

Claude Denis. *We Are Not You: First Nations and Canadian Modernity*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1997.

review by Nan McBlane

Denis uses the Peters vs. Campbell¹ torts case as the basis for his criticism of Canadian "whitestream" colonial practices towards Aboriginal people. He further explores the conjunction of racism and sexism both in the case and the lives of Aboriginal people in general. The second stated aim of *We Are Not You* is a criticism of modernity. Although Denis does not state that the concepts of colonialism, sexism and modernity are interrelated, the body of the work strongly suggests this is so.

Briefly, in the Peters case, a Coast Salish woman asked the elders in her community to initiate her partner to *syewen* in an effort to help him with alcohol, marital and other problems. Joseph Peters' permission was not gained, although the elders thought they had permission of the family. After four days, and when Peters complained about health problems, he was released. He subsequently sued the elders, two bands, one of his aunts, and his partner, Pat Michaels for "assault, battery and false imprisonment" (p. 11). These were civil, not criminal charges. The case against the bands, the aunt and Pat Michaels were subsequently dismissed but the justice of the British Columbia Supreme Court found for Peters against the elders who did the initiation.

Using poststructuralist theory as his basis, Denis draws the reader's attention to the differences in the two discourses – that of "whitestream" (read Anglo) Canada and that of Aboriginal Canada. The law suit was filed under "whitestream" law, that is, British common law. Here the treatment of Peters was viewed by himself, the B.C. Supreme Court and the media as assault and battery. Although reticent to speak about the initiation rites, the First Nations (Salish) view is that of cleansing and healing. The connotations, in either language, appear to be obvious but there is somewhat more to it than just language. Denis argues throughout *We Are Not You* that the differences in the discourse are important because they reflect the way in which White Canadians treat Aboriginal people – as "them," and therefore not important or marginal to Canadian society.

Sexism towards Aboriginal women (and First Nations women, in particular) can be noted in the judge's treatment of Pat Michaels in the

1 The case is real, but these are the fictitious names Denis gives to the protagonists to protect their privacy. With the exception of two newspapers, all of the place and person names in the account are fictional.

Peters v. Campbell case. He is antagonistic towards her and the testimony she and Peters' aunt gives is denigrated, along with the women who gave it. Further, the media reports of the case reflect this bias. Pat Michaels' concerns for Joseph Peters and the motivations for the initiation are buried late in the newspaper reports. Denis argues that such reporting means that these two central points of the initiation are missed because readers have, by this time, gone on to other stories. The voices of the women and the elders are not heard and yet they are the key voices.

Sexism in the Indian Act is also noted by Denis. Although he does not phrase it in this manner, what we are looking at is a political, legal and cultural system that was/is patrilineal being superimposed on political, legal and cultural systems that were often matrilineal. Such an imposition lead to the loss of voice and power by women and thus helps to hasten the destruction of the culture.

Denis' criticism of modernity is twofold: he addresses the assumption of modernity that it can best protect individual rights and he discusses modernity's loss of spirituality. He takes the debate that appears to be about individual *versus* collective rights (modernity *versus* Aboriginal views) and shows why he thinks the debate is false. To do so he gives a history of the development of individual rights in Western civilization and says that these rights are very much idealized and that each of us is more connected to, and therefore, more responsible to community than the ideal implies. Aboriginal culture takes individual rights seriously as well but overtly acknowledges that we are all connected to one another and to community. Thus we are all responsible to others and community.

In the discussion about loss of spirituality Denis looks at the separation of state and polity which Western civilizations have made. This is so important to Western societies that it is entrenched in their constitutions (e.g. the United States, France and Canada). Islamic and Aboriginal societies worldwide do not make this separation. Again, using poststructuralism, he suggests that the Western discourse is unable to express the spiritual world in a manner necessary to understand Canadian First Nations ceremonies such as *syewen*, and therefore is unable to appreciate the Aboriginal connectedness to the spiritual world. He claims that modernity may have much to learn from Aboriginal spirituality. In fact understanding both the spirituality and the connectedness to nature are necessary if First Nations self-government is ever to be meaningful in Canada. It is further necessary if we, as a species, are going to be able to slow the damage we are doing to our planet and its environment.

Throughout *We Are Not You*, Denis carefully states or implies that the relationship between the Canadian polity and the Aboriginal peoples of

Canada is very much determined by a lack of understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal culture, on the part of "whitestream" Canada and that there is a very uneven power structure involved here.

Somewhat of a groundbreaking book, *We Are Not You* is most difficult to read, as Denis himself admits in his discussion of poststructuralist theory. A basic understanding of the systemic racism Aboriginal people face on a daily basis, of the Indian Act, and of shamanic traditions might help the reader make better sense of some of this book. It is thought provoking and should make "whitestream" Canadians look more closely at the institutional arrangements within their country.

Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Astchee). *Never without Consent: James Bay Crees' Stand Against Forcible Inclusion Into an Independent Quebec*. Toronto: ECW Press, 1998.

review by James B. Waldram

Never without Consent is an extraordinary book. Its intent is very simple: to set out the position of the Cree of James Bay on the issue of Quebec sovereignty. It is based on an earlier work, a massive and highly technical report called *Sovereign Injustice: Forcible Inclusion of the James Bay Crees and Cree Territory into a Sovereign Quebec* (1995). This report was a largely inaccessible, primarily legal study of the various issues surrounding Quebec sovereignty as they were perceived by the Cree. In *Never without Consent*, the Cree have produced a highly readable version that is sprinkled with poignant political cartoons, photographs, and excerpts from speeches by leaders such as Matthew Coon Come. This book opens up the Cree position to Canadians as a whole, and does so in a way that is possibly without parallel in Canada.

The main argument that the Cree present is that their territory cannot be included within the boundaries of an independent Quebec without their consent. The book takes stands on some of the most fundamental issues plaguing the debate, including that a unilateral declaration of independence would be illegal. In doing so, the Cree must walk a fine line. They appear to acquiesce to Canadian law and the Constitution when it benefits them, while maintaining their position that the Cree are themselves a self-determining people. This apparent contradiction is characteristic of the discourse on Aboriginal self-determination in general, and it would be safe to infer that the Cree (and other Aboriginal peoples) do not see any contradiction at all. Nevertheless, it is amusing to see the Cree in effect