

**Contesting Reconciliation, Foregrounding Relationality:  
Contemporary Indigenous Women's Writing in Canada**

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## Abstract

In an era of ‘reconciliation’ marked by the work of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), active from 2008 to 2015, this thesis examines how contemporary Indigenous women’s writings challenge and rethink established models of testimony and relationality. It explores how Lee Maracle (Stó:lō), Katherena Vermette (Métis), Tracey Lindberg (Cree), Terese Marie Mailhot (Nlaka’pamux), and Norma Dunning (Inuit) widen understanding of testimony in imaginative, personal, and collective ways through novels, life-writing, and short stories in which the dominant tenets of reconciliatory discourse advocated and advanced by the TRC can be seen to be challenged and complicated. Focussing on mutual understanding, attentive listening, anger, pain, empathy, forgiveness, and healing, this thesis intervenes in and expands discussions of ‘reconciliation’ and puts under scrutiny a colonial narrative of ‘Indigenous deficiency’ and the role of epistemic injustice in Indigenous-settler relations. Its theoretical lens is wide, encompassing Indigenous theory, postcolonial studies, queer theory and affect studies, and an interdisciplinary approach to literary analysis that draws on adjacent fields of philosophy, sociology, politics, law, and health studies. It argues that selected literary texts authored by Indigenous women offer alternative and more equitable pathways for establishing, mending, and nurturing meaningful relationships between Indigenous peoples, settlers, and other beings on the land. These pathways chart forms of engagement that require an accommodation of refusal and a respect for complexities and opacities. This thesis contributes to a growing body of literature that centres the voices of contemporary Indigenous writers and emphasises the importance of storytelling in illustrating alternative forms of action and healing.

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## A Note on Terminology

The term ‘Indigenous’ is commonly used to refer to Indigenous peoples throughout the world, in North, Central, and South America, Australia and New Zealand, the Pacific Islands, the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and Scandinavia, for example. Here, I use the term to refer to the original inhabitants of Turtle Island (North America) and, more specifically, the three main Indigenous groups in Canada: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit. The term is capitalised to affirm the political status of peoplehood, while the plural, ‘Indigenous peoples’, reflects the diversity of groups with distinct identities, cultures, and systems of governance. Whenever possible, I use tribal names, the names of linguistic groups, or the names by which writers and intellectuals identify themselves. For example, Terese Marie Mailhot is identified as Nlaka’pamux (Interior Salish) and Lee Maracle as Stó:lō (Coast Salish) within the larger group of Salish languages spoken in British Columbia. Public enquiries heavily rely on the use of ‘Aboriginal’, an umbrella term for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, as co-opted and assimilated into the government’s discourse. The terms ‘Indians’ for First Nations and ‘Eskimo’ for Inuit are misnomers that do not originate in their cultures, carry legal connotations, and have been used pejoratively by non-Indigenous peoples. Because of their contentiousness, these terms will not be used except in citations or when employing legal language and referring to institutions like the Indian Residential School (IRS) system.

‘Settler’ is a relational term that problematises the presence of non-Indigenous peoples on Indigenous lands. I use the term specifically to refer to the ‘European-descended socio-political majority’ in Canada, as Métis legal scholar Chelsea Vowel suggests, and not to designate anyone who is not Indigenous.<sup>1</sup> To do so would obscure the ways in which colonial

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<sup>1</sup> Chelsea Vowel, *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis and Inuit Issues in Canada* (Winnipeg, MB: Highwater Press, 2016), 16.

power relations affect lived experiences within and beyond Indigenous communities. Africans who were enslaved and forcibly brought to British and French colonies that became Canada, indentured labourers, and people who were forced to migrate because their lands were occupied or otherwise affected by colonialism did not come as ‘settlers’. If, as historian Lorenzo Veracini asserts, settlers are the ‘founders of political orders’ who ‘carry sovereignty with them’, immigrants from non-European countries and refugees are ‘*appellants* facing a political order that is already constituted’.<sup>2</sup> The dominant socio-political structures in Canada are imported from Europe, have been imposed through violence, and are sustained by racial hierarchies. When I use the term ‘white Canadians’, then, it is to signal privilege within a ‘white-dominated system’ that ‘marks out European identities as the unproblematic norm as set against “ethnic” or racial “others”’.<sup>3</sup> ‘Settler’ is an abbreviation of ‘settler colonial’, with settler colonialism the ‘deliberate physical occupation of land as a method of asserting ownership over land and resources’.<sup>4</sup> Settler colonialism replaced original populations and policies of assimilation enacted to absorb Indigenous cultures into Euro-Canadian society have involved extensive annexation of Indigenous lands and resources that, if taken to a logical conclusion, would erase Indigenous identity and culture. There are several ways through which the state has attempted to assimilate Indigenous peoples, including dispossession, control over the land (land acquisition and resource extraction), breach of promise (unfulfilled treaties and denial of Indigenous rights), and laws and policies such as the *Indian Act* and the IRS.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3.

