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As a visibly white aboriginal woman, Winona Linn experiences her aboriginal identity as a site of contention. Linn's experience of racism, as related to the denial of her personal identity by non-native individuals, is the site from which Linn has written "Knock-Off Native," a poem which responds to a man who called Linn a "knock-off Pocahontas" after one of her performances. Linn expands her exploration of identity to confront the difficult questions surrounding aboriginal authenticity, specifically how authenticity ties into the marketability of minority groups and how it alters definitions of nativeness. Linn's work is also steeped in environmental advocacy, a theme which landed her in the role of the 2011 poet laureate of the Federal Green Party of Canada. In order to better understand the implications of Linn's advocacy, I will examine the link between ecocriticism and aboriginal identity with respect to the image of the "Ecological Indian." Linn's poem further reveals the political nature of literature; in addition to Linn's direct connection with the Federal Green Party, she exposes Canada as a genocidal nation, thereby situating the outside reader as a member of a guilty party, and reminding the critic of the dangers of seeing themselves as immune to the tragedies of the past. Finally, it is important to explore Linn's choice of medium in order to assess the impact of her

work. The accessibility of both Slam poetry as a form and YouTube as a publishing medium has interesting implications for literature's ability to educate. In "Knock-Off Native," Winona Linn successfully deploys a declaration of identity to leverage a platform to discuss some of the difficult issues which arise in studies of aboriginal literature. It is these discussions of authenticity, environmental advocacy, the politicization of literature, and accessibility which make Linn's work successful as a text through which to examine aboriginal identity.

Winona Linn is a triple-threat: she is young, Meskwaki, and a woman, and she uses these three potentially disadvantageous forces to powerfully respond to her personal experience of racism. Originally from Kingston, Ontario, Linn made a name for herself in Halifax while attending the University of King's College. She graduated after "underachieving at finishing an over-expensive, unfulfilling undergraduate degree that she hopes to put to good use" (Speak OUT Poetry). Despite "underachieving," her time in university was not spent idly. In 2011, she was made the poet laureate of the Federal Green Party of Canada, for whom she wrote and performed political poetry, her most well-known piece being "Leave," which compares the governing Conservative Party to a bad boyfriend. Besides addressing political issues, Linn writes "confessional autobiographical fiction" ("Winona Linn - Facebook"). "Knock-Off Native" conflates these two poetic commitments by addressing both the inherent racism in Canada and the political issues surrounding aboriginal affairs as well as Linn's personal experience as a visibly white Meskwaki woman.

Linn experiences an unusual mechanism of racism because she has a fair complexion and appears to be white. She opens "Knock-Off Native" by asserting that she is Meskwaki despite being described by a man as a "knock-off" after one of her performances because her "skin didn't mesh with his perception of Indian" ("Knock-Off Native"). Linn works against her racist

systems by juxtaposing her experience with the historical experience of the Meskwaki people. She refers to the history of her people in the line, “If he wanted to offend me, he should have called me Keokuk, Blackhawk, or Wapello the Prince” (Linn). These are three historical Meskwaki and Sauk, often called “Sac and Fox,” leaders who let their people down and were ultimately responsible for the loss of their land to the British (see “Keokuk” and Lewis).

Sac and Fox is a misnomer used to identify the Meskwaki and Sauk tribes. The Meskwaki people are often informally referred to as the Fox Tribe. The colonial American government blurred their identity by equating the Meskwaki and Sauk tribes in historical documents. While the Sauk and Fox tribes formed a close alliance during the years surrounding the War of 1812, they have always been “territorially and politically autonomous” (“Meskwaki Tribe”). The blurred identity of these tribes persists in modern scholarly documents. It presented an obstacle in my research because it is near-impossible to determine to which tribe historical literature is referring when the Sauk and Fox tribes are falsely depicted as a single identity. The essay “Genocide, Racism, and Canada Day” mentions Canadian laws and acts which served to oppress aboriginal people in Canada. Many of these laws involve the distortion of aboriginal identity (Gehl Gii-Zhigaate-Mnidoo-Kwe). It is not a big step from here to see how the blending of aboriginal tribal identities is another instance of the oppressive force of colonization in action. In my experience, the individual identity and history of the autonomous Sauk and Fox tribes are lost in historical literature written by British settlers because of this refusal to acknowledge that each tribe has its own unique history and governing system. It is interesting that this problem emerges in Linn’s work. Just as the Sauk and Fox tribes were historically considered a unified tribe because of their political alliance and the ignorance of the European settlers to their difference, Linn’s visibly white appearance has caused her identity to be blurred with a white

