

REG JOHANSON / “Guerrilla Backchat” with Marie Annharte Baker

Marie Annharte Baker has published three books of poetry, *Being on the Moon* (Polestar 1990), *Coyote Columbus Café* (Moonprint 1994), and *Exercises in Lip Pointing* (New Star 2003), with a fourth in the works. Her work receives extensive critical attention in an interview with Susan Rudy and Pauline Butling in *Poet’s Talk* (U of Alberta Press 2005) as well as in my own essay, “Straight Forward Approach: Annharte’s *Exercises in Lip Pointing*,” in *Antiphonies: Essays on Women’s Experimental Poetries in Canada* (The Gig 2007). She has worked as a teacher, social worker, and performance artist, and is currently doing a Master’s degree in Cultural Studies at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, where she grew up.

Commenting from the position of a “First Nations woman writer,” in this interview, conducted by e-mail in the fall of 2009, Baker deals with writing as a reflex of trauma, “bad writing,” “madness,” and the political dynamics of literary communities—their exclusions, conflicts, and contradictions. Literary communities function through an increasingly ideological system of state funding, which in part determines who is eligible to participate and which texts have “literary merit.” In addition to the problematic ways in which funding is constitutive of relationships and roles (“judges,” “emerging” or “established” writers, “administrators,” “distribution / subscription,” “poetry,” etc), funding also censors dissent. We hope readers will find much here that’s worth the risk.

REG JOHANSON: Your latest writing has gotten very dense, thickly textured. I’m thinking of something like “Succinct Savage Subtext”:

Sublime sin is subversive sloth.
Search for superlative transgression
is a waste of superb time and silly putty.
Contra dictation in speech spelled out.
Spirituality suckered back slow slug
style into shame strut secreted sacred.

Size of head dress indicates sad sly
sell out stance or Chief Lies In His Face
or pants Colanders sick soul slime space.
Sensational sensing of scarred syllables.
Submit soon to sacrifice backslider sulk
yet loathe subtle wraparound remains
hardly suggest starburst satisfactions.

It's a kind of a black hole as a poem—no light escapes. What's driving this "thick" style?

MARIE ANNHARTE BAKER: Wasn't "Chief Lies in His Face" a bit of relief? Though it does refer to that cartoon stereotype of Chief Rain In The Face, does fit the gloom of having a rain cloud in front of face with a lightening bolt ready to strike! No silver lining!

The starting occasion of this poetic venture was a challenge to write in a group of women meeting somewhere on Cordova Street in Vancouver. My friend Diane was running the group. I wanted the hiss of the ssss's to be snake talk (if snakes talk with a hiss except in a cartoon). Part of me is unhappy with native lit so the "subversive" allusion. But "sloth" is attached because oppression, like depression, works against one talking any social action. "Subtext" for me is what seems to be the point of writing because direct writing would be more censored. Although I have done that and have slammed readers and listeners in heavy duty-tone. A poetic tomahawk chop?

Some of this style was picked up at Bukowski's when it was happening as I got amused by writers who just wanted to slam words at an audience. It is an attack mode I figure. I found it amusing! Then I became a sceptic one summer while studying spirituality and counselling. So I am attacking the assumed quick fix of spirituality for the ndn sense of loss and grieving. Bit of fatality there I must admit. An end-of-the-trail scenario looming always. Hard to hang onto one's spotted pony!

"Starburst satisfactions" for me indicate a type of starblanket image. It is a new day especially for a morning star risen. Maybe I am sleeping too late because of insomnia affliction? If I look at the rest of the poem to see if it ever lightens up, I notice mention

about the big headdress which reveals how unhappy I was to see Phil Fontaine in his oversized bonnet when posing around for the apology for the residential school debacle. Another cartoon image comes to mind—Tumbleweeds. Again, I felt there was no adequate forum to discuss differences with government programs on that issue. Been to many gatherings of the survivors but claim that my mom was not one! Have her ghost to think about although she might have followed along with everyone else and lined up for the compensation payment! The “excessive” in this refers to the “sublime sin” in Ojibway practice of overstating anything. Yet, I presume it is a poem with a suppressed scream as subtext.

