Louise Poulin

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“White Native Relations:
A Historical perspective.

An Interview with Pierrette Désy.”

Un document produit en version numérique par Jean-Marie Tremblay, bénévole,
professeur de sociologie au Cégep de Chicoutimi

Courriel: jean-marie_tremblay@uqac.ca

Site web pédagogique : <http://www.uqac.ca/jmt-sociologue/>

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Courriel : desy.pierrette@uqam.ca

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Pierrette Désy is a professor with the Department of History at the Université du Québec à Montréal. She studied ethnology in Paris where she obtained her Ph.D. at the Sorbonne. Mme Désy's fields of expertise are cultural anthropology and ethno-history, and her most recent research involves the study of contemporary and historical Amerindian societies.

Author of several articles, her latest publications include *Trente ans de captivité chez les Indiens Ojibwa. Le récit de John Tanner*¹ (Payôt, 1983). She has contributed to the *Dictionnaire des Mythologies*² (Flammarion, 1981) and to the *Dictionnaire des Poétiques*³ (to be published by Flammarion), and done research on territorial occupation by North American Indians in Canada in the 19th century (vol. II of the *Atlas historique du Canada*). She is currently preparing a manuscript on captives taken by both the French and the Indians in the 17th and 18th centuries. She was also president of the Canadian Anthropology Association in 1985-86.

Following the Oka crisis at Kanesatake in August 1990, Pierrette Désy published a series of three articles on the historical land claims of the Kanesatake Iroquois, and an "ethno-literary" article will appear in the May 1991 issue of *Cul-*

¹ Livre disponible dans [Les Classiques des sciences sociales](#). JMT.

² Texte disponible dans [Les Classiques des sciences sociales](#). JMT.

³ Texte inédit, jamais publié, maintenant disponible, sous le titre “Ethnopoétique amérindienne” dans [Les Classiques des sciences sociales](#). JMT.

ture. She also made a presentation at Kahnawake to representative European parliament in January of 1991.

She looks forward to establishing a centre for Native Studies in order to foster better understanding of native peoples and their cultures.

We interviewed Mme Déry to gain better insight into the tensions existing between White and Native Peoples and to examine the risks associated with this unrest. In the following interview, Mme Déry shares her views with us.

Pierrette Déry

How were you as a researcher affected by the Oka Crisis of last summer ?

I am not an expert on the Iroquois people, however, from the outset of the crisis I was struck by the lack of understanding of their condition as demonstrated by journalists and media commentators. More often than not, the content of media reports was completely unfounded. There was an urgent need to understand the situation from a historical perspective. During the 1970's, I followed native movements, such as the "American Indian Movement", very closely. The 1990 siege at Kanesatake and the siege at Wounded Knee in 1973 were similar in a number of ways. During my research for the *Atlas historique du Canada*, I had gathered data on every Indian reservation in Canada in the 19th century. It was therefore relatively easy for me, based on my files on the Iroquois and the Algonquins of Lac des Deux-Montagnes, to reconstruct the history of land claims and to show that since the beginning of the 18th century, the Natives had been continuously claiming the same thing. It would seem, then, that this claim could and should have been settled long ago. In a more general sense, the crisis afforded an opportunity for Quebecers and other Canadians to understand the magnitude of native land claims, but, unfortunately, not to understand the Natives or to help them understand us. Something else that struck me was the general feeling of a collective guilty conscience that was expressed by most Canadians and Quebecers. But what good is a guilty conscience if we cannot find concrete solutions to this type of situation ?

I think it is fair to say that native claims fall into two categories : land claims and the desire for political autonomy. Are these closely linked ?