identity by those not familiar with her heritage. Linn asserts her aboriginal identity in some of her other poetry, including “Grey Owl,” which centres on a woman who tries to make herself aboriginal but ultimately fails. Linn compares the woman’s false practices with her own honest experience of indigenous identity. Yet, despite her self-assertion, a man still confronted Linn after a performance to impose his perception of authenticity upon her by calling her a “knock-off.” In doing so, the man attempted to strip her of her identity in a way similar to how the Canadian legislature, cited in Gehl’s essay, sought to undermine the identity of Canadian aboriginal people and how the colonial British settlers created a falsely unified identity for the Sauk and Fox peoples.

The idea of being “knock-off” is clearly an essential aspect of Linn’s poem. The term refers to commodities which lack authenticity and therefore are less valuable than their “name brand” counterparts. For example, a hand bag embroidered with the Louis Vuitton insignia or a bracelet with the Tiffany stamp retails for much more than a similar but non-authentic item. Knock-off items are valued only for their use value — they get the job done — whereas name brand items possess an inflated value as a result of a perception of them having some kind of authentic prestige or exclusivity. The man who called Linn a “knock-off” was surely attempting to associate her with these sorts of commodified things. In doing so, he attacks both her authenticity and innate value as a human being because he is commodifying her as an object with a worth-value related to her authenticity. To call someone a “knock-off Pocahontas” is to suggest that aboriginal identity can be commodified in much the same way as knock-off purses and watches. This process occurs not only in Linn’s poem, but also in various locations in our commercialized lives: Disney both commodifies and sexualizes Pocahontas in its film, and the

name and mascot of the Redskins football team denigrates Native Americans' cultural identities by commodifying them (see Cladoosby).

Significantly, the issue of authenticity is a hugely problematic topic in discussions of aboriginal identity. Patricia Monture Angus is careful to distinguish authenticity from identity. Questions of authenticity, she argues, are raised externally to aboriginal people, whereas identity is raised internally among indigenous people. Angus says that questions of authenticity are asked by colonizing nations, not colonized ones. Therefore, the presence of such questions, which Linn addresses in her poem, serves to locate Canada within the continuum of colonization (Angus 25). Authenticity, Angus stresses, is not an essentialist quality but a poorly disguised form of colonialism. It is a relation of power that is exercised through the asking of such externally raised questions by the colonizer to the colonized. The colonized is then forced to answer in defense of their identity (Angus 28). The result in literature is that authenticity attempts to force a singular authentic literary voice on aboriginal people where one does not exist. Anything which does not meet some sort of potentially arbitrary or unachievable standard of authenticity is dismissed and devalued. Even ignoring the plurality of individual voices, forcing an authentic, unified voice on native people disregards the fact that there are 613 First Nations bands in Canada alone, each with their own governing council, values, traditions, and heritage ("Frequently Asked Questions").

The inclusion of clichéd Canadian natural imagery in "Knock-Off Native" when Linn refers to "pink granite mountains... / studded with red and white pines reaching up to the sky" ("Knock-Off Native") might be Linn's response to the pressure for authenticity, intentional or otherwise. This response is an indication of her attempt to ensure that her poem will be accepted as a piece of aboriginal writing by external audiences. I see this image as potentially problematic

because the authenticity argument draws authors away from what it means to be an aboriginal writer by reinforcing a non-aboriginal standard of literature (Angus 29). In forcing Linn into the role of wise rememberer of natural beauty before it was “buried under Toronto stone” (“Knock-Off Native”), the colonizing mentality attempts to locate Linn’s “authentic identity” outside of herself, in the false notion of the collective Indian. Of course, no such authentic identity exists. Seeking to locate oneself outside of the individual actually goes against native teachings, which, according to Angus, locates knowledge within the individual so that the one thing we can know with certainty is ourselves (30). In this way, the potency of Linn’s poem as aboriginal literature may be diluted by the struggle for and against authenticity.