<sup>3</sup> David B. Macdonald, ‘Paved with Comfortable Intentions: Moving Beyond Liberal Multiculturalism and Civil Rights Frames on the Road to Transformative Reconciliation’, *Pathways of Reconciliation: Indigenous and Settler Approaches to Implementing the TRC’s Calls to Action*, Aimée Craft and Paulette Regan eds., (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Vowel, *Indigenous Writes*, 16.

<sup>5</sup> First passed in 1876 when Canada became a self-governing entity within the British Empire, the *Indian Act* has undergone several amendments but largely retains its original form today. It is a tool that enables the Canadian federal government to regulate and administer in the lives of First Nations and reserve communities.

The term ‘survivor’ is used to refer to former residential school students who have resisted and survived this system of assimilation. It is not unproblematic, and in discussions of Indigenous-settler relations centres residential schools in ways that may foreclose consideration of Indigenous resistance to continued colonialism. While it is an appellation that many former students have chosen to adopt and that Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) embraced in its final report, some critics find it troubling for its correlation to trauma and victimhood. For example, Xat’sull Chief Bev Sellars rejects it as a descriptor: ‘I am much more than that. I prefer to claim outright victory in this war against the residential-school experience’.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, ‘survivor’ is an important reminder that the genocidal programme of which the residential schools are a part is no less destructive than that endured by survivors of war and the Holocaust. It is estimated that over 150,000 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children between the ages of four and sixteen attended residential schools. Formal education was a colonial tool of oppression used to tear Indigenous peoples away from their philosophies and traditions through forced imposition of European epistemologies and ways of being. Children were prohibited from speaking their languages and performing their rituals and traditions. They were subject to inhumane medical experiments and could be forced to perform manual labour and service duties. Sexual abuse was rampant, and many young people did not survive.<sup>7</sup> I employ the term, then, to affirm the strength of Indigenous peoples in the face of suffering that was endured in the schools, and in recognition of the full impact of this assimilative system as part of a larger colonial apparatus.

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<sup>6</sup> Bev Sellars, *They Called Me Number One: Secrets and Survival at an Indian Residential School* (Vancouver, BC: Talon Books, 2013), 191.

<sup>7</sup> The total number of school-related deaths remains unknown due to an incomplete historical record, but recent investigations into unmarked graves at former residential school sites suggest a higher number than the originally estimated six thousand deaths.

# Introduction

## From Text to Context: ‘Reconciliation’ and Indigenous Testimonial Writing

In 2016, Cree poet Sky Dancer Louise Bernice Halfe released *Burning in This Midnight Dream*, a collection of autobiographical poems, many of which were written in response to the unfolding of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), established in 2008 to investigate the history and lasting impacts of the Indian Residential School system (IRS) on Indigenous families. In 2015, the TRC released an Executive Summary documenting crimes against humanity committed at residential schools across Canada, alongside 94 calls for acts of ‘reconciliation’ to promote peaceful and respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. In 1883, the Canadian government had adopted the IRS as a federal policy and made residential school attendance mandatory. Funded by the government and administered by Christian churches, the IRS was active for more than a hundred years, with the last residential school closed in 1997. Its overarching purpose was to ‘kill the Indian in the child’ by severing connections between Indigenous children and their families and home culture in order to assimilate them into the dominant white settler Canadian culture.<sup>1</sup> Residential schools created a traumatic legacy of ideological, psychological, and physical violence and intergenerational trauma.<sup>2</sup> Halfe was forced to attend Blue Quill Residential School in St. Paul, Alberta, for nine years from the age of seven and, since the 1990s, she has

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<sup>1</sup> Statement of Apology to former students of Indian Residential Schools, *Government of Canada*, 11 June 2008, <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100015644/1571589171655> [accessed March 2020]

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘intergenerational’ is used to refer to trauma transmitted across generations, often in reference to abuse experienced at residential schools. See for example, Neil Andersson and Amy Nahwegahbow, ‘Family Violence and the Need for Prevention Research in First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Communities’, *Pimatisiwin*, 8.2 (2010), 17.

been writing about ongoing colonial violence in Canada, crafting truths using Cree poetics.<sup>3</sup> A continuation of Halfe's testimonial work, *Burning in this Midnight Dream* engages with the TRC and the concept of 'reconciliation' in this context, shaped by the government as a truth-telling process designed to 'renew relationships on a basis of inclusion, mutual understanding, and respect'.<sup>4</sup> In her foreword to *Burning in This Midnight Dream*, Paulette Regan, Senior Advisor at the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, describes the poems as 'teachings' that forge pathways towards 'reconciliation'. But Halfe directs readers' attention towards truth in a Preamble where she suggests that if the TRC 'opened the door' to sharing stories of abuse, they were 'understandably sanitized' and made 'safe' for its purpose. Her poetry penetrates deeper, her intent not to 'fully plumb the depths' because aspects of trauma may always remain private, but to 'share yet more of that truth'. Halfe's poetic testimony is interspersed with black-and-white family photographs in a documentary style that emphasises her experience as both personal and collective. In poems such as 'Owners of Themselves' Halfe draws readers' attention to the difficulties of disclosing a painful story that has long been kept hidden, in the knowledge that it will be judged and validated: 'I have encountered so much silence. / Even when people came before the TRC / their over-arching silence / to me / overwhelmed the tidbits they were capable of offering'.<sup>5</sup> Halfe bears witness to how a government-mandated process is limited when experiences are too distressing to be shared in public, memories and feelings resist the confines of words, and the intensity of affect can only be communicated through a telling silence. In poetry, Halfe recounts how she listened to other survivors, 'waiting for their