Clearly they are linked ; in fact, they are inseparable. Consider what would happen if Québec were to be given either autonomy without territory or territory without autonomy. We can see the result of this today, namely, a host of problems. The native peoples consider it essential to have their own territory and to have autonomy within their territory. The Sechelts of British Columbia, for example, enjoy a degree of autonomy that permits them to manage offices and run businesses. In the 1960's, the American Bureau of Indian Affairs, which wanted to close Indian reservations, was able to persuade a number of tribes, including the

Menominee of Wisconsin, to leave their reservations. The Menominee inhabited a rather large reservation on which stood a mill that provided employment to inhabitants of the reservation. The economy of the reservation was quite healthy thanks to the spirit of cooperation among its inhabitants. However, as soon as their land ceased to be a designated reservation, and reverted to having no particular political status, the Menominee economy began to unravel. This in turn threatened to disintegrate their sense of cultural belonging, without which they would eventually disperse. As the last remaining barrier between Natives and Non-Natives, the reservation is important because it sets boundaries that allow the Indians to live in a place that is uniquely their own. The American government, therefore, stopped its practice of closing reservations because it had brought about a catastrophe. When Jean Chrétien, then Canadian Minister of Indian Affairs, tabled his famous "White Paper" proposing the closure of reservations, the native peoples responded by drafting a "Red Paper" in which they expressed their opposition to his plans. The reservation represents for native people a kind of autonomy. In principle, then, Natives should be granted more autonomy over larger territories. But this is easier said than done, because native tribes do not always agree on claims.

In Canada, native peoples differ from one region to another, each tribe having its own language and culture. They also relate differently to the political systems that govern them. The relationship of the Hurons to the Québec government, for instance, is different from that of the Blackfoot of Alberta to the government of that province. It would be wrong to assume that all native peoples act in the same manner and have the same needs at the same time. The Nishga of British Columbia, for example, are not claiming the same things as the Montagnais of Québec's north shore. The respective histories of these groups are also different. On the other hand, all Natives have one thing in common : the justifiable desire to have their land claims settled.

Above : Native worker employed by the Mahemigew Peat Moss Company, on the Lennox Island Reservation, Prince Edward Island, 1985.

What policies do you feel should be adopted in order to settle land claims that differ from one province to another ?

Ideally, we should listen to those who understand the issues at stake, by which I mean firstly the interested parties and secondly, the experts. Let's take, for example, the Hurons in Québec. They have land claims on l'Isle d'Orléans. In this case a team should be formed to find historical and cartographic documents, etc., which would allow the Hurons to settle their claim. In most regions of Canada,

there are, in fact, teams of this type made up of native and non-native researchers. Once again, I emphasize that land claims differ from one situation to another. Perhaps we should rethink the structure of the Department of Indian Affairs, which is unable to respond effectively to demands for settlement. We understand that there are, at present, 1,500 land claims pending but that only one is settled each year. There is obviously a problem here. Perhaps Indian Affairs should devote itself entirely to settling land claims. I realize that this problem cannot be solved that easily, but it would be a start.

If documents and proof exist, why is it so difficult to settle a land claim ?

There are two types of land claims. First, there are those claims that concern only one tribe whose claims are well defined. An example of this is the Hurons and the forty acres of land that previously belonged to them and were later re-claimed by the government. This type of claim can be settled easily. Claims of the second type are far more numerous and complex. They generally relate to territorial disputes involving progressive territorial encroachment". In northern Québec, for example, claims have been made by the James Bay Cree and the Naskapi of the Schefferville region. Their claims relate to the "Kaniapiskau" region, which was also used by other tribes, such as the Inuit and the Montagnais. The Cree obtained financial compensation from the government but the Montagnais received nothing. They did not agree with the treaty and consequently refused to sign it because they felt their original territory was in fact far larger than specified in the treaty. Another example involves the Saint-Lawrence valley, where Cartier met Iroquois during his explorations in the 16th century, but Champlain encountered Algonquins in the 17th century. Still another example is the Tuscarora Indians who originated from South Carolina and who, in fleeing from the colonists, joined the Five Nations Iroquois during the 18th century. We can see from these examples that the concept of territoriality cannot be defined by fixed borders ; it is much too fluid and complex in terms of time and space to be limited by a single definition.