Further complicating the issue of authenticity is the fact that nativeness is defined differently by different groups of people. Native groups can define their own membership via self-identification, language, heritage, or other factors, but conflicting definitions from sources of institutionalized authority and the colonizing government can sometimes negate the effect of autonomous definition. Moreover, these definitions often change. For example, in the early 20th century, the “one drop rule” in the United States meant that a single drop of African blood made an individual black for legal and discriminatory purposes (Hu). Contrarily, Canada’s 1876 Indian Act, which stated that when an indigenous woman married a white man she lost her status as an Indian, was a similar piece of legislation, but instead of legally justifying discrimination, it worked to dissolve aboriginal culture and identity through assimilation (Gehl Gii-Zhigaate-Mnidoo-Kwe).

Changing definitions of native and other minority identities continues today: the Coalition of Bar Associations of Colour recently made a resolution to treat racial “box-checking” an “academic ethnic fraud” (Hu). This resolution came into effect because some people argue

that some individuals self-identify as a race that the association would claim they are not in order to gain advantage from affirmative action policies (Hu). The reversal of racially-based legislation from “you are too black/native/minority” to “you are not black/native/minority enough” illustrates the lose-lose situation for those involved in the racist colonial power dynamic. An “other” identity is disadvantageous in the power relation. If one attempts to reclaim some power through leveraging affirmative action programs, which aim to make amends for discrimination, new legislation is formed to continue to disempower those people who do not meet the unachievable standard of authenticity.

The political issue for Linn in this question of self-identification versus colonial-authority identification may simply be that she looks white. Regardless of how she attempts to self-identify, she is disadvantaged, either because she is native and therefore is subject to all of the accompanying stereotypes, or because she is “knock-off” or inauthentic. As a society, it seems that we are very uncomfortable with racial identity when our visual perceptions are not confirmed. Judging a person by their appearance is “increasingly difficult in a time when mixed-race marriages and immigration... [are] more common” (Hu). In this way, we are no better today than racial profilers of the past, so it is important that critics examine their own relation of privilege when analyzing aboriginal literature.

As the poet laureate of the Federal Green Party of Canada, environmental advocacy is clearly a topic which Linn feels passionately about. However, environmentalism is personal for Linn as well. Her poem “Los Alamos North or, When Dragons Wake!” articulates her rage at the nuclear industry, which is responsible for the polluted water in the Chalk River. Her mother, who swam across the river for years, was diagnosed with and later died from thyroid cancer as a result of radioactive leakage into water. She declares that she likes “Looking up at the pines on the

Ottawa River / knowing that the eerie green lights in the sky / aren't going to give me cancer” (Linn, “Los Alamos North”) and expresses her rage at Stephen Harper for not letting the Chalk River “rest” away from the radioactive waste. The environmental meets the political at another personal junction in Linn’s “Knock-Off Native,” when Linn says that the “people of the red earth... understand thirst,” in part because not a single Canadian reserve has potable drinking water (“Knock-Off Native”). “The people of the red earth” refers to Linn’s own Meskwaki people and the creation myth in which the hero Wisaka created the first people from red clay (Alex 224). The choice to refer to the Meskwaki people by a name which essentially connects them to the earth suggests that Linn feels that her people share a historical and cultural tie to the land and further that the current Canadian governments are undermining this tie by allowing industry to pollute the land’s water.