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<sup>3</sup> A former Saskatchewan Poet Laureate, Halfe has published four books of poetry: *Bear Bones and Feathers* (1994), *Blue Marrow* (1998), *The Crooked Good* (2006), and *Burning in This Midnight Dream* (2016). *Sôhkêyihta: The Poetry of Sky Dancer Louise Bernice Halfe* (2018), edited by settler scholar David Gaertner with a biographical afterword by the author, is a selection of previously published works charting Halfe's poetic testimony through the years.

<sup>4</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Winnipeg, MB: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), 23.

<sup>5</sup> Louise Bernice Halfe, *Burning In This Midnight Dream* (Regina, SK: Coteau Books, 2016), 76. Subsequent references are in parenthesis.

dams to break’ while ‘hoping they wouldn’t’ (76). She articulates the pressures of testifying as personal and cross-generational when expressing the wish ‘that every teller would have two grandchildren / beside them as they spoke [...] so they could support the old people / as they fell into their dark holes / of memory’ (76). The comfort provided by the presence of grandchildren is as quotidian as it is profound, and its absence speaks to the long-term impact of intergenerational trauma if a teller lacks a web of supportive relationships because residential schools severed family bonds.

Halfe also conveys her experience of speaking truth to power in the poem ‘April 30, 2014’: ‘This afternoon I have my hearing / for Truth and Reconciliation. / I must confess my years of sleeping / in those sterile, cold rooms where the hiss / of water heaters were devils / in the dark’ (68, 69). Testimony of an all-encompassing trauma is distilled in this instance, the ineffability of which is suggested through what is left unspoken. Many of Halfe’s poems communicate a tension between an unwillingness to speak and a responsibility to tell. For example, in ‘*nanahitamowin* — to be obedient’, Halfe confides, ‘I’d rather step on the buffalo’s back and / shove my memories deep into the closet’ but, she decides, ‘It is better to dance / with memory / than be noosed by the gut’ (9). In *Burning in this Midnight Dream*, Halfe weaves together recollections and reflections, family histories, photographs, and a difficult history of land loss and Indigenous respect for the land. Her promise to ‘stich [sic] and sew, use colourful / embroidery thread and mend this soul’ is compellingly realised in poetry that pivots on history as felt and experiences that persist but may remain beyond comprehension for listeners (9).

*Burning in This Midnight Dream* is one of a small number of poetry collections that address the TRC directly.<sup>6</sup> When the TRC released its final report, another Cree poet, and CBC

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<sup>6</sup> In 2016, Cree-Métis poet Lisa Bird-Wilson published her first poetry collection, *The Red Files*, which builds on archival research and also addresses the abuse suffered by Indigenous children in the IRS system. Bird-Wilson’s poems are inspired by the photographs of anonymous Indigenous children in residential schools that she saw during a TRC event in Saskatoon. The discrepancy between archival images of nameless children and

host, Rosanna Deerchild published *calling down the sky* (2015) to bear witness to her mother's experience in a residential school and the intergenerational trauma that ensues as a result. Deerchild was spurred to write after a TRC event in Winnipeg in 2010, when her mother, Edna Fergusson, was turned away from a sharing circle. These poems, then, are the seal of a daughter's promise, 'I will make sure that you are never told to be quiet again'.<sup>7</sup> Deerchild tackles the voyeurism and the spectacularisation of Indigenous suffering in ways that echo criticism raised against the TRC, as I discuss below. The first poem, 'mama's testimony: truth and reconciliation' opens with a reckoning with the violence of inquisitiveness about it when 'reconciliation' demands that Indigenous peoples put their pain on stage: 'people ask me all the time / about residential schools / as if it's their business or something'.<sup>8</sup> Deerchild criticises the imperative to make trauma intelligible by forcing words into an experience that is 'unnameable': 'there is no word for what they did / in our language / to speak it is to become torn / from the choking'.<sup>9</sup> Trauma may be unspeakable and human experience irreducible to a rational narrative expressed as finite parameters, when the feelings are ongoing. In another poem, 'the second time', the impossibility of narration characterises the experience of speaking and listening, and remembering is made visible only through storytelling and the silences it contains: 'i ask mama / about residential school / she says no / i ask her again / she says no / the third time / i stop listen / to her silence'.<sup>10</sup> Writing *calling down the sky* over five years strengthened Deerchild's relationship with her mother as she learned how to listen to her story,

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the richness of their stories — unknown, like their names — has driven Bird-Wilson to imagine them in poetry. Political commentary is evident in poems such as 'The Apology', in which she patches together some of the words used by Prime Minister Stephen Harper in his 2008 statement of apology to former residential school students with her criticism of official statements that fail to be accompanied by real political change: 'you sowed these seeds and you / apologize for having done this / thing that is still in the doing', Lisa Bird-Wilson, *The Red Files* (Gibsons, BC: Nightwood Editions, 2016), 47.

