

Remembering the spirit of the Beothuk : *The Beothuk Saga* of Bernard Assiniwi

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(The 20th International Baltic Conference on Canadian Studies,
10 October, 2020, Vilnius University)

Bernard Assiniwi (1935-2000)

- French-Canadian writer and specialist in native studies (history, anthropology and literature). Curator of ethnology and researcher at the Canadian Museum of Civilization at Hull.
- First Nations (Cree/Algonquin heritage)
- The *Beothuk saga* was published in French in 1996 and translated into English in 2000. Assiniwi received the prize France-Québec for *La Saga des Béothuk* in 1997.
- Assiniwi mainly published his work at *Éditions Leméac* specialized in Canadian/French Canadian literature
- Choice of the historical novel to present the history of the Beothuk



Bernard Assiniwi (1935-2000)

- His works on native studies are from various perspectives
- *Lexique des noms indiens en Amérique* (Lexicon of Indian Names in America) in 1973 (2 volumes, Leméac). It will be republished in 1996
- He also published in 1973 *L'Histoire des Indiens de Haut et Bas Canada* (*The History of the Indians of Upper and Lower Canada*, 3 volumes)
- Bernard Assiniwi belongs to a tradition of *passeurs*. It can be inaccurate to reduce these *passeurs* to a single role of writer (Premat 2017: 96). Specific roles of the voices of the First Nations



Bernard Assiniwi (1935-2000)

- The importance of writing to remember the genocide.
- *The Ottawa Citizen*, 6 September 2000.
- Interview: "Every bit of knowledge I have must be written somewhere so people can remember. Whether we like it or not, our culture is dying. People say, 'Oh, yes our culture is oral.' That is an excuse not to read today. We can all read today. If we don't write it, it will be lost".
- History of a discrete genocide, the one of the Beothuk.
- Previous studies on the Beothuk: Ingeborg Marshall (Marshall 1996)



Autobiography

- The Beothuk represent the fate of every First Nation.
- Personal factor for Bernard Assiniwi with his adopted grandson, John Assiniwi (an Innu from the Newfoundland community of Davis Inlet)
- Suicide of John Assiniwi (*The Ottawa citizen*, 6 September 2000)
- Story of a mutual ignorance (the French and English fishermen did not appreciate the hospitality and openness of the Beothuk and the Beothuk did not understand them). Intercultural clash that had dramatic consequences
- Social erasure (invisibility). The challenge to write about a genocide in a colonial context (Coulthard, 2014; Fanon, 2008)



The English translation

- Wayne Grady, a well-known Ontario writer and translator
- Grady published different works on natural history, ecology and extinction.
- Grady, W. & Damstra, E. (2011). *The Great Lakes. The Natural History of a Changing Region*. New York: Douglas & McIntyre.
- Similar travel into history from Wayne Grady.



Research question

- Many studies focus on ethnopoetics which is the way the writers of the First Nations present and enlighten cultural specificities (Feld 1982; Beaujour 2017). Lexicalization of cultural geistures / habits.
- The focus is more on how to break the hegemony of a narrative. The genocide is the sad history of the Beothuk but there is an inversion of points of view in the novel. Assiniwi expresses the desire of creating a counter-narrative of the indigenous communities (Bhabha 1994: 66) by revealing the details of their ways of living and thinking. **How does he re-member the Beothuk?**



Theoretical perspective

- The origin of the novel is reused to transmit stories from the oral tradition as if the Beothuk's story was not that different from other early European nations (Robert, 1988). Equalizing the powers in the historical novel.
- Notion of "re-membering" (Sule, Premat 2016). Here, Re-membering is a way of restructuring the Beothuk's mindset.
- Idea of reconnecting to an ancient history.
- Inversion of the aesthetical canons of the literary tradition with the origin of the novel.



The structure of the book

- Three parts (The Initiate, The invaders, The genocide).
- Discovery of the Beothuk (introspection). The reader is the one who discovers the mindset of the Beothuk (initiation)
- The first part is really important (134 pages) with many details on Anin, the first ancestor of the nation. Inversion of the colonial outlook. Anin makes a travel and circumnavigates the world (spiritual transcendence). Exploration of his own land.
- In order to empower his nation, Anin gave his word that he would know his land and its borders. First answer to the research question: the book can be read as a form of historical novel, a full presentation of the cultural *ethos* of the Beothuk



The initiation

- "If he crossed overland to his village, he would never know if the earth were round, like an island, or just a long, narrow spit of land that stretched endlessly out to sea. And he would be going back on his promise not to return until he had found out" (Assiniwi 2000: 27)
- He encounters the Ashwan (Miq'Maq) and rescues a woman, Woasut. She is also a survivor of another Beothuk clan. Initiatory travel where his courage is at stake. Many appearances of the spirit animal, Gashu-Uwith. Meat offering to Gashu-Uwith (Assiniwi 2000: 18)



The initiation

- Importance of the encounter between Anin and Woasut
- Anin declared to Woasut: " 'Look, my spirit protector. He must have been a member of my family when he was an Addaboutik" (Assiniwi 2000: 39). The clans of Addaboutik and Beothuk are very close to each other. Mention of the Ashwans and the Bouguishamesh
- Humour in the narrative. Gashu-Uwith seems to be afraid (No idealization of the spirit).
- Importance of the geistures in the familiar world. "Anin hunted Mamchet the Beaver, Kosweet the Caribou and Odusweet the Rabbit" (Assiniwi 2000: 43).



