

Dr. Laura Donaldson is examining the ways in which historically marginalized groups such as women and Indigenous peoples have been defined by colonization.

Decolonizing Native American Culture through Writing

by Michelle Novak

Dr. Laura Donaldson defies the traditional image of the scholar working in isolation. She views her research, writing and teaching as a form of community work, and she looks forward to examining her own family history which can be traced back to the early 19th century Cherokee community in Alabama, U.S.A.



Since coming to Lakehead University last September as the Senior Research Fellow in The Rockefeller Foundation's Visiting Humanities Research Fellowship Program, Dr. Donaldson has been working on a book-length study with the working title: *The Skin of God: Native American Writing as Colonial Technology and Post-Colonial Appropriation*.

The work explores the contradictions of cultural imperialism. "The act of writing was a tool of conquest," says Dr. Donaldson, "which Aboriginal peoples then appropriated for use within their own systems of knowledge."

"Writing is a discipline that reconfigured Native cultures in ways that were functional for imperialism, but it created opportunities for resistance. Only now are these communities *decolonizing* themselves by placing them-

selves at the centre of their own literature... *Appropriation* is the breaking away from the view of Natives as victims with no life apart from colonized civilization."

Dr. Laura Donaldson is Associate Professor of Women's Studies and English at the University of Iowa where she teaches in the American Indian Studies Program. In an earlier book, *Decolonizing Feminisms: Race, Gender, and Empire Building* (The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), she situates contemporary theoretical debates about reading, writing, and the politics of identity within the context of historical colonialism.

Dr. Donaldson's dedication to bridging barriers to true understanding translates into her research and she is already looking forward to her next project which will involve the study of her own family. Dr. Donaldson's Cherokee heritage involves both the Chickamauga Cherokee community, known for their anti-assimilationist views, and the Chisholm family, one of the founding families of "Old Settler" Cherokee who emigrated to Arkansas long before the "Trail of Tears" (the forced removal of the Cherokee people from Tennessee and North Carolina to Oklahoma in 1839).

Dr. Donaldson is eager to explore her family history because she sees it as a microcosm of all issues and problems of contact, and their effects on Indian identity.

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Just as Natives have been almost exclusively viewed from their relationship in *colonized* reality, so too must the researcher be careful not to circumscribe information gathering within the confines of her own narrow approach. Instead of fulfilling one particular goal, Dr. Donaldson believes research should strive to find continuity within differences. Each Native group is very distinct, she says, but there is a continuity in terms of shared social goals and attitudes toward the world.

Dr. Donaldson appreciates having the opportunity to experience Northwestern Ontario. She realized only after arriving in Thunder Bay that she needed and wanted to learn much more about First Nations peoples.

"One thing I'll take away from this experience is bridging the communications gap between Native scholars in both Canada and the United States."