<sup>7</sup> Rosanna Deerchild, Radio interview with Shelagh Rogers, 'Rosanna Deerchild on "Calling Down The Sky"', *The Next Chapter, CBC Radio*, April 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/2689763469> [accessed October 2022]

<sup>8</sup> Rosanna Deerchild, *calling down the sky* (Markham, ON: BookLand Press, 2015), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Deerchild, *calling down the sky*, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Deerchild, 'the second time', *Poetry in Voice*, nd, <https://poetryinvoice.ca/read/poems/second-time> [accessed August 2022]

coming to the realisation over time that if she wanted to learn about residential schools, asking direct questions would not elicit her mother's confidence in telling.<sup>11</sup> The truth about the residential schools eludes unequivocal representation. Halfe and Deerchild address this through poetry which allows omissions and harnesses symbolic language to express that which may be difficult or impossible to tell. This thesis is underpinned by a critique of the kind of testimony expected and required by the TRC, but I am interested primarily in how writers who do not address the Commission directly are creative in finding alternative ways to express testimony and relationality in opposition to rigid definitions of 'reconciliation', and who widen understanding of testimony in imaginative, personal, and collective ways. I focus on more sustained storytelling practices in the form of novels, short stories, and memoirs by contemporary Indigenous women writers who foreground and test models for telling, listening, understanding, and relating to others, in the aftermath of the TRC and who extend this cultural and creative work beyond poetry.

The first wave of Indigenous writing in the 1970s was led by Maria Campbell (Métis), Mini Aodla Freeman (Inuit), and Lee Maracle (Stó:lō) who wrote personal narratives in autobiographical form but faced difficulties in getting their works published.<sup>12</sup> One of Canada's most renowned Indigenous authors, Lee Maracle was also an orator, poet, performer, and activist but it took a long time for her work to receive the attention and recognition it deserves. She spoke from her experience when she asserted that 'Canada has a difficult time with

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<sup>11</sup> Deerchild, Radio interview with Shelagh Rogers, *The Next Chapter*, *CBC Radio*,

<sup>12</sup> For example, Maracle's semi-autobiographical *Bobbi Lee: Indian Rebel* (1975) was deemed 'too political'; Freeman's memoir, *Life Among the Qallunaat* underwent heavy editing when published in 1978; and although now considered a landmark in Indigenous literature, Campbell's memoir *Halfbreed* (1973) was 'dismissed' at the time of its publication as 'protest literature'. Lee Maracle, Radio Interview with Carol Off, 'Lee Maracle's Celebrated 2014 Novel *Celia's Song* finally hits the awards circuit', *As It Happens*, *CBC Radio*, September 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1596811843957> [accessed May 2020]. Keavy Martin, Julie Rak, and Norma Dunning, 'Afterword' to Mini Aodla Freeman, *Life Among The Qallunaat* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015), 270. Hartmut Lutz, 'Preface', *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors* (Saskatoon, SK: Fifth House Publishers, 1991), 2.

Indigenous women writers generally'.<sup>13</sup> Maracle claimed space in the literary marketplace regardless of whether it was offered. For example, in 1988, Maracle asked to be included in the Vancouver Writers Festival to launch *I Am Woman* (1988), a collection of essays on Indigenous feminism, but she was denied an invitation. She attended nevertheless, went on stage, and performed a reading.<sup>14</sup> The new wave of Indigenous literature that has ensued, and includes Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Cherie Dimaline, Katherena Vermette, and many other women, was trailblazed by Maracle. Despite increased attention directed towards Indigenous writers, and the groundswell of artistic production by Indigenous women, they continue to have 'less visibility' and 'fewer opportunities to represent [their] work' than Indigenous men, as Inuk author Norma Dunning contends.<sup>15</sup> This is one of the reasons that I prioritise Indigenous women, emerging voices, and polyphonic texts in this thesis. Except for Maracle's *Celia's Song*, the works selected are debuts and have yet to receive sustained critical attention, but they all explore testimony and relationality in the form of 'layered text[s]' in the way Maracle believed 'Indigenous women authors do [...] best'.<sup>16</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, these writers put reconciliation in Canada under scrutiny in thought-provoking ways.

