

Languages of our Land, Indigenous Poems and Stories from Quebec,
Langues de Notre Terre, Poèmes et Récits Autochtones du Québec.
Edited by Susan Ouriou, translated by Christelle Morelli.
Banff Centre Press, Banff, AB, 2014.

By Stephen Morrissey

If you read *Languages of our Land/ Langues de Notre Terre* with any preconceptions about First Nation writing then you will be surprised by these twelve Native writers from Quebec; they are all unique and talented voices. All of these authors write in French and for the most part they live either north of or in the Quebec City region.

I suspect that many of the readers of this book will be English-speaking. What might be interesting for them is to read the English translation and the French text together. Don't just ignore the original text, even with thirty year old high school French you can benefit from this reading. With no offense to Christelle Morelli, who translated this book into English, you will see the limitation of translation. There is an almost ineffable quality to a text in its original language that can elude even the best translator. For instance, here is the beginning of Mélina Vassiliou's wonderful poem "Birthing/Writing". In English the text is flat:

birthing
writing

writing
my future

But in the original French you have the wonderful sound of the words, as Mélina Vassiliou wrote them; they have vigour not found in the English translation. Here is the same passage but in French:

Progéniture
Écriture

écriture
mon futur

These are powerful words in French: "écriture/ mon futur". You can get the full force of the words by reading them out loud several times, "écriture/ mon futur", "écriture/ mon futur". It becomes mantra-like and an inspiring motto reminding poets that the profundity of our existence lies in communicating our vision, it is our present and our future. But, in English, these lines don't carry the same passion for either the reader or for the work of the translated author. Indeed, in English "écriture" sounds like "a creature", and that is what writing is like, it is a primeval creature or spirit inside of one that must be recognized and allowed its voice. To deny this expression is to stifle or destroy one's inner being. We could try, "a creature/ my future", and improvise on this in the following text; "Progéniture" means "offspring" or "progeny".

The Innu poet Réal Junior Leblanc writes of a "Roadblock 138 - Innu Resistance"; he asks,

How can we
defend our heritage
and our children's future
against the moneyed giants?

I used to live near the New York State border on Route 138, the highway that Leblanc refers to, it is mostly a secondary highway that runs its 1400 km length slightly diagonally east and west through country and city across the Province of Quebec. I can see that in some ways this road is an asphalt soul of the province connecting, linking, joining people from north to south. This is how the St. Lawrence River used to be spoken of, as a kind of blue soul of the province, but perhaps Route 138 can become today's version of this idea. I am reminded of the Mohawk blockade of the Mercier Bridge, on Route 138 as it enters Montreal, back in 1990, and the reaction of the majority population against this manifestation. Any answer for Leblanc's question, "how can we defend our heritage?", is both difficult and complicated; however, Leblanc writes,

I weep
for all the rivers
they will divert
for all the forests
they will plunder
for all the lands
they will flood
for all the mountains
they will raze

To them, I will say always
from the depths of my soul

No

It might be difficult to maintain a "No" when the force of modernity and so-called progress surround one. So much is political in Quebec; French, English, First Nations. We who live here know that our identity is in the language, or languages, one speaks; it is our endless conversation, our endless dance. Even though writing in French, Manon Nolin in her poem "The Land of my Language" is referring to her Innu language:

Roots of our ancestral lands
a word, a language
that of my ancestors
bear my promised land

The language of my cradle
becomes my land
and so the territory of my tongue
remains my life's *Innu-aimun* [my italics; trans. "Innu language"]

If poetry is the voice of the human soul, as I believe it is, then these Native writers are the voice of the soul of their community. These writers are the voice of hope and rebirth, and as the editor of the book, Susan Ouriou, writes in her Introduction, they bring to us a "reinterpretation of history and a rediscovery of spirit."

There is so much of interest in *Languages of our Land/ Langues de Notre Terre* that I regret not being about to discuss each author in some detail; they all deserve to be recognized. However, perhaps the poet Johanne Laframboise speaks for all of the writers in this book when she writes,

One cannot kill
poetry

it withstands all
for us

we owe it to ourselves
to be poets
in this century

"One cannot kill/ poetry", that is a statement of survival and transformation and a wonderful affirmation of the creative spirit. All of these writers affirm their vision and their community in this excellent anthology.

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