Letter to Sir John A. Macdonald

History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, however, if faced with courage, need not be lived again. ~ Maya Angelou

How can your perspective limit your understanding? Can you really understand an issue from the perspective of a group of which you are not a part? Can you understand what it’s like to be female or male? Can the writing of history be truly objective? From whose perspective do we learn history? Consider questions 12 and 13 of the Critical Literacy questions as you think about how we learn history.

12. Whose voices and positions are being expressed?
13. Whose voices and positions are not being expressed?

Now read the poem, Letter to Sir John A. Macdonald by Marilyn Dumont (p. 8 Echoes 11). (Found Below)

LETTER TO SIR JOHN A. MACDONALD

Posted by Marilyn Dumont
Date: March 04, 2013

Poetry from the author of A Really Good Brown Girl.
Dear John: I’m still here and halfbreed,
after all these years
you’re dead, funny thing,
that railway you wanted so badly,
there was talk a year ago
of shutting it down
and part of it was shut down,
the dayliner at least,
‘from sea to shining sea,’
and you know, John,
after all that shuffling us around to suit the settlers,
we’re still here and Metis.

We’re still here
after Meech Lake and
one no-good-for-nothing-Indian
holdin-up-the-train,
stalling the ‘Cabin syllables / Nouns of settlement,
/...steel syntax [and] / The long sentence of its exploitation’
and John, that goddamned railroad never made this a great nation,
cause the railway shut down
and this country is still quarreling over unity,
and Riel is dead
but he just keeps coming back
in all the Bill Wilsons yet to speak out of turn or favour
because you know as well as I
that we were railroaded
by some steel tracks that didn’t last
and some settlers who wouldn’t settle
and it’s funny we’re still here and callin ourselves halfbreed.


Understanding the Poem

Marilyn Dumont is a Metis poet from northeastern Alberta. She is a descendant of Gabriel Dumont, Louis Riel's commander of forces during the Northwest Resistance of 1885. In the poem's first line, "Dear John: I'm still here and halfbreed," the Dumont calls herself "halfbreed," a derogatory term referring to the Metis who are half Aboriginal and half French. At the end of that stanza, she does not use the derogatory term halfbreed but replaces it with the proper term Metis. She has also changed from using "I" to "we"
in the last line of stanza one: "we’re still here and Metis." The change from "halfbreed" to "Metis" suggests a desire to express her pride in her heritage. The subtle change from "I" to "we" emphasizes that she is not alone, but part of a community. The repetition of the idea that "we’re still here" stresses the fact that this community has survived despite the hardships, which are part of our history.

In stanza two, Dumont continues her letter. She continues to emphasize the fact that, despite Macdonald’s intentions and the cost to the Metis community, national unity has not been achieved.