Yet the connection between the native identity and ecology can sometimes be just as problematic as it is progressive. Indigeneity is occasionally cited as the link between science and the environment in the media and mainstream perceptions. For example, in the Disney film *Pocahontas*, the European John Smith, who represents colonization and European thinking, overcomes racial, linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic barricades because he learns to share in a love of the natural world through his romance with Pocahontas. This interest in indigeneity arose from the same force which later sparked ecocriticism: an understanding of the negative consequences of modern industrialism (Buell, Heise, and Thornber 428). In the movement’s early years, many ecocritics were problematically uncritical about the assumption that “indigenous environmental virtue” would be corrective to the consequences of industrialism. This mistake leaves room for the perpetuation of the myth of the “Ecological Indian,” the stereotypical idea of indigenous people living in perfect harmony with nature. Aside from just

not being objectively true, this image evokes aboriginal cultural practices in an essentialist way and ignores the fact that indigenous cultures are nuanced and constantly evolving. Furthermore, this assumed link provides an outlet for the appropriation of native storytelling in such a way that the native way of life is distorted so that it becomes merely an anecdote for ecological responsibility. In this way, the image of the Ecological Indian reduces and distorts the intended meaning of the story, thereby devaluing the cultural and historical significance of aboriginal storytelling and forcing the aboriginal representative into a mere token of environmental responsibility (Buell, Heise, and Thornber 429).

In order to not fall into the trap of ascribing the image of the Ecological Indian to Linn, we should not reduce her poem to pure ecological advocacy because doing so risks relegating Linn to the realm of the Ecological Indian and ignores the complexity of her work — not to mention that it forces the reader to miss her entire thesis. In my experience of listening to Linn's work, I found myself less tempted to assign Linn to this role in "Knock-Off Native" than I did in "Los Alamos North or, When Dragons Wake!" I believe that this may be the result of the fact that Linn's primary project in "Los Alamos North or, When Dragons Wake!" is ecocritical, as compared to her work to define her own identity in "Knock-Off Native". That being said, in both poems it is tempting to dismiss Linn's environmental advocacy as motivated by her Meskwaki identity. In practice, we should consider a wider range of motivating factors including personal experience, beliefs and values, and influential figures in addition to cultural history as the author's inspiration, just as we would do if we were studying British literature. To fail to do so transforms Linn into the epitome of the Ecological Indian, starves her work of a more valuable reading, and denies the complexity of her work.

The image of the Ecological Indian represents the homogenization of hundreds of distinct cultures and histories (Garrard 126). The Ecological Indian allows for a connection between Linn's environmental advocacy and her assertion of identity because both aspects of her work are strongly impacted by homogenization. The Ecological Indian is inhibitive of indigenous identity because it strips aboriginal groups of an internally formed identity and instead demands an authentic expression of an external model of identity, namely, that of the Ecological Indian. Linn both rejects and reclaims the Ecological Indian by juxtaposing her fierce independence and right to a self-defined identity, which she places at the centre of "Knock-Off Native," with her genuine care for the environment. She does not explain why she is an environmentalist in "Knock-Off Native," but it is safe to assume that it is not because she's born into it through her Meskwaki identity. An analysis of her other poems makes it clear that environmentalism is decidedly personal for Linn because of her experience with her mother's cancer. However, an equally important question is whether or not the Ecological Indian is a role that has been assigned to Linn by external parties. Linn is a talented enough poet to have her work stand on its own, but a part of me is suspicious of the Federal Green Party's motivations for selecting Linn as their poet laureate. I wonder whether, intentionally or otherwise, she was selected at least in part because of mainstream perceptions of the Ecological Indian. Reinforcing the stereotype may be an efficacious goal for the Green Party, since this stereotype might help to make Linn's work resonate with audiences, given that it feeds existing notions about aboriginal values. When many people see an aboriginal poet, they expect to hear something about the environment. Therefore, connecting Linn's poetry to the Green Party may strengthen the "green" claim via the stereotype. I hope that Linn's racial identity was a happy coincidence for the Green Party, but the link here nevertheless remains problematic.