So I did go excessive because so many ndns were not saying anything even on the CBC news. Maybe the intensity or dense part is like an internal bomb going off inside me leaving me devastated. Most readers would not notice because of the holocaust denial so blatantly understated with the residential school apology.

RJ: Indirection and subversivity are important features of your writing. I understand this partly in terms of your critique of “settler lit.” In your essay “Borrowing Enemy Language: A First Nation Woman’s Use of English” (which has become something of a classic now) you talk about how important it is “not to give too much information to just anybody,” as Guy Debord would say. “Settlers” have used “native informants” against native people to improve the repressive apparatus. On the other hand, you are also very critical of what you call “bad writing” by aboriginal people, as in the lines: “Given enough poison / indians will die out but who will give us / the secret remedy or cure for bad writing?” (“How to Stop” 55)

First, what is “bad writing” to you? And second, how do you walk the line between critique and solidarity? In other words, how do you prevent your critique of aboriginal writing from playing into the settler’s “divide and conquer” game?

MAB: Luckily I am aging—another indigenous writer just confirmed it by calling me an older poetess! “Bad writing” might include the informant writing but that purpose is considered fundamental to indigenous writing: the need to inform a readership. Yet it also misinforms. I think of my writing as bad writing in that to impress myself and anyone else I do include the literacy factor (or is it illiteracy?). I love how our people speak English and especially when they play around with puns, etc. Conversational

style is my preference when I am being playful. Or want to be very serious! Luv the vernacular as in “Borrowing Enemy Language.”

Bad writing has to be about the orality of our people especially those who refuse to read and write English. As an adult educator I see a resistance. My current interest is on biographical writing or memoir writing. It is very difficult to write the “truth” because of the censorship that I alluded to in my answer to your first question. It is also dangerous to speak the “truth.” I am shocked at how many Indigenous people just accept education as rendered in schools and colleges. This body of knowledge never included their contributions to world wisdom. I don’t expect these institutions to upgrade their curriculum in the very near future either. Even in my cultural studies class I detect either aversion or evasion. I mentioned the necessity of using the term “cultural imperialism” at times.

Bad writing would have to be that which does not give enough historical detail about the recent past. It is settler lit in that too much fudging of actual events or people’s reactions gives us a cosmetic sanitized version of Canadian history. IMHO [in my humble opinion] Canadians love to be dismissed as second or third rate people. So Canadian Aboriginal writers tend to defer to that settler narrative imperative or diminutive.

One of the myths is that we ndns don’t have a written language so therefore we are inferior. I have a counter argument to that assumption. My complicated argument here is that if an Indigenous writer agrees to this falsehood then he or she may be complicit in “bad writing.” Colonized writers do not find out their own history so when literary critics step in and sort, catalogue, interpret, and assess writing, they are more than happy to accept a non-indigenous evaluation. Even the class factor does not get any critical attention because of the settler (and complicit native) opinion that everyone in society is equal. I was just reading Jameson for my class and he seemed to contend that a Marxist analysis did utilize historical detail because they valued materialism. I think I am being pragmatic. We do need more historical context in our ndn writing.

At the time of writing “bad writing,” I must have assumed that we still did not know what it was because we were not the critical experts of our own cultural productions. I had stated elsewhere that colonized native writing was bad even though I do admit to doing it too.

