The native challenge: Rita Mestokosho´s fight for the Innu minority in Québec

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Nobel speech on 7 December 2008 Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio

• "I am Innu, and Innu means human being. We are almost 15,000 Innus, split into 11 communities, 2 in Labrador with English as their second language, 9 in Quebec with French as their second language. We live between 2 worlds, the modern and the traditional. Finding a balance between them is not easy because our traditional land is always threatened by the bigger forest-industries, the dams for hydro-energy and the mines. Our life and survival are linked to the survival of the rivers, the forest and the lakes. Writing in a language, in the French language is also a necessity. It enables us to reach a wider audience for expressing our fears in a poetical way."
Rita Mestokosho

• An Innu writer who became more famous after Le Clézio’s Nobel speech
• She writes for the survival of the Innu community.
• She uses different languages to address this message to a broader audience
1) The Innu cosmic world-view
The word Innu

- The term "innu" is actually linked to the Earth which, in the Innu world-view is totally integrated to the Innus' way of life. Rita M. poem expresses clearly this relationship
- "With the unique smell of the woods
- Ingrained so deep it is in your bones
- you dwell alone with your thoughts
- but from the way you act and live
- I sense you miss your way of life"
- You appeals to the Innu soul, the breath of life linked to the Earth.
- "Your message is to protect the land
- I'll protect it for as long as I live with it
- but I won't neglect to learn
- your message which is so sacred
- and share it with the world." (Mestokosho, 2010)
The references to the Earth

• Husserl, the philosopher, founder of the phenomenology, wrote a text called *La Terre qui ne se meut pas* in 1934 which gives some basic principles of phenomenology.

• The Earth is the constituent genesis of a mankind, an archi-home belonging to an "archi-people" with its "archi-territory". It is one among the stars in the infinite space of the world. As a support to all bodies, it cannot be a principle, but a ground-body on which human beings move.

• Innu cosmogony = a consciousness of the belonging to the Earth
Interview with Rita Mestokosho (Stockholm, 2009)

• "It is not easy to adjust to a calendar when you never know what might happen to you to-morrow. With all that's going on in the world... we are not centered on ourselves. Our vision is very wide. We believe that the earth is our mother, We believe that the sun is our grand-father. We believe that the moon is our grand-mother. And every human creature living on the Earth, is our younger brother, our younger sister. We are responsible to take care of ourselves. And what's more, responsible to teach every one we meet how essential it is to take care of the Earth because it is the most beautiful legacy that we will leave to our children and grand-children."
Writing or praying the Earth?

• The awareness of nature is part of a claim for a way of life “we are aware now that this little lost planet is more than a communal place to all the human beings. It is our house, home, heimat, it is our motherland and what is more, our Earth-Fatherland” (Morin, 1993)

• The Earth as a natural and cultural element

• How is the transmission possible in such a context?
2) The right name at the right place?

- The path, the print, the light are recurrent themes in Rita M's poetry: the future invites us to re-examine the past and to get inspired by the spirit of the ancestors.
- "In the life of an Innu, there are two paths stretching away in front of him. The first is made by the footsteps of men who have gone before him, this path is hard for it is knee-deep in troubles as well as joys. He will walk this path to go from place to place where he lives"
2) The right name at the right place?

- Rita M. has mixed feelings about the term "native" in Canada. The ancestral minorities are those which have been living on the territory since a certain amount of time and which have signed territorial agreements in the past (1982 constitutional chart article 25).

- "When you are talking about native persons, you often hear about tobacco trafficking, trafficking this and that. But you never hear about Innus or native persons wanting to protect their territory. You never hear about their efforts to keep their mother tongue, to teach their mother tongue at school. Because we will never be Québécois, we will never be Canadians. We want to exist as Innus, because being innu means to be a human being. As Innu is a guardian of the Earth, and it is exactly what we want to teach our children." (Interview, 2009)
2) The right name at the right place?

- The transmission is marked by the recollection and the repetition of simple gestures, a way of life linked to a form of animism where natural elements are sacred as they sustain the principle of life.

- During the 17th century Jesuit missionaries tried to christen the Innu communities and in the 19th century Innu communities get special pieces of land called "reserves". Rita M. cannot accept the term "Reserve" which translates a desire to park the communities somewhere in order to bereave them from their territories.
2) The right name at the right place?

• "We were placed in reserves. That's is where the Indians were placed, because we were called Indians. "Trauma is a recurrent theme in the process of memorising as Rita M. explains it to us. The suffering came from the fact that these communities felt like strangers in their own land. This incident of acculturation developed when the government defined a territory for the communities. They were forced” (Interview, 2009)
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" We were placed in reserves. That is where the Indians were placed, because we were called Indians. " Trauma is a recurrent theme in the process of memorising as Rita M. explains it to us. The suffering came from the fact that these communities felt like strangers in their own land. This incident of acculturation developed when the government defined a territory for the communities. They were forced later on to adopt a way of life. Rita M. explains how she was seen as a student in a Quebec school” (Interview, 2009)
2) The right name at the right place?

- "I was placed in a religious convent with my cousin and another friend. We were 56 girls, most of them from Quebec, rich girls placed in private schools. We had been sent there, my cousin and the other girl, because we were good students. I remember how the nuns separated us when we arrived. And then the usual question "how long have you been in Canada?" I thought: "Well, what a strange question". But I remembered that in the history books at school I learned history written by people saying that I was a barbarian. It hurt. I started to react, because I could not be a savage; it hurt me.” (Interview)

- How do we recompose the Innu identity?
3) The future of the Innu community

• Rita M. feels that she is invested in the special mission of writing in order to be politically influent.

• "Poetry chose me. But when I use poetry as a language, I know that I can go everywhere. I know that the doors will be opened. If I use a more political discourse, some doors may stay closed, especially those next to the government. I am convinced in my message. Because it was my grand-parents' voice, and I am sure that it was their own grand-parents' voice. That is the reason why I am convinced that I was born for that reason." (Interview, 2009)
3) The future of the Innu community

- The language is what creates a common space, what binds us together: the mother tongue is Innu aimun but French the second language which Rita learns at the age of 4 at primary school is the language of communication to a broader audience in the perspective of what is defined as la francophonie. La Francophonie represents the cultural diversity around the French language in a post-colonial approach.
Conclusions

• Innu identity linked to belonging to a place
• The narrative process as the last chance for surviving
• No migration possible
• Literary spaces as another way of recreating an imaginary territory
• Ongoing projects at Stockholm University
• Conference 22-23 August 2017 (“Has Literature a healing power?”)
References