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<sup>13</sup> After a prolific career, in 2017 the Canadian government awarded Maracle its highest honour, the Order of Canada, describing her as 'one of the most influential Indigenous voices in Canada's literary landscape'. In 2019 she was shortlisted for the celebrated 2020 Neudstadt International Prize for Literature, for her 'magnificent book' *Celia's Song*. 'Honouring Lee Maracle', *Canadian Scholars*, 11 November 2021, <https://canadianscholars.ca/honouring-lee-maracle/> [accessed October 2022]

<sup>14</sup> Lee Maracle interviewed by Rosanna Deerchild, 'Lee Maracle stormed CanLit stages to make sure her story was heard', *Unreserved, CBC Radio*, 16 March 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/how-indigenous-authors-are-claiming-space-in-the-canlit-scene-1.4573996/lee-maracle-stormed-canlit-stages-to-make-sure-her-story-was-heard-1.4578124> [accessed October 2022]

<sup>15</sup> Norma Dunning interviewed by Masinahikan Iskwêwak, 'Episode 08: Norma Dunning on writing Annie Muktuk and Other Stories', *Book Women Podcast*, 2019, <https://anchor.fm/bookwomenpodcast/episodes/Episode-8-Norma-Dunning-on-Writing-Annie-Muktuk-and-Other-Stories-e520q8> [accessed January 2022]

Lee Maracle addressed the issue of unequal representation again in a 2016 interview with CBC where she described it as 'a problem in Canada' where '70% of book buyers happen to be women but 80% of books sold are men's books' and the works of Indigenous men like Thomas King, Drew Hayden Taylor, Richard Van Camp, and others, are given more prominence over those of Indigenous women who instead remain 'at the bottom or the middle' of publication lists. 'First Nations Authors Discuss Carolyn Bennett's Proposed Indigenous Book Club Month,' *The Current, CBC Radio*, 8 January 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-january-8-2015-1.3394962/first-nations-authors-discuss-carolyn-bennett-s-proposed-indigenous-book-club-month-1.3394986> [accessed May 2020]

<sup>16</sup> Lee Maracle, *My Conversations with Canadians* (Toronto, ON: Book Thug, 2017), 148.

Maracle's novel *Celia's Song* (2014) blends social realism with elements of traditional Stó:lō storytelling and explores how experience may be communicated in ways that question and exceed received models of relationality. It is a sequel to Maracle's *Ravensong* (1993), which was published when the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was investigating Indigenous-settler relations (1991–1996), a process which eventually led to the establishment of the TRC. *Celia's Song* was written while the TRC was meeting and is dedicated to 'all those children who were removed from our homes and who did not survive residential school'. The social contexts in which the novels were produced reflect Maracle's concerns and the attention she pays to national debates, but whereas *Ravensong* focuses on the impossibility of cooperation during the 1950s, *Celia's Song* is read here for how it depicts the 1980s as beginning a 'healing period' for Indigenous peoples in which they also co-operate with non-Indigenous friends and allies.<sup>17</sup> In 2016, one of the TRC's calls to action was fulfilled when the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) was set up to investigate violence committed against Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA people, and in the same year, Métis writer and activist Katherena Vermette published her first novel, *The Break*, set in contemporary Winnipeg and centring the Métis experience.<sup>18</sup> My reading of this text is underpinned by testimonies from the MMIWG archives and focuses on the role of empathy in institutional contexts and the notion of epistemic (testimonial) injustice when a speaker is not believed due to negative stereotypes that listeners hold about the speaker and her social group.<sup>19</sup> *Birdie* (2015), the first novel by a writer, lawyer, academic, and

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<sup>17</sup> Lee Maracle, Radio Interview with Carol Off, 'Lee Maracle's Celebrated 2014 Novel *Celia's Song* finally hits the awards circuit', As It Happens, *CBC Radio*, September 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1596811843957> [accessed May 2020]

<sup>18</sup> Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual. For more on the term see the National Inquiry into MMIWG, *Reclaiming Power and Place: The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls* (Québec: Government of Canada Publishing and Depository Services Program, 2019), vol. 1.a, 126, 239-240.

