to make choices based on their truths and values — there is "might" in each decision and action. However, the progression of her narrative also suggests that this power is dependent on individuals becoming part of an integrated system of kinship and custom; the might of oneness is achieved only by becoming part of a broader community which can guide and influence choices. Both "oneness" and "might" also have double meanings here: "oneness" can be seen to reference not only individuals but also collectives — the power of many coming together and acting as one — and "might" refers to both strength and future potential. These bonds, strengths, and possibilities exist between individuals and communities, and they offer hope for moving beyond the damage colonization has inflicted, and continues to inflict.

"Fight," "The Hiatsk," and "The Might of Oneness" indicate that young Indigenous writers are considering the challenges and opportunities Alfred outlines: they are looking to be rooted within their cultures, and to use the knowledges, kinship bonds, and values of their communities to confront contemporary issues. For Alfred, calling on these traditional pedagogies and practices is particularly important, as colonial ideals have become embedded in too many Canadian educational and cultural systems:

We need to realize that ways of thinking that perpetuate European values can do nothing to ease the pain of colonization and return us to the harmony, balance, and peaceful coexistence that were — and are — the ideals envisioned in all traditional indigenous philosophies. In fact, it is not possible to reach those goals in the context of Western institutions at all, because those institutions were designed within the framework of a very different belief system, to achieve very different objectives. (65)

The act of writing is, for the most part, a personal endeavour and a good way to bridge Indigenous and Western cultures without ideological interference. While it could be argued that writing and publishing in North America immediately falls within Western frameworks, Womack notes that Indigenous peoples have a centuries-old tradition of oral storytelling, and "a vast, and vastly understudied, written tradition" (2). These traditions, like others, have adapted to contemporary condi-

tions, and despite the dominance of Western systems and ideologies, Indigenous writings continue to consistently “seek creative and evocative ways to argue that Native cultures continue to survive and evolve” (Womack 10). However, Womack also notes that Indigenous writing and publishing is not without its challenges given the current climate, and he contends that “The current state of Native literature is, at least partially, a colonized one” (7).

It is important to note that this colonization is a factor in the writing practices of Indigenous youth, just as it is a factor in the writing practices of their adult counterparts. The *Our Story* program, which was created by the Historica-Dominion Institute, a national organization with a mandate “to build active and informed citizens through a greater knowledge and appreciation of the history, heritage, and stories of Canada” (Historica-Dominion, “About”), rectifies a vision of Canadian history in the singular, while privileging Canadian citizenship for Indigenous peoples over alternative forms of tribal identification. Alfred notes that frameworks such as these are intensely problematic, and he argues that Indigenous peoples need to identify first and foremost with their nations and not with the colonial Canadian state. He contends that “a lot of Native people imagine themselves to be Canadians. And that’s not true” (19). He points to the challenges of Canadian citizenship, which are powerfully illustrated in his interview with a Kwa’kwa’ka’wakw woman. In the interview, Alfred asks her if she sees herself as a Canadian citizen, and she replies, “No. Actually, I’ve tried to search for the moment in time when Canada decided legally — at least legally — that we were considered citizens. Which is kind of a joke, because as I’ve heard someone say ‘Legally, yes, we are regarded as citizens. Yet the same legislation — the Indian Act — is always there to remind us that we’re not’” (43).

The structure of the *Our Story* program, which invites “Young Aboriginal writers [to] submit original pieces that reflect on defining themes in the history of this country and its Aboriginal people” (Historica-Dominion, “News Releases”), leaves little room for Indigenous identities that seek to reject (or even problematize) Canadian identity. It mandates that submissions not only accept the dominant narrative of Canada “and its Aboriginal people,” but also participate in its construction. According to Hoechsmann and Low, frameworks such as this have the potential to drastically alter what young people submit. They note that “Youth voice is always inflected by some assumption of

the expectations of the audience, whether an active peer audience, . . . a niche market of well-meaning adults, or some hybrid of the two" (68). As a result, the structure of the contest could encourage young writers to adopt specific ideological histories at the expense of the events that have mattered to them. Additionally, the submissions to the *Our Story* contest are vetted based on "their creativity and originality, their cultural and historical content, and the author's writing ability" by "a combination of Historica-Dominion Institute employees, and a consultant who teaches Native literature" (Tizel) before the top ten texts are sent on to an advisory panel of Indigenous judges³ to be ranked. As such, the ideological framework of the Historica-Dominion Institute is not just enforced by the contest's mandate and guidelines, but established and reinforced from the first round of vetting.

