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2 Article

3 **The gift of shame**

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10 **Abstract** This short confession looks back at the confessional mode of a 2009  
11 article, ‘The Object of Devotion,’ on the impact of religious orientation on my  
12 scholarly formation, before turning to a different sort of self-examination: the moment  
13 of shame that is at once a source of pain and a generous gift. The inventory offered here  
14 concerns not religious orientation but the shame that arises from being wrong. It also  
15 casts light on changes that have come to our profession, where racist structures of  
16 thought and their administrative and social manifestations have become more visible  
17 than before. It’s not that our work environment has changed; rather, the assumptions  
18 that were there all along have become visible, and recognizing them – and responding  
19 to them – has become imperative. In this way, when I make a confession, and talk  
20 about my own shame, it’s in part the product of my own experience, but it is also the  
21 product of our common situation. This confession also looks forward to the fruitful  
22 outcomes of this experience, including collaborative workshops on indigenous peda-  
23 gogy, on the role of indigenous story, and on the stories we tell about the land.

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32 **‘Who Am I?’**

33 I was about to say this: To confess, to make a confession, is to look into the  
34 mirror and describe what you see, in every painful, embarrassing detail. But then  
35 I stop and think, No, that’s a narcissistic move. You can’t talk about yourself,  
36 you can’t confess, without descending into egotism.

But what value might there be in confession? Could confession be a gift to others, offering something of value? I think of Augustine, in the *Confessions*, always pulling up short with second thoughts, whittling away at his own ego, asking God to put him straight. I think about Montaigne, in his *Essays*, always changing his mind, always revising, himself and his book both always a work in progress. I think about the criminal, pressed to make a confession: the requirement to enumerate what you have done, what you believe, what you know.

For me to confess would be to ask myself, ‘Who am I?’ I have to admit that sometimes I do ask that question, and what I produce is a list:

- A Muslim 46
- A mother 47
- A researcher, or a scholar, or a reader 48
- A person who has animals 49
- A half-German person 50
- A bisexual person 51

The hierarchy is different, depending on what’s going on when I ask myself the question (‘Who am I?’), and sometimes things get left out or added. But it’s always a list. How can a person be only that, a list? Is it because a person is layered, like the skin of an onion, where you peel away layer upon layer to get at what lies hidden deep inside? In this metaphor, each term on the list would be another layer in the skin of the onion, and – paradoxically – it’s the top term on the list that would correspond to the deepest hidden core of the onion. But every time I ask the question (‘Who am I?’) and make a list of answers, it’s always nothing more than a guess or an approximation. Is that who I am?

I guess there could be a personal value in asking this question, in making this kind of confession: self-examination may be good for the soul. But what possible value could there be for anyone else in doing this? This is a problem I encountered once before, in 2009, when I was asked to write an article for a special issue for the journal *Religion and Literature*, in which several medievalists were commissioned to describe how their faith commitments inflected their scholarship, and their scholarship inflected their faith commitments. I didn’t know the editor at that time, but I realized that she had invited me thinking that I would write about how my Islamic faith related to my scholarly work. I initially hesitated to contribute, because even though I would write a bit about being a Muslim, the faith commitments that had shaped me as a scholar dated from a much earlier period, when I had been raised as a Jehovah’s Witness, from age 7 to 14.

It took a long time to write that piece, not least because it required me to think back on a time that I had not consciously remembered for years, and then to use those memories as the raw material for an article, something like the way you would write up research findings for an academic publication. It was difficult to do, but once the task was done, I was very glad to have done it, mainly for the



mental and emotional inventory it provided. It was clearly valuable to me to  
85 have done that work, to have taken measure of that time of my life, in that essay:  
86 I titled it, ‘The Object of Devotion: Fundamentalist Perspectives on the Medieval  
87 Past.’ But what value could this work have for others?

88 I struggled with this question in the article, and wrote these words in an  
89 attempt to address it:

90 What I am not so much suggesting as illustrating in the following pages is  
91 the need for a personal inventory of terms and categories, of an exploration  
92 of why we see the world – including the object of our research, which is  
93 also the object of our devotion – in the way we do. This is not to suggest  
94 that my personal inventory is in itself particularly interesting or important:  
95 the effort to make such an inventory, however, I would suggest, *is*  
96 important and worth carrying out, not just for one’s own sake but for the  
97 sake of the work. (Akbari, 2010, 299–300)

98 No one liked that last sentence. The editor suggested cutting it out, and every person I  
99 showed a draft of the essay did the same. I insisted in keeping it in. Why was it so  
100 important to keep that sentence in the article? It was the same problem of confession:  
101 What value could there be in talking about the self, in making a confession?