The initiation

- Other spirits that can be dangerous. Washi Weuth, the night spirit. The reader enters not only in Anins' mind but also in Woasut's thoughts (Assiniwi 2000: 44)
- "The forest could provide him with some of his needs, but not all of them, and if he were to continue his voyage around his people's land, he could not leave the shores of this water, because it was only by following the shore that he could return to his point of departure" (Assiniwi 2000: 16). Presence of the boreal forest, the high waters, the caribous and the tapatook.



The initiation

- The form of a spiritual presence that translates the possible dangers. Projection of feelings. "She had imagined terrible things happening to him in the six suns he had been away. She herself had been frightened by Gashu-Uwith, whom she had heard prowling near the mamateek at night, and whose tracks she had seen in the snow in the mornings" (Assiniwi 2000: 50).
- Re-membering: a form of *parousia* (quality of presence)
- Voices, visual images of a hostile environment. The reader is initiated in a new way of perceiving the world. Decolonial strategy. A form of *Mitsein* (Olafson 1998: 20)



The initiation

- Erotic scenes of Anin with his wives, they learn him how to behave (Assiniwi 2000: 75).
- Scenes between women. "For the first time in Beothuk and Addaboutik memory, two women loved each other passionately and yet tenderly" (Assiniwi 2000: 100).
- "That night, Wobee the Malouin watched Ooish and Obosheen making **love-between-women** while he was honouring the tall dancer, Badisut. Everyone went to sleep feeling happy" (Assiniwi 2000: 199). No feeling of possession.
- A woman became the chief of the Beothuk nation, Great Iwish (Assiniwi 2000: 153).



The initiation

- Questions of polygamy. Anin has to share time with all his wives, he has to make sure that the clan survives (prosperity of the nation). New perspective on the affection (no predatory feelings). "The affection we feel for each other does not come from any desire to possess each other to the exclusion of others, does it, Della?" (Assiniwi 2000: 119)
- The historical novel (the *saga*) deals with the survival of the clan that becomes a nation.



The initiation

- Perception of the "North" with the Bouguishamesh wife. "That night, Gudruide spoke in Addaboutik about her life in the cold country, which she called 'the North'. She came from an island called Ice-land, she said, and had emigrated to another place called Green-land" (Assiniwi 2000: 70).
- Encounter of Scottish slaves. No slavery in the world of Beothuk. Anin does not understand the word (Assiniwi 2000: 68).



The initiation

- Anin perceives the ethnic differences between the different people and between his wives (Bouguishamesh, Addaboutik, Beothuk...).
- The rules of the clan : balance between women and men
- "A clan chief may chose one woman one sun and another the next. Only the first wife is given preference, according to our custom. If the number of women becomes less than the number of men, then the first wife would be the only wife. And second and third wives must also attend to the needs of other men, so that there will be no disputes among brothers or other male members of the clan" (Assiniwi 2000: 81)



The initiation

- The remembering style is here present in form of dreams. A lot of descriptions of Anin's dreams. Projection of the ancestor in the future (Comparative mythologies).
- "He dreamed of expanding the clan, of the creation of new villages in order to take better advantage of the resources of the island. He saw people living again on the coast of the rising sun, where there was plenty of game and berries" (Assiniwi 2000: 95)



The initiation

- Anin enters in diplomatic relations with other clans to determine the borders of the Beothuk's nation.
- "But I am Anin, chief of the Clan of Gashu-Uwith, and I have no connection with any other clan. I therefore do not know where to land so that I may not offend one clan or the other. I and the other members of my clan will stay in our tapatooks until the village has resolved this dilemma" (Assiniwi 2000: 103).
- No war to determine the borders but an agreement with celebrations. "The villagers had thought of everything in advance, with but one exception: on which side of the river the newcomers should disembark" (Assiniwi 2000: 104)



The invaders

- Nostalgia in the text. "This is how the peace and happiness of simple living have endured, so that the Living Memory of the people did not die" (Assiniwi 2000: 134).
- The clan's Living Memory. The book is built around the re-membering of the Beothuk. Anticlimax in the second part of the book.



The invaders

- Arrival of John Cabot (spelled "Kapitan Jon Kabot" in the text). Hospitality of the Beothuk but disloyalty of John Cabot. "The young people did not remember this lesson, and so the Living Memories of each clan were charged with reminding them of this sorrowful incident, as well as telling them of all the dangers experienced by their ancestor Anin during his voyage around the land of the Beothuk" (Assiniwi 2000: 144).



