

## **Review: *First Person Plural* by Sophie McCall and *Oral History on Trial* by Bruce Granville Miller.**

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Sophie McCall. *First Person Plural: Aboriginal Storytelling and the Ethics of Collaborative Authorship*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011. 254 pp. ISBN 978-0-7748-1980-0

Bruce Granville Miller. *Oral History on Trial: Recognizing Aboriginal Narratives in the Courts*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011. 195 pp. ISBN 978-0-7748-2071-4

Sophie McCall's beautifully written and powerfully argued *First Person Plural* redefines Aboriginal collaborative writing, and with it the concept of Aboriginal voice, by expanding the genre of the "told-to narrative" prevalent in biography and collections of traditional stories to include collectively authored texts such as the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, court decisions such as *Delgamuukw vs Canada* [1997], and films such as *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*. McCall is a highly knowledgeable and sharp reader, and her attention to detail, especially when reconstructing historical contexts (the synopsis of *Delgamuukw* is particularly strong), makes *First Person Plural* a valuable interdisciplinary contribution to the field of oral history.

*First Person Plural* is organized around significant moments in recent Aboriginal history with chapters devoted to the literature of the MacKenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry, the Oka Crisis, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), and the *Delgamuukw* decision. This elegant structure allows McCall to historicize the literary and theoretical debates concerning 'Aboriginal voice' that have preoccupied studies of Aboriginal literature since 1987. McCall enters these debates in the first chapter "'Where is the Voice Coming from?' Appropriations and Subversions of the 'Native Voice,'" where she engages with the influential critics in the field such as Craig Womack and Arnold Krupat. The role of a collaborator as both an ally and a traitor inflects the reception of told-to narratives, and calls for the analysis of authority and power in these texts that McCall provides. Throughout the book, McCall remains aware of the particular circumstances under which each work is produced as well as the relations of power and authority framing them. This is particularly striking in her analysis of the collective life history *Night Spirits* in the chapter "'My Gift Is a Gift': The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and the Politics of Reconciliation" and of the film *Atanarjuat* in "'I Can Only Sing This Song to Someone Who Understands It': Community Filmmaking and the Politics of Partial Translation." The chapter "Coming to Voice in the North: The MacKenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry and the Works of Hugh Brody" is a sensitive yet rigorous analysis of Berger and Brody's writing made even more effective by their pairing. McCall takes a similar approach in "'There is a Time Bomb in Canada': The Legacy of the Oka Crisis" which places films by Alanis Obomsawin and writing by Lee Maracle together and "'What the Map Cuts Up the Story Cuts Across': Translating Oral

Traditions and Aboriginal Land Title” which reads *Delgamuukw* alongside the collaboration of Okanagan storyteller Harry Robinson and Wendy Wickwire. By expanding authorship to include “land claims negotiators, map-makers, and activists, working with collaborators who may or may not be from the same community or share a similar cultural background,” McCall usefully recasts collaboration as alliance building (206).

In *Oral History on Trial: Recognizing Aboriginal Narratives in the Courts*, Bruce Granville Miller brings an anthropologist’s perspective to the treatment of Aboriginal oral traditions in Canadian courts. In his more than twenty years of experience as a professor of anthropology and as an expert witness who has given testimony in a number of cases in Canada and the United States, he has watched the transformation of the methods and standards used to evaluate oral history as evidence. After *Delgamuukw*, Miller observes the court shying away from the use of oral narratives despite hard-won recognition of their value. In addition to the legal issues arising from using oral history in court, Miller sees this “retreat” as giving in to the mistaken notion of incommensurability that McCall also finds unconsciously animating Hugh Brody’s method. In contrast, Miller emphasizes where there is potential to understand and to integrate epistemologies in the court. Citing Aboriginal scholar Winona Wheeler and Stó:lō historian Sonny McHalsie, Miller locates the failure of the Canadian justice system to integrate oral tradition in dismissive attitudes towards orality in western culture at large as well as ideas deeply embedded in the practice of law. Because the court examines and cross-examines evidence, it fails to see that “[o]ral narratives are not simply repositories of facts awaiting examination, an idea that has confused the court at times” (166). While these structural problems make it difficult for the court to understand oral narratives in the absence of the context in which they are held, Miller believes that it is possible to incorporate them in testimony and suggests concrete solutions such as granting expert status to Aboriginal oral narratives on the basis of reputation.

The greatest strength of Miller’s book is its analysis of the Canadian legal system as a culture in its own right. Miller’s study of the legal process, including the selection and adjudication of evidence by the researchers who prepare legal cases, the constraints placed on legal teams by the conventional rules of evidence, and the beliefs guiding the opinions expressed by judges, offers valuable insight into the problems facing Aboriginal peoples in Canadian courts. As Miller concludes, “the adversarial legal process is clearly not the best venue” for learning to reconcile Aboriginal oral tradition and western epistemologies (164), yet it is precisely where the consequences of failure to understand Aboriginal culture and history are the most grave. Miller grounds these conclusions in particular contexts, such as the problems facing the Stó:lō people’s efforts to archive cultural knowledge, and thus demonstrates how oral narratives “derive from concrete, particular circumstances” rather than “abstract, generalized notion” (172). It is this distinction that is the subject of the literature review at the beginning of the book which moves rapidly from source to source without contextualizing and relies on the reader’s prior knowledge; for example, although cited in the opening chapter, the Crown’s favoured expert Alexander von Gernet is not actually introduced until page 118, yet the chapter in question, “Court and Crown,” provides an insightful analysis of von Gernet’s opinions, and succeeds in turning the Crown’s position on evidence back on itself,

showing specifically how von Gernet (2006) misreads or reinterprets the work cited by scholars such as Cohen, Cruikshank, Henige and Vansina among others, and sometimes verges on the kind of “cherry-picking” of data that Miller critiques.

Reading these books together makes it clear that literary scholars who study oral narratives, especially the textualized orature produced in Aboriginal communities, have something to offer the discussion of oral traditions in the courts – and why an excellent companion to *Oral History on Trial* can be found in *First Person Plural*.