"... [T]here are, at present, 1,500 land claims pending. but... only one is settled each year. There is obviously a problem here."

Native dancer in traditional costume, Ontario, 1984.

Were relations between the Whites and the Indians always so strained ? Can you think of any historical precedent wherein the two groups agreed with and respected each other ?

Let me read you an excerpt from Les mémoires d'outre-tombe by Chateaubriand. "The sachem of the Onondagas received me and bid me to sit upon a mat. He spoke English and understood some French ; my guide knew Iroquois ; our conversation went well". I wonder, whenever I read such anecdotes, what process of regression we went through, and what slope we must have descended to have wandered so far off track. Having now reached the end of the 20th century and

realizing that our relations with the native peoples are strained, we assume that this has always been the case. Of course, there have always been tensions between the two groups ! The Europeans brought with them diseases that were foreign to America. We measles and smallpox were, among other diseases, virtually responsible for a form of genocide. Obviously, history influences future generations, but harmonious relations developed in spite of these problems. Let's take, for example, the story of the *coureurs de bois* and the *voyageurs* who departed from Trois-Rivières or Montréal and travelled through the Great Lakes region to the Red River in Manitoba, then married Ojibwa and Cree women. These men were clearly on good terms with the native people because their children became the first Métis. During the 17th century, when the French dealt with the Natives, they recognized that these peoples belonged to nations ; in other words, there existed at that time between the French and the Indians a relationship of mutual respect. We learn from historical documents that in 1701, Callières, the governor of New France, received Indian delegations for the purpose of exchanging prisoners and to forge alliances. The governor addressed the Indian representatives as equals, and in an extremely eloquent manner. The real deterioration in relations began when the State started trying to govern everything. It divided up the land, drew borders and created reservations without negotiating with the native people. It was in the 19th century that the Indians were completely confined to reservations, and we cannot comprehend what is happening today without a good understanding of the events that took place then. At that time, the conquest of the West and of the Indians was being advocated. The Canadian government, like the American government, was influenced by the "Doctrine of Manifest Destiny", which predicted the complete disappearance of the Indian people in the short term. For the Indian, this meant assimilation and the possibility of total disappearance. Any policy dealing with native peoples, then, was founded upon the false assumption that, one day, the Indians would disappear. But, as we now know, this is not at all the case ; after 1920, the native population ceased its decline and has since grown at a rate that surpasses that of the Canadian population as a whole. All of our present policies on native relations should, therefore, be rethought.

What happened during the 19th century to cause such a deterioration in White-Indian relations ?

The advent of colonization and the establishment of European colonists in North America brought with it the policy of confinement of the Natives. In Ontario, for example, the native population has always been quite large. Some tribes in the Great Lakes region used to subsist from agriculture and gathering. The massive influx of Europeans created a need for farmland. Since good land was often owned by Indians, the colonists would strip them of their land and send them to reservations. The quest for land to farm and to mine is really at the root of land disputes. The situation was different in the case of the fur trade as it did not give rise to the same degree of displacement, epidemics however, had wiped out the Indian population in many areas.

Can we learn anything from history ?

That is the big question. We always say that we can learn from history, however, the most striking aspect of the Oka crisis is the fact that Mohawk and Algonquin land claims have not changed since 1712. This is a history lesson that the Department of Indian Affairs could have learned, but did not ! The Oka crisis attracted the attention of many people. All of a sudden, our politicians discovered that North American Indians are here to stay, and have no intention of disappearing. The intellectual community is realizing that the history of Canada cannot be written without including the history of its native peoples. In Quebec, we have even more on our plate ; at least in Montreal, where the native population continues to grow, we must create a Native Studies centre at the university level. In closing, I would also like to say that our relations with the Natives do not have to be strained. Last summer emotional turmoil reached an unusually high level, to which we are not accustomed. Today, we must find a harmonious way of getting along, and the natives are the first to espouse this idea. It is a kind of challenge which we cannot afford to ignore.

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