102 Maybe the value here and now is the same value that, more than ten years  
103 ago, I thought could be found in ‘The Object of Devotion.’ In 2009, I was  
104 modelling the act of making a mental inventory, of taking stock of the early  
105 influences that had formed the habits of mind that would become fundamental  
106 to my scholarship. There was little or no value, in my opinion, in the items in my  
107 mental inventory; what value there was lay in the doing of the inventory, in the  
108 ways in which it might provide a model or a pathway for others.

109 This might be a similar situation. But the inventory I am offering here, along  
110 with this long preamble, has to do not with religious orientation but with shame. It  
111 has to do with being wrong. It also has to do with the changes that have come to our  
112 profession, where racist structures of thought and their administrative and social  
113 manifestations have become more visible than before. It’s not that the field has  
114 changed; it’s that the assumptions that were there all along have become visible,  
115 and recognizing them – and responding to them – has become imperative. So when  
116 I make a confession, and talk about my own shame, it’s in part the product of my  
117 own experience, but it is also the product of our common situation.

## 118 **Indigenous Pedagogy, Indigenous Story**

119 I want to describe one particular moment where I was ashamed. This took place  
120 on 8 May 2018. It was a painful moment, but it also engendered growth, which I  
121 also want to describe. To tell the story of that moment, I first have to tell the  
122 story of what came before and what came after.

1 ‘Decolonization as metaphor allows people to equivocate these contradictory decolonial desires because it turns decolonization into an empty signifier to be filled by any track towards liberation. In reality, the tracks walk all over land/people in settler contexts. Though the details are not fixed or agreed upon, in our view, decolonization in the settler colonial context must involve the repatriation of land simultaneous to the recognition of how land and relations to land have always already been differently understood and enacted; that is, all of the land, and not just symbolically. This is precisely why decolonization is necessarily unsettling, especially across lines of solidarity’ (Tuck and Yang, 2012, 7).

First, what came before. Together with some colleagues, I helped to organize a workshop in November 2017 on ‘Literature Pedagogy and Decolonization,’ emerging from a collaboration between a group of faculty members at the University of Toronto and a partner group of faculty and graduate students at South Africa’s University of the Western Cape. There were already a few collaborative streams going between the institutions, one on museums, and one on drama and puppetry, and there was a desire to do a third collaboration related to literary studies. Literature pedagogy seemed like a good topic to focus on, since both groups were engaged in it; and because the colleagues in South Africa had been through the experience of a Truth and Reconciliation process (and were at that time in the midst of the ‘Rhodes Must Fall’ movement), and we in Ontario were at that time beginning to implement Truth and Reconciliation recommendations in the Canadian context, ‘decolonization’ seemed like an appropriate theme.

The event in November 2017 was enormously successful, especially in terms of what it meant to people on the ground at Toronto: it was clear that faculty and graduate students were thirsty to talk about what happens (and does not happen) in the classroom, and to try to figure out what it might mean to teach literature in this particular moment, when there seems to be so much disconnect between what’s happening in the classroom and what’s happening outside. The so-called ‘crisis’ in Humanities, people seemed to feel, was also a failure to imagine what we might do differently in our own classes. There was clearly a desire to think about these issues together, in a way that was very different from what might happen within the more formal structures of departmental curriculum committees.

Because the November event was so successful, we organizers decided to try to do something similar and just a little more capacious in the spring term. This time, we thought, we would focus not just on literature, but on humanities pedagogy more broadly. Lots of people expressed interest in participating, and we were on track to do this second workshop in April 2018, when suddenly there were objections – most powerful among them, an open letter from a graduate student in Anthropology saying that the use of ‘decolonization’ in this context was totally inappropriate: decolonization is not just a metaphor, but rather requires the actual repatriation of land. At least some people felt that it was being understood as a metaphor here, however, and this was the fundamental ground of their opposition to this planned workshop.<sup>1</sup>

Participants had different views about how to respond, but the lead organizer, Neil ten Kortenaar, immediately recognized that (as he put it), ‘our position was false,’ and cancelled the event just a week or so before it was to take place. This was absolutely the right thing to do, even though it was painful; I remember writing to Neil right around that time to say that I was sure he was right, but that I also admired his generosity and patience in saying that, if we were to do something, we had to do it right, and that (again in his words) ‘we had to do



better.' I don't know that I would have been so patient or so generous, though I think and I hope I have learned from observing what he did at that time.