<sup>19</sup> Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

Indigenous rights activist from Kelly Lake Cree Nation, Tracey Lindberg, was released in the week that the TRC's recommendations were published and named a finalist in the CBC Canada Reads competition that aims to foster Canadian awareness of 'reconciliation'. *Birdie* and the poetic memoir *Heart Berries* (2018) by Terese Marie Mailhot, a Nlaka'pamux writer, academic, and journalist from the Seabird Island reserve, are examined for how they explore the possibility of healing by foregrounding love and the refusal to forgive as inherent in colonial trauma, difficult ideas and ones that were not mobilised by the TRC in its emphasis on 'reconciliation'. Inuit perspectives risked being overlooked during the TRC process and fiction by Inuit writers is seldom analysed in critical studies of residential school literature. Short stories in the collection *Annie Muktuk and Other Stories* (2017) by Inuk author and academic Norma Dunning are analysed for how they establish telling links between the residential schools and other institutions that are protected by the state, underlining how colonial strategies that sustained the schools in the past persist in the present and may affect the future if 'reconciliation' fails to engender institutional change. This thesis teases out the ways in which contemporary writing by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit women is a form of critical as well as creative practice through which authors challenge and rethink models of testimony and relationality. *Celia's Song* is a historical novel, *The Break* has been read as crime fiction, and *Birdie* may be read as psychological novel or spiritual quest, but each is richer than generic labels convey. Mailhot's life writing blends epistolary style with therapeutic journaling and eulogy, while Dunning's short stories merge fiction, biography, and autoethnography. They are layered texts that weave together interconnected stories — whether stitched and sewed or spun and woven in crisscrossing patterns like spiderwebs.

### **Contesting Reconciliation**

As a term of reference for rethinking Indigenous-settler relations in Canada, 'reconciliation' appeared in 1996 in the Final Report of the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP)

which was established by the federal government in 1991, following a series of Indigenous protests that culminated in two ‘national crises’: the opposition to the Meech Lake Accord and military mobilisation over the so-called ‘Oka Crisis’, a land dispute.<sup>20</sup> The RCAP’s report raised issues that had been impacting the lives of Indigenous communities over time, including ‘[v]iolations of solemn promises in the treaties, inhumane conditions in residential schools, the uprooting of whole communities, the denial of rights and respect to patriotic Aboriginal veterans of two world wars, and the great injustices and small indignities inflicted by administration of the *Indian Act*’.<sup>21</sup> But the ‘principal source of outrage’ that propelled discussions of ‘reconciliation’ has less to do with violations of the distinct rights of Indigenous peoples that the RCAP report outlined and more with the violation of human rights, and especially the sexual victimisation of children.<sup>22</sup> A major turning point in 1990 was the disclosure by Phil Fontaine, then Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations, of sexual abuse he suffered at a residential school. Fontaine was not the first Indigenous person to talk about sexual violence in the schools but, because of his status, his statement generated a widespread response and encouraged many other Indigenous individuals and groups to pursue claims against the federal government and the churches that ran residential schools. The large number of abuse claims filed by residential school survivors ultimately led to the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA), signed in 2006 by plaintiffs, the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit representatives, and the federal government and church bodies. The IRSSA was implemented a year later to bring ‘closure to the legacy of Indian residential schools’ through

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<sup>20</sup> The ‘Oka crisis’ refers to a seventy-eight-day armed standoff between the Mohawk nation of Kanasatake, the Quebec provincial police, and the Canadian armed forces near the town of Oka, Quebec, which began on 11 July 1990. It started as peaceful protest to defend sacred Mohawk lands from becoming a golf course. For more on the failed Meech Lake Accord, the ‘Oka Crisis’, and their relation to the RCAP see Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 115-116.

<sup>21</sup> Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, *Looking Forward, Looking Back*, vol. 1, Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Ottawa: Canada Communication Group, 1996), <http://data2.archives.ca/e/e448/e011188230-01.pdf> [accessed August 2022]

<sup>22</sup> Ronald Niezen, *Truth and Indignation: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 29.

a series of restitutive measures including monetary compensation, the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, health and healing services, and commemorative activities.<sup>23</sup> Canada's TRC, then, emerged from Indigenous peoples' demand for justice. An independent body over which the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) has superseding agency, the TRC was chaired by the Honourable Murray Sinclair (Ojibwe), assisted by commissioners Chief Wilton Littlechild (Cree) and Marie Wilson (settler). Its work must be understood as resulting from the strength, care, and labour of Indigenous peoples who agreed to share their stories to bring historical and contemporary truths to bear on a settler nation. But the TRC is also inevitably compromised by the system of which it is a product, with 'reconciliation' a contentious term that may be mobilised by the state for assimilative purposes. The meaning of 'reconciliation' is widely disputed. Christopher Bracken (settler) discards the term as 'a signifier with a zero signified' and in *The Theatre of Regret* (2020) David Gaertner (settler) examines how it has become a 'floating signifier', a word that 'points to nothing and has no agreed-upon meaning'. Etymologically, to reconcile means 'to restore to union and friendship', from the Latin *re-* 'again' and *conciliare* 'to bring together in harmony, make friendly'. The TRC's final report defines reconciliation as an 'ongoing process' of 'establishing' and 'maintaining' mutually respectful social and political relationships between Indigenous peoples and settlers, but the term is employed in the Canadian context with two other contrasting connotations, depending on whether it is 'Indigenous-centred' or 'state-centred'. From Indigenous perspectives, 'reconciliation' refers to Indigenous practices of re-establishing 'a positive "relation-to-self"' and others where this has been damaged by structural violence. When state-centred, 'reconciliation' alludes to processes through which the state