The ecocritical aspect of “Knock-Off Native” is closely related to its political commentary. At one point, Linn says that “Columbus Day celebrates murder” and references the Taino people of Puerto Rico, a group which experienced much of the same cultural genocide as Canadian aboriginal peoples. During his first voyage, Columbus speculated that the Taino people would be “good servants” because of their generosity. He later displaced Taino men from their homes and jobs, forcing them to work in mines and colonial plantations, an act which caused them to starve since they could no longer farm, to fall victim to smallpox, measles, and other deadly European diseases, and to flee their homes or fall in battle against far better armed Europeans. In 50 years, up to three million Taino people vanished, along with the Taino language (Poole 1).

The inclusion of the history of the Taino people in Linn’s poem reminds the reader that literature is political and that the New World, including Canada, has a history of genocide, an argument with which Dr. Lynn Gehl would surely agree. It is important to place Linn’s and Gehl’s work side by side because Gehl’s essay seeks to prevent readers from distancing themselves from such accusation of genocide and rape as Linn makes in her poem. As a Canadian reader, I at first assumed that Linn’s attempt to parallel the subversion of her own culture with what was done to the Taino people did not make me complicit. However, the similarities in the systematic oppression of the Taino people to the oppression which was legalized via the Indian Act and the other oppressive Canadian legislation mentioned in Gehl’s article is difficult to ignore, which makes the political nature of Linn’s work quite apparent. Linn describes her poetry as “autobiographical fiction” (“Winona Linn - About”) in which she combines her personal history as a woman entangled in racial politics with imaginative storytelling. Linn’s autobiographical approach allows her to present the world in a novel and

politicized way; her political standpoint shapes what she produces. Her view is unusual because she is not seen as native by outsiders but she identifies as such, which shapes her experience of the world and her depiction of its realities in her poetry. This experience allows her to fabricate reality in a way which transcends mundane life. Olive Senior claims that “the purpose of literature is not to represent but re-present... [to be] fully engaged with the world.” Linn’s politicization and re-presentation of her own situated history through her poetry allows her to engage with the world in a novel and interesting way which it builds upon her pre-existing themes of aboriginal identity, ecocriticism, and the politicization of literature.

Linn’s chosen genre reveals a surprising amount about her motivations in writing “Knock-Off Native.” Slam poetry is founded on the egalitarian notion that everyone has a valid opinion about art, regardless of whether or not they have a degree or certificate to prove it. Judges are selected from the audience at random, an act which serves to democratize the entire process. They are asked to judge impartially, without being influenced by the audience’s reaction. Meanwhile, it is the job of the audience to sway judging by hollering, cheering, or mildly heckling the performer (“A Brief Guide to Slam Poetry” n.p.). In this way, slam poetry creates a dynamic relationship between the performer, judge, and audience in which each party is given an opportunity to criticize art. Woods says that slam poetry is the “purest form of democracy in art” and is a form through which we are reminded that “art belongs to the people and not institutions” (19). The democratic aspect of Linn’s chosen genre is an essential factor in analyzing Linn’s work, particularly its political aspect. The history of indigenous peoples of North America has been anything but democratic. Land was stolen, identities were displaced, the vote was withheld from millions of individuals, and things have still not been set right (Gehl n.p.). There is not equal opportunity in this country for Linn and other aboriginal people, but

there is democracy on Slam stages around the country. However, although the form itself is democratic and unbiased, the audience members and judges, of course, are not. In this way, prejudice and racism can easily seep into Linn's experience of the Slam form. It would seem entirely possible that "Knock-Off Native" could have been inspired through Linn's rage that racism had affected her in a place which she previously thought of as safe. In this way, the poem is about more than a racist individual who attacks her identity and attempts to force her to conform to his perception of authenticity. Instead, it reflects her anger at an entire system which is so pervasive that it affects her in places in which she once felt safe and immune, a place that should have provided that safety and immunity from racism.