In the weeks after the cancellation, in the late spring, Neil and Uzoma Esonwanne and I (who had been the spring workshop organizers) met with Lee Maracle to talk about what might be possible. Lee Maracle is an extraordinary writer of fiction and non-fiction, a teacher, and a member of the Stó:lo nation (Pacific Coast Salish). She gave her time generously, meeting with our small group several times in preparation for a workshop that took place on 12–13 October 2018 – four circles over two days, focused on indigenous pedagogy. (And she has continued to give her time, as we planned additional events – a workshop on indigenous story on 19 April 2019, and another workshop on indigenous story and the land scheduled for 3 April 2020.) In 2018, we met in Lee's office at First Nations House for about two hours each time, about four times in the spring, and then again in the fall. The meetings were difficult, and wonderful; I learned so much, but I also had to be put in my place sometimes, when I was not listening as well as I should have been. I learned a lot of things during those visits, but I think the most important thing I learned was how to listen better.

In those sentences above is hidden the moment of shame. I'll say more about that below.

Now, what came after. When I think about those meetings, the thing that stands out the most in my mind is stories. Lee used story to explain things: to explain who she is; who her people are; what the relationship between land and people might be; what might be possible for settler people, who are guests on the land they live on; what might be possible for indigenous people and settler people to do together; what might be possible up north, where we were, and how that might have an effect on people living in other parts of North America (Turtle Island), and the world. Those stories conveyed so much. After a while, we started to talk about how we might structure the thing we might do together, and Lee explained how decisions are made in different indigenous communities: they vary somewhat, but there's a shared practice of what she called the 'fifty-string circle,' where you imagine people situated along the edge of the circle, as if each person marks a string and the point at the center is what is sought, or what is 'cherished and hidden.' The group goes around the circle, with each person adding something – there's no arguing or even direct questioning in this circle – and when the circle gets back to the beginning, one person (who in the fifty-string circle is often called the 'pine tree elder') gathers together what they have heard and asks a question that is meant to take the group a little further toward the object of knowing. In this way, the group collectively approaches the thing that is hidden.

As you can imagine, this is a time-consuming way of making decisions, by consensus and by taking time to hear all the voices in the house. But it seemed like a model we could adapt. Accordingly, we set up four circles, two each day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, on four themes: 'Pedagogy and Indigenous Story'; 'Bodies in the Classroom: How Do We Choose a Story?';



‘Curriculum, Syllabus, Canon’; ‘Identity, Authority, Vulnerability in the Classroom.’ We populated the circles with people who had been eager to present at the workshop we had cancelled in April, inviting more people to fill out the circles. Lee guided the process, especially in developing the first circle which would set the pattern for all the other circles to follow, and which would center specifically on indigenous story. Each circle would have four or five presenters, who would speak for six to eight minutes each; there would also be respondents in the circle, who would speak briefly, as well as a ‘speaker’ who would guide the progress of the circle, following the traditional indigenous model. Finally, the circle would also include all those in the room, in outer circles, whose participation would consist both of witnessing – important work, about which much more could be said – and adding something more, if needed, when invited by the speaker at the end of the movement around the circle.

Before we started on the first day, I misunderstood how the circle would work: I thought that all four or five panelists would speak, and then the respondents would each speak for a minute or two, commenting on the overall theme. I assumed that we would go around the circle in this way a couple of times during the two hours scheduled for the session. But when Lee led the first circle, I saw how it was actually supposed to work: Smaro Kamboureli spoke first, about her own experiences of coming to gain knowledge of indigenous story, and how that process included a period of muteness where she couldn’t write or, I think, even speak about what she was learning. There was a lot to unlearn, as well as to learn. The people in the circle then spoke in turn, each beginning with the phrase ‘I was struck by,’ or ‘What struck me, in listening to you, was...’ In this way, what was added by each person was truly responsive, making a cumulative effort to get closer to what the group was communally trying to approach: that thing that is ‘cherished and hidden.’