While it is important to keep these issues in mind, and to realize that achieving an entirely independent voice as a young Indigenous writer is challenging, it is also important not to let these challenges prevent authors such as Chartrand, Jang, and Robinson from being taken seriously, or programs like *Our Story* from receiving attention. While the authors may be limited by the Historica-Dominion Institute's concept of Canadian identity, all three still manage to explore the ways that Indigenous cultures continue to survive, evolve, and resist colonialism; they successfully "add [their] voices to the narrative that is history, translate [their] understandings of history and justice, and bring the power of [their] wisdom to bear on the relationships [they] have with others" in the way that Alfred envisioned. Additionally, for all of its challenges and complexities, the *Our Story* contest has been extremely successful at building partnerships with Indigenous writers and artists, and these relationships should not be undermined. Although Alfred argues that working within frameworks that "perpetuate European values" can be counterproductive to Indigenous causes, he clearly values the ability of Indigenous thinkers to engage "with the changing mainstream society from a position of strength rooted in cultural confidence" (168). The *Our Story* program, as Tizel notes, has opened up space for this type of engagement by placing a high value on the wisdom of Indigenous writers and leaders:

While our jury now includes one non-Aboriginal member, we strongly believe that it's important to have Aboriginal individuals on the jury. They have unique knowledge and perspectives. And

they are role models — they give feedback to the top-ten winners and help show them how they can succeed as writers. That's huge. (Tizel)

Ultimately, the program has succeeded in providing a forum for young Aboriginals, and drawing the attention of the broader Canadian public toward Indigenous issues. It has stimulated dialogue and encouraged involvement, and, perhaps most importantly, it has taken the voices of youth seriously.

Indigenous and non-Indigenous critics alike should be part of this movement; texts like "Fight," "The Hiatsk," and "The Might of Oneness" indicate that young Indigenous writers have a lot to say. Authors such as Chartrand, Jang, and Robinson are calling on traditions and pedagogies in order to create a self-conscious and adaptable traditionalism that is strong enough to withstand the perplexing, and often oppressive, situations they face. Their writings illuminate the ways in which cultural rootedness and kinship bonds can be used to confront and overcome colonial structures and legacies, and their voices offer tremendous insight into the challenges and possibilities associated with being a young Indigenous person in Canada. Given the significance of the issues they are tackling, it is important that their words are treated critically and ethically from a variety of standpoints, and that what they have to say does not get lost. While it is necessary to recognize (as the Historica-Dominion Institute has) that Indigenous critics and readers have knowledges and perspectives that can make them better equipped to engage with certain elements of these stories, it is also important to acknowledge that the involvement of non-Indigenous peoples and organizations can broaden these discussions and provide youth with more opportunities to be heard.

It is time that we, the scholarly community, engage with young Indigenous authors; we must respect what they bring to the table as thinkers and artists, and accept that their voices are strong enough to withstand critical interventions. In order to do this, we need to move beyond definitions of youth culture that privilege what is *for* or *about* young people and recognize that they are more than capable of expressing themselves. It is their voices, and not the voices of those speaking for them, that should be examined. Texts such as "Fight," "The Hiatsk," and "The Might of Oneness" suggest that Hoechsmann and Low are correct in their contention that reading youth writing "is a form of inter-

generational dialogue and respect that invokes a willingness to learn” (167). We must open ourselves to this process, as it is clear that authors like Chartrand, Jang, and Robinson have a great deal to teach us.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I would like to gratefully acknowledge Dr. Sam McKegney for his indispensable feedback and guidance on this project.