Further thoughts on “bad writing” and concerns about “divide and conquer” accusations. I was attacked a few years ago by an aboriginal writer who claimed we (ndn writers) were a small community and that I had violated it because I had ridiculed him. Word had got back to him about my transgression. He said that he promoted my work with the implication that I should not say something “bad” about him or his writing. I said that I was known for making outrageous assertions and that it was my style of guerrilla backchat. He then made a gesture of thrusting his fingers in my face. I did not know what that was supposed to mean except was later told that it was an expletive. So I figured I pissed him off. I would try harder to put any critique of ndn writing down on paper. We were not free to discuss our work or that of others without someone ratting on us. Just like in a residential school atmosphere! I was advised that to ward off any other threatening gestures on his part, I should tell him I would report him to the police and get a restraining order. My thought then was that I should have just hit him although I claim to be non-violent especially because of my own case of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The upshot of this account is that I believe in what Chrystos told me, that especially ndn women writers are not free to express their views! She figured we would have to do it through using other names and hide our true identities. I realize how hyper-sensitive our people are about getting feedback about their behaviour and writing. I am that way too. Yet, we have practiced a type of social control usually termed gossip where we do speak out. I did not expect to ever get attacked for my commentary on native lit but I did expect to hear disapproval. I may have been out of line but I did learn now that I have to be much more careful in whom I confide, especially in native literary circles.

So that writer attested to us ndns being one big happy family and I replied to the contrary. I thought we had different styles and for sure different ethics. The idea that we do not have differences amazes me. From colonial times up to present times, we have been warned not to be divided against one another. Yet, we had incredible diversity prior to the colonial invasion and we still have many alternative views and positions. Just because non-native literary critics want us to stay in the same herd to be more manageable, we (ndn writers) should diversify. So bad writing is copying other ndn writers and not getting your own style down. Bad writing is fun especially if irreverent in tone and content. Being a “good native” and a “good native writer” is too gobbledygook to understand. Non-natives practice schlock formula writing so why not

allow ndns the same range. The expression “excellence” in writing does not impress me much because for indigenous writing we have to do it all.

Methinks I protest too much on that “bad writing” part of the question or do not clarify enough to make any sense. I did not even get to the idea of differentiating between performance and writing standards. “Bad writing” can be hidden by ndns acting out stereotypes for instance. Our racist society loves us harpooning ourselves in this way.

RJ: One of the things I admire about your work, and your bearing in general, is how you bring conflict and disagreement to the writing scene, sometimes indirectly in satire and humour, and sometimes straight-on. In non-aboriginal writing circles we also hear about writing as a “gift economy,” as if we were all exchanging presents with each other. It follows from this model that it’s bad manners to dissent, so discouraging words are seldom heard. “The gift economy” myth has been exposed recently in the protests around cuts to arts funding: suddenly writers are talking about how important they are to the non-gift, commodity economy, and how “valuable” their work is to the state.

But my question: You’ve done some critical work on representations of “madness” or mental illness in the media. I also wonder about this poem from that angle:

Come Out From Behind The Yam

Scary guy is waiting to catch me again
if not paying attention to his moves.
He grabbed me to make me embarrassed.
I yell what do you think you are doing
as if I don’t know he is a predator. I
mis-spoke to him at the bus stop. He
mis-communicated a single mis-action.

Later on I tell how he green ski jacket
black hair sweaty face put his hand
grabbed me made me think about him
get out of here you followed me. He got

brave enough to go underground after
me stepping off escalator at the mall.
In public he attacked victim waistline
because shopping crowd small like
he was short too maybe I was too tall.
He brushed against me but left a bruise.

I am stuck somewhere psychology
does not map just a drop off location in
the mind. What if he jumps up from
behind again or finds me moving to a
new safe place crawls in behind the
TV set then jumps out when I go
to bed. Just think I am not safe from
him because he might be you. Tries
hiding in cat pan but it's not that
therapeutic to guess whereabouts.

Maybe I won't throw you out because
I saw you in the vegetable drawer in the
fridge behind the yam. Then again I
might mistake your green jacket for that
old head of cabbage going bad. Pay
attention even after the fact helps me.

Here it's unclear whether the assault is real or imagined, or which assaults are real, which are imagined. I wonder if the place "psychology does not map" is the place where social reality (violence against women) crosses over into a personal experience of paranoia, which is then stigmatized as "madness." As the saying goes, just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you. Like addiction, mental illness is personalized, perhaps as a way of avoiding real social pathologies. And the mentally ill, like addicts, are also troublesome in the economy (gift and otherwise) because they are considered to be unproductive and / or uncooperative. Can you talk about how you see this problem in writing and in literary communities?