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<sup>23</sup> Monetary compensation measures are the Common Experience Payment (CEP) which the government of Canada pays to former students who can prove their attendance in residential schools that are recognised by the IRSSA, and an Independent Assessment Process (IAP) for claims of sexual and serious physical abuse. The Official Website of the Government of Canada, *Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement*, 9 June 2021 <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1100100015576/1571581687074> [accessed August 2021]

attempts to render consistent or compatible ‘Indigenous assertions of nationhood with the state’s unilateral assertion of sovereignty over Native peoples’ lands and populations’. As Dene scholar Glen Coulthard contends, this definition ‘lies at the core of Canada’s legal and political understanding’ and undermines more genuine forms of reconciliation.<sup>24</sup> Survivors of residential schools sought justice through a litigation process rather than relying solely on ‘reconciliation’, which always risked becoming a ‘politics of distraction’ that ‘re-inscribes the status quo without holding anyone accountable for ongoing injustices’.<sup>25</sup> This is not to say that Canada’s TRC is exclusively co-optive, which would deny the agency of Indigenous peoples who worked to bring it to realisation and who participated in it.<sup>26</sup> It is, however, a space where multiple agendas clash.

Truth and reconciliation commissions are typically mechanisms of transitional justice, but Canada’s TRC did not facilitate any major political reform. The TRC’s distinctive aim was to educate a nation, and at a public hearing in 2013, Commissioner Sinclair explained that the Common Experience Payment (CEP) and the Independent Assessment Process (IAP) had already provided opportunities for survivors to testify privately in front of adjudicators, but the process was secretive, so the TRC was created ‘to make stories public’.<sup>27</sup> The scope of the TRC

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<sup>24</sup> Christopher Bracken, ‘Reconciliation Romance’, *Qui Parle*, 24.1 (2015), 4. David Gaertner, *The Theatre of Regret: Literature, Art, and the Politics of Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2020), 19. TRC, *Honouring the Truth*, 6, 190. Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 106-107.

For further criticism see, for example, David Garneau, ‘Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation: Art, Curation, and Healing’, *Arts of Engagement, Taking Aesthetic Action in and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin eds., (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 33-34. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Recreation, Resurgence and A New Emergence* (Winnipeg, MB: ARP Books, 2011), 21-22. Dian Million, *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013), 6.

<sup>25</sup> Jeff Corntassel, ‘Re-envisioning Resurgence: Indigenous Pathways to Decolonization and Sustainable Self-Determination’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1.1 (2012), 91, 93. See also Jeff Corntassel and Cindy Holder, ‘Who’s Sorry Now? Government Apologies, Truth Commissions, and Indigenous Self-Determination in Australia, Canada, Guatemala, and Peru’, *Human Rights Review*, 9.4 (2008), 472.

<sup>26</sup> This point is also made by Dylan Robinson in relation to performance in ‘Reconciliation Relations’, *Canadian Theatre Review*, 161.1 (2015), 61.

<sup>27</sup> National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) Archive, University of Manitoba, Part SP117\_part03 - Commissioner Justice Murray Sinclair, [https://archives.nctr.ca/SP117\\_part03](https://archives.nctr.ca/SP117_part03)

was much wider: ‘reconciliation on a grand scale out of an ambitious production of knowledge’.<sup>28</sup> Gaertner issued a reminder in *The Theatre of Regret* (2020), though, that ‘the democracy that now calls for reconciliation is the same democracy that inflicted (and continues to inflict) the violence that now demands redress’ and Lee Maracle exposed this paradox when she suggested that ‘reconciliation’ is a ‘misnomer’ if the continuation of the Canadian state is dependent upon the continuing genocide of Indigenous peoples.<sup>29</sup> To (attempt to) maintain impartiality, Canada’s TRC was extra-governmental, but it failed to hold perpetrators accountable, whether overarching bodies like government and churches, or specific individuals. As Ronald Niezen summarises, Canada’s is the only truth commission to have ‘thoroughly extinguished the identities of possible perpetrators from its proceedings, preventing their names from even entering the record through survivor narratives, and maintaining invisibility and anonymity’.<sup>30</sup> Survivors were disallowed from publicly naming perpetrators, unless they had already been criminally prosecuted, sued, or held liable in a Canadian court. Justice Murray Sinclair explained that this was decided to ensure that the rights of those who had not been tried would be protected, and because ‘[no] commission should turn into an inquisition’.<sup>31</sup> But other factors influenced the dynamic in more complex ways than Sinclair’s statement suggests. By entering the IRSSA, survivors lost their right to sue the government, churches, or any other defendant in court. Opting out of the IRSSA meant losing the right to financial compensation.<sup>32</sup> Many testifiers did not perceive monetary compensation

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<sup>28</sup> Ronald Niezen, ‘Foreword’ to *Power through Testimony: Reframing Residential Schools in the Age of Reconciliation*, Brieg Capitaine and Karine Vanthuyne eds., (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017), xi.

<sup>29</sup> Gaertner, *The Theatre of Regret*, 33; Maracle, *My Conversations with Canadians*, 133.