The expanding domain and ever-growing popularity of social media platforms, particularly YouTube, allow authors to publish and share their works in ways which has previously been impossible. Linn takes full advantage of this new publishing platform in "Knock-Off Native." YouTube publishing gives a voice to those who otherwise struggle to be heard. In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak convincingly argues that the subaltern, those outside of hegemonic power structures, are deprived of a voice because they are denied representation in media and literature (Spivak 78). Social media streams are not affected by hegemonic power structures to the same extent as traditional publishing methods because self-published literature is unmediated by the traditional power structures which rule the publishing industry. That is to say, anyone with internet access can digitally publish their work. It is crucial that academia acknowledges the voice of people in unique and subaltern positions. As scholars, it is our responsibility to represent a multiplicity of voices. Like-minded belief breeds like-minded belief and we should be mindful not to slip into the false-consensus effect, a cognitive bias in which we normalize and perceive support for our own beliefs, regardless of whether or not those

beliefs are supported outside of the academic community. For this reason, it is essential to acknowledge our own standpoint and to recognize that we often speak from privileged positions when we analyze poetry published by authors such as Linn. Therefore, readers and critics should constantly work to evaluate the perceptions which they deem intelligible and unintelligible.

YouTube's accessibility provides a wealth of literary material which promises to expand areas of research within academia. Access to firsthand accounts of aboriginal and postcolonial experiences is incredibly inviting because the only thing required is internet access. Accessibility also creates opportunities for non-scholarly interaction with literature, thereby welcoming all individuals into the sphere of criticism. Furthermore, self-publishing allows for conversations between authors with differing experiences. On YouTube, "reaction videos," or videos created as a response to previous videos, are common practice. This level of conversation occurs instantaneously and transnationally, which enables a certain freedom in the production and broadcasting of literature previously impossible in academic research. Slam poetry seems to be the perfect fit for YouTube because both advocate accessibility and engagement. In short, Slam takes poetry out of the hands of academics. It is "a trick to convince people that poetry is cooler than they've been led to believe by wearisome English classes" (Woods 18). YouTube is a potentially educative platform for strategies which seek to both entertain and inform, and Linn leverages this platform, allowing her to reach audiences across national borders. A primary concern in indigenous and postcolonial fields is to incite change and understanding in all people, not just in fellow scholars. Poems like "Knock-Off Native" and other self-published works sanction the type of inclusive engagement at which we should be aiming.

Winona Linn's identity as an aboriginal woman has clearly been challenged throughout her life. The contested ground of her identity is the site from which Linn has written "Knock-Off

Native,” a poem which explores the role of authenticity, ecocriticism, the politicization of literature, and accessibility in aboriginal literature. Linn’s poem reveals that authenticity artificially commodifies and devalues those to whom it is assigned. Moreover, authenticity denies the complexity of aboriginal identities and refuses to acknowledge the plurality of indigenous nations in Canada and the United States. Ecocriticism is personal for Linn, who lost her mother to a cancer caused by her swimming through the radioactive waters of the Chalk River. While ecocriticism can be progressive, the intersection of ecocriticism and authenticity fabricates the image of the Ecological Indian, the wise savage who is innately tied to the earth and serves as the solution for the consequences of industrialization. Therefore, the Ecological Indian is inhibitive of indigenous identity because indigenous identity celebrates difference while the imposition of the Ecological Indian forces a single, stereotypical image. Linn’s work is also political. Her reference to the Taino people situates the reader as a figure who is not innocent in Canada’s history of genocide. Moreover, Linn’s unique experience in racial politics allows her to write “autobiographical fiction,” which transcends mundane experience and inspires her to present a powerfully political poem in a way which does not at first seem political at all. Finally, Linn’s medium and genre serve to make her work accessible and appealing to an audience much wider than might otherwise be possible. In doing so, she opens up the field of scholarship in an egalitarian way. Inclusion should be an essential feature in postcolonial and aboriginal debate because it allows those who have traditionally been silenced to speak. Linn’s anger toward the man who called her a “knock-off Pocahontas” (“Knock-Off Native”) and the subsequent creation of her poem provides grounds through which to discuss important themes like authenticity, ecocriticism, politics, and accessibility, which are all entangled in the study of aboriginal

literature. It is this possibility for discussion, education, and the modification of thought that makes Linn's work successful as a text through which to examine aboriginal identity.

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