MAB: I definitely might be a circuit speaker for Horrible Anonymous. It is a fun status rarely because it does hurt to be excluded. Like this weekend with a gathering of aboriginal writers in Brandon. I ended up thinking I would want to move to the USA as soon as possible so as not to be so confined to the apologetic Canadian aboriginal writer group. How sad! It all seemed to be a colonial advantaged slate of writers touting awards given by literary or government arts agencies. Low standards for supposed excellence.

My horribleness is at times accidental as I forget in my search for answers that I offend people by asking any questions at all. Back to ndn gift problem: No gift exchange even as writers perceive themselves to be gifted! I remember tagging myself as a cultural worker and that has lost relevance. I even think of being “gifted” as surviving at all. So grateful but it too is very painful to survive yet another day of abuse by one’s so-called peer group of writers. I was treated as a pariah in Brandon. Then again when I brought another pariah (Vincent Harris) for as long as he could stand it, I again brought the wrath on myself for defying his exclusion. His insight was valuable as he mentioned that this conference we went to was all about the aboriginal service industry. So does that make us appliances that have to be serviced? LOL but with a big teardrop in the eye! So our work is not a product or a gift because we are the products! Vincent mentioned the aboriginal service industry to a Native Studies instructor and security was called and he was escorted off the campus. He’s the best ndn writer in Brandon. Artist as well. Also, he opened a great gallery that had to close because of a lack of support from the arts industry as well. So he challenged that apartheid system by being an independent spirit.

I’m bitchin’ but when a person has few allies because the arts and native politics have fused, it does hurt one’s feelings, income, work and participation in Canada Council events (where they rule). I am leaving out the disgusting aspect of seeing other native writers grovel and perform their work as spectacle and circus! Yet, they are for the most part just happy to get the oppressor’s pat on the head.

The organizer of the conference told those present that aboriginal writers are now top dog because modernity has f’d up other Canadian writers. So now the settler lit people figure they had to learn from natives! No mention of the missionary position

where non-natives dominate not only the publication of native literature but also its presentation.

The various arts councils do not require that native input be respected. Even in the good old days in the States, you had to have Native American people's point of view. Undergrad followers of the English profs are expected to represent native authors. Very colonial demeanours are required. Maybe I need to rage and rant on this but to no avail as the white liberal snot fest presides. Vincent said it was a wild west show!

I struggle to participate without much fear and loathing but I think putting my work forth in such an environment has affected me to produce less than I might have. That is why I liked the association in Vancouver because of a feeling of togetherness with more poor writers (another form of bad writing).

Now to the madness arena. Well, I did write a piece called "Mad Woman Monocle" (4 instalments) for a community newsletter (*In A Nutshell*) in Vancouver. I did write an essay on resistance writing for Miki's anthology (if they accept it with revisions). In Brandon, the ndn writers pretty well did not want to take on resistance or protest writing. They do not want to mention "victimry" as a concept extolled by Gerald Vizenor. So they are much too ambivalent.

Did get a laugh when a woman writer (Jan Acoose) doing her PhD said she thought I did not give a fuck about what people said. I confess I do care but don't appreciate trashing except I probably have done that too. Lots of animosity comes from the elite writers in particular. I am taking a bit of a sympathetic view because they do not practice a critical stance. They put their fragile shameful self forward in a reading and don't want to get rejected. Then again, I am always finding more rationale for therapeutic interventions. So writing itself is not always just about healing.

I must not forget to reply to the madness element in the poem ("Come Out From Behind the Yam") which is related to an actual encounter/attack that set off my PTSD. I use the "poet's fridge" as my own metaphor where the poet puts food in the fridge but leaves it to rot because she gets too busy writing? I did visit a poet once who warned me not to eat anything in her fridge because of the danger of food poisoning. So that is where I put the perpetrator described in that poem, then I thought the cat pan probably was a better choice. In my current as yet unpublished manuscript, I use my madness as a

way to transform reality because the “I” author may disintegrate and destabilize the “author-itarian.”

Works Cited

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