NOTES

¹ The definition of “youth” is broad and somewhat contentious. Some scholars, organizations, and government programs classify youth as those under thirty, while others label youth as those who are under the legal age of majority (eighteen or nineteen in Canada, depending on the province). The difference between “child” and “youth” is also open to question, as individuals as young as ten and eleven are considered youth in some cases, while other definitions consider youth to be those who have entered their teen years. While it is well beyond the scope of this essay to establish an authoritative definition of “youth,” it is worth noting that the *Our Story* program is open to Aboriginal writers from the ages of fourteen to twenty-nine, and that this essay focuses specifically on writers who are under eighteen.

² The differences in incarceration, education, poverty, and suicide rates between Indigenous youth and their non-Indigenous peers are not small. A report issued in 2003 showed that Aboriginal youth were almost eight times more likely to be incarcerated than their non-Aboriginal counterparts (Government of Canada, *Aboriginal Youth* 10); moreover, “in 2006, close to half of the Inuit and First Nations on-reserve adult population did not have a high school diploma, compared to 15% of other Canadians. Roughly 4% of these two groups had obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared with 23% of other Canadians” (*Aboriginal Youth* 3). Similarly, the average income gap between Registered Indians between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine and other Canadians was \$34,617 in 2000 (Guimond and Cooke 29), and a study in British Columbia showed that Aboriginal youth “take their own lives at rates between five and twenty times higher than that of the non-Aboriginal population” (Chandler and Lalonde 69).

³ The advisory committee is currently made up of nine Indigenous writers, artists, and leaders and one non-Indigenous writer and editor.

WORKS CITED

- Alfred, Taiaiake. *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto*. 2nd edn. Toronto: Oxford UP, 2009. Print.
- Chartrand, Julie-Dean. "Fight." *Our Story: Canadian Aboriginal Writing Challenge*. Historica-Dominion Inst., 2008. Web. 8 Jan. 2011.
- Chandler, Michael J., and Christopher E. Lalonde. "Cultural Continuity as a Protective Factor against Suicide in First Nations Youth." Government of Canada Policy Research Initiative. *Horizons* 10.1 (2008): 68-72. Print.
- Government of Canada Policy Research Initiative. *Aboriginal Youth in Canada: Emerging Issues, Research Priorities, and Policy Implications Workshop Report*. Ottawa: Policy Research Initiative, 2008. Web. 24 Feb. 2001.
- Guimond Eric, and Martin J. Cooke. "The Current Well-Being of Registered Indian Youth: Concerns for the Future?" Government of Canada Policy Research Initiative. *Horizons* 10.1 (2008): 26-30. Print.
- Historica-Dominion Institute. "About." *Historica-Dominion Institute*, n.d. Web. 8 Jan. 2011.
- . "News Releases." *Historica-Dominion Institute*, 18 Mar. 2010. Web. 8 Jan. 2011.
- Hoehsmann, Michael, and Bronwen E. Low. *Reading Youth Writing: "New" Literacies, Cultural Studies and Education*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008. Print.
- Jang, Trevor. "The Hiatsk." *Our Story: Canadian Aboriginal Writing Challenge*. Historica-Dominion Inst., 2009. Web. 8 Jan. 2011.
- Justice, Daniel Heath. "'Go Away Water': Kinship Criticism and the Decolonization Imperative." *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective*. Ed. Craig S. Womack, Daniel Heath Justice, and Christopher B. Tanton. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2008. 147-68. Print.
- Miller, J.R. *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1997. Print.
- Robinson, Maynan. "The Might of Oneness." *Our Story: Canadian Aboriginal Writing Challenge*. Historica-Dominion Inst., 2009. Web. 8 Jan. 2011.
- Tizel, Elaina. "RE: Our Story Research Questions" Message to Jennifer Hardwick. 16 Nov. 2009. Email.
- Womack, Craig. *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999. Print.