The invaders

- Acceleration of remembering narratives in the part of the book.
- Death: a processus of migration. Passage to the "Living Memory" (Assiniwi 2000: 165).
- Living Memory: perpetuation of the heritage of the Beothuk.
- History of foreigners that became Beothuk such as Jean Le Guellec. New name, Wobee (Assiniwi 2000: 204).
- New anticlimax with the last part on the genocide.



The genocide

- Chronology at the end of the book (Assiniwi 2000: 323-330). Difference with the chronology made by Ingeborg Marshall (Marshall 1996: 250-253).
- "1829, June 5: Shanawdithit dies of tuberculosis" (Assiniwi 2000: 330).
- "1829: On June 6 Shanawdithit dies of pulmonary tuberculosis. Though some of her people would still have been alive, either in the interior of Newfoundland or in Labrador, the Beothuk tribe as a cultural entity has become extinct" (Marshall 1996: 253).



The genocide

- Brutality of colonialism
- The animal zoos (Assiniwi 2000: 238). Insistence on the notion of "captivity".
- Commentary of the author.
- "What I find the strangest thing of all, however, as the Living Memory of my people, is that the colonists of the island of Newfoundland did not try to use these two young men as go-betweens, or even as interpreters, when they sent their military expeditions into the interior of the island to establish contact with our people" (Assiniwi 2000: 238)



The genocide

- Many references to the notion of “memory”.
- “Last survivors” (Assiniwi 2000: 276)
- “They had lived on this island since the beginning of time, longer than memory” (Assiniwi 2000: 276).
- “The elders said that non-native people have always been afraid of wolves, and tell many stories about those animals in Europe. Their wolves seem much different from the wolves we know on our island. Here the wolves feed on caribou and other animals. They do not eat Beothuk. Non-natives have always been afraid of Beothuk, and they have killed almost all of us” (Assiniwi 2000: 276).

Contrast of non-native/native perspectives



Comparison of chronologies

- "1497, June 24, 5.00 a.m. -John Cabot (Jean Cabot, Giovanni Cabotto) sails into Bonavista Bay. When he returns to England, he takes **three Beothuk** with him and presents them to King Henry VII". "1534, May 10 – Jacques Cartier sails into Catalina Bay, which he names Sainte-Catherine. He also visits Port de Rapont (Quirpont), where he finds Beothuk habitations covered with sailcloth, but does not make contact" (Assiniwi 2000: 323; 324)
- "1497 **Discovery** of Newfoundland by John Cabot" (251). No mention of Jacques Cartier. "1560s-1700s Conflict between Beothuk and Inuit" (Marshall 1996: 251)



Comparison of chronologies

- "1768, August – Some trappers encounter another Beothuk woman and her six-year-old child. She trips while trying to run away and is killed. Her son is taken prisoner and displayed in Liverpool that winter, for a fee of two cents. He is called John August, making the month of his capture. Much later he returns to Catalina to seek the men who murdered his mother, and dies in 1785. It is known whether he succeeded in avenging his mother's death" (Assiniwi 2000: 327).
- "1768 Furriers capture the Beothuk boy and kill his mother" (Marshall 1996: 252).



Comparison of chronologies

- "1803, September 17 William Cull captures a Beothuk woman near Gander and is given a reward for not killing her. At a former ball she is exhibited to the island's upper-class inhabitants, who admire her light hair and pale skin. She prefers the company of children, with whom she plays" (Assiniwi 2000: 328)
- "1803 A Beothuk woman is captured by William Cull and returned to the Exploits River the following year" (Marshall 1996: 252)
- When both chronologies are compared, Assiniwi gives accurate details on the conditions of capture.



Conclusion

- Many historical works to present the history of Beothuk (cultural heritage).
- Re-membering the Beothuk: incorporating a the living memory of a diversity of clans that had a fair deal when they shared the territory. Fair deal which was broken by the invaders. Inversion of colonial prejudices.
- The Beothuk had avant-garde views on gender relations, many women became chiefs and could transmit the living memory.
- The historical novel: an appropriate genre to tell the story of a wasted opportunity between non-native and native people. Deep critics of colonialism which does not look for an encounter.



Conclusion

- Construction of the historical novel: the "saga" (the first part) reminds the origins of the European novel. A perspective that has to be studied: how did Assiniwi reuse some literary "models" (*topoi*) of a form of European tradition (Icelandic sagas)?
- Possibility of having a systematic comparison of Assiniwi's historical novel with the reference book of Ingeborg Marshall (Both books were published in the same period).



Conclusion

- Even recent genetic research on the DNA of the Beothuk (Ivan Semeniuk. (October 12, 2017). "DNA deepens mystery of Newfoundland's lost Beothuk people; Study finds Beothuk are genetically distinct from people that preceded them". *Breaking News from globeandmail.com*. Results of this study: no relation to the Maritime Archaic. Breaks the view on a common ancestral population for all Indigenous people.



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