The other circles were also wonderful, with extraordinarily frank and open conversations. I won’t say more about them here, except to mention one other thing that sticks with me, from the third circle, in which I was the speaker. I was doing my best to listen very well to each person, because I knew that it was on me to gather up the threads each time we came around the circle, and also to choose which presenter would go next, based on what had been said just before and my sense of where they might take us. I noticed that my posture was completely different from what it would normally have been at a conference: there, I tend to sit back, legs crossed, conscious of whether people are looking at me or not, and I look up at the speaker at the front of the room. Here, I had both feet planted on the ground, and I was leaning forward, often with my hands on my knees, listening as hard as I could. I knew I must look funny doing this, but I didn’t care. I think I started doing this because I remembered, half-consciously, Lee saying once that she had been listening with her whole body, with her feet planted, when she was witnessing a particular gathering. She also talked, many times, about listening with your whole body. For some reason that stuck with me, and now in that circle, every time my mind started to drift, I reminded



263 myself to plant my feet, and that centered me so that I could listen better. I'm  
264 still not a very good listener, but I'm a much better listener than I used to be.

## 264 The Gift of Shame

265 Here's the moment. It was our first meeting with Lee, 8 May 2018. I remember  
266 the date, because it was the day before I had to leave for the annual International  
267 Congress of Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo,  
268 Michigan. It was a busy time of year: I had administrative work, as head of my  
269 unit, and class, and a conference paper to write. But we had found a time that  
270 worked for our little group, and so I made my way to First Nations House, to  
271 meet for the first time with Lee Maracle.

272 She began to teach us right away, though I had no idea that this was  
273 happening at the time. She told stories, different kinds of story – some mythic,  
274 some personal, some political, some historical – about where she came from, the  
275 people there, and the land. At the time, I thought it was digressive; I didn't  
276 understand the purpose of story.

277 And I didn't understand how to have a proper conversation. I asked – rudely, I  
278 now see in retrospect – whether it wasn't case that there are many kinds of  
279 indigenous people. Wasn't it the case that we might speak of indigeneity in a  
280 range of locations – for example, Palestine, or South Africa – and therefore talk  
281 about decolonization on that basis? I was so sure that I knew more than she did.  
282 I thought, with all the years in which I had accumulated different types of  
283 scholarly knowledge, and administrative know-how, and a sense of authority  
284 (which was hard come by), that I was in a position of control, of superiority. I  
285 assumed that I was comfortably seated in what I would later learn to call 'the  
286 knower's chair.' I had made the mistake, though, of underestimating Lee's  
287 knowledge, and overestimating my own. I can't remember exactly what Lee said  
288 in response, but I remember the shame. I think she said that I had insulted her,  
289 and explained exactly how I had done so. What I do remember is the feeling of  
290 sitting in the chair, and realizing that I was wrong, and that I was wrong not just  
291 in the fact of what I had said but in the very position I had taken up.

292 It was a terrible moment, which is probably why it's so hard to remember the  
293 details. But it was also a beautiful moment – a gift – because I understood almost  
294 immediately that I was wrong, and was filled with the desire to learn. That  
295 evening, I read Lee's chapter 'Oratory on Oratory,' in her book *Memory Serves*,  
296 and talked with my children about what I was learning (Maracle, 2015). The  
297 next time we met with Lee, I felt humble, and tried hard to communicate my  
298 desire to make up for the offense I had given; Lee was enormously generous in  
299 teaching and sharing her time and knowledge with me. The moment of shame  
300 was, as I say, a gift.

What's the value of this story? If the purpose of a confession is to be exemplary, to offer a story that can be of use to others, the value of this story lies in the embrace of being wrong. If you are wrong, accept it, sit with it, and try to do better. If you are as fortunate as I was, you will receive a generous response and an opportunity to learn. Even if that generous response doesn't come, you can still try to do better, seeking out knowledge and a way to repair what you've done wrong.

I don't tell this story because it makes me look good; I think it makes me look stupid and arrogant. I don't have any illusions about my own abilities, and my own level of knowledge. I am sure, though, that I know more than I did before. I listen better than I did before. I try to use the knowledge that I have been given, instead of hiding it away (though I can surely do better than this). This all comes from the gift of shame. Let me share it with you; let it help you do better, to do good.

## About the Author 315 316 318

About the Author Suzanne Conklin Akbari is Professor of Medieval Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, NJ. Her books are on optics and allegory (*Seeing Through the Veil*) and European views of Islam and the Orient (*Idols in the East*), and she's also edited volumes on travel literature (*Marco Polo*), Mediterranean Studies (*A Sea of Languages*), and somatic histories (*The Ends of the Body*), plus *How We Write* (2015) and *How We Read* (2019). Her most recent book is *The Oxford Handbook of Chaucer* (2020), co-edited with James Simpson. A Co-editor of the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, Akbari co-hosts a literature podcast called *The Spouter Inn* (E-mail: sakbari@ias.edu).

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