<sup>30</sup> Ronald Niezen, *Truth and Indignation*, 3.

<sup>31</sup> NCTR Archive, University of Manitoba, Part SP117\_part03 - Commissioner Justice Murray Sinclair, [https://archives.nctr.ca/SP117\\_part03](https://archives.nctr.ca/SP117_part03)

<sup>32</sup> Far from employing a language of understanding, solidarity, and respect, the official court notice reads: ‘Eligible former students who stay in the settlement can get a payment from it. Family members who were not students will not get payments. However, former students — and family members — who stay in the settlement will never again be able to sue the Government of Canada, the Churches who joined in the settlement, or any other defendant in the class actions, over residential schools’. ‘Official Court Notice’, [https://www.residentialschoolsettlement.ca/summary\\_notice.pdf](https://www.residentialschoolsettlement.ca/summary_notice.pdf)

as a form of restitution, but rather an instrument that forced them to accept what was sometimes described as ‘shut-up money’.<sup>33</sup> This suggests the extent to which the IRSSA, a legal agreement approved by Canadian courts, was driven not only by concerns for the justice and well-being of Indigenous communities but also by how to best contain and offset the largest class action lawsuit in Canadian history — by redirecting justice towards reconciliation. Nuu’chalnulth scholar Rachel Yacaaʔaʔ George points out that ‘the judiciary is a function of the colonial system’ and that, as such, it ‘remains impeded in its ability to fundamentally question the authority and interests of a state that brought it into existence’.<sup>34</sup>

The TRC model is said to be aligned with Indigenous conceptions of justice, and its restorative approach involves the therapeutic use of storytelling. But Indigenous restorative processes rely on abusers taking full responsibility for their actions in order to work towards resolution according to restorative measures that the injured parties have the agency to decide.<sup>35</sup> At TRC events, restorative justice is reinterpreted through Western frameworks that are influenced by Christian theology, which burdens survivors with a responsibility to overcome hate and anger for the promise of a reconciled future. Love and healing are equated with forgiveness. Specific templates for testimony encouraged by the TRC placed emphasis on personal suffering while invoking a new narrative in which anger and pain could be overcome and replaced by forgiveness.<sup>36</sup> Survivors were — oxymoronically — encouraged to shut out the feelings that they were supposed to be narrating according to a paranoid imperative which

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<sup>33</sup> This is the term used by Anne-Marie Reynaud following interviews with survivors from the Mitchikanibikok Inik First Nations in Quebec. Others perceived it as ‘killer money’ contributing to alcohol and drug abuse, emphasising the ways in which monetary compensation did not help the healing process but generated more harms because money was not given to communities but to individuals who were not offered any kind of emotional, spiritual, or mental health support. Anne-Marie Reynaud, *Emotions, Remembering and Feeling Better: Dealing with the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement in Canada* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2017), 105, 205.

<sup>34</sup> Rachel Yacaaʔaʔ George, ‘A Move To Distract: Mobilizing Truth and Reconciliation in Settler Colonial State’, *Pathways of Reconciliation: Indigenous and Settler Approaches to Implementing the TRC’s Calls to Action*, Aimée Craft and Paulette Regan eds., (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020), 93.

<sup>35</sup> Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, 23

<sup>36</sup> Niezen, *Truth and Indignation*, 68.

determines the ‘impossibility but also the supposed necessity of forestalling pain’.<sup>37</sup> Paranoid critical modes, which US scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies as ubiquitous in Western criticism, are limited to a negative discourse that does not repair unequal power relations. Sedgwick proposed a turn to reparative approaches. As Ellis Hanson summarises, these focus ‘not on the exposure of political outrages that we already know about, but rather on the process of reconstructing a sustainable life in their wake’.<sup>38</sup> A reparative approach focuses not only on what is said or done, but also how and to what effect, and a reparative reading allows for a different kind of performative knowledge, beyond speech. Sedgwick’s reflections inform my reading of literary texts in the context of ‘reconciliation’ because I identify TRC public events as sites of ‘paranoid’ practice that placed an emphasis on ‘the efficacy of knowledge per se — knowledge in the form of exposure’.<sup>39</sup> At the TRC, Indigenous peoples seeking justice were forced to navigate a system that was not designed to support them. Survivors spoke of the difficulties they experienced when testifying during the CEP and IAP because their stories were often not believed by adjudicators who were judging their validity for monetary compensation.<sup>40</sup> In my reading of Vermette’s novel *The Break*, for example, the failure of settlers to listen to Indigenous peoples equates, by extension, to Canada’s failure to protect Indigenous communities.

The TRC report mobilised national pride and shame at the same time: ‘No Canadian can take pride in this country’s treatment of Aboriginal peoples, and, *for that reason*, all Canadians have a critical role to play in advancing reconciliation’.<sup>41</sup> However, the use of the

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<sup>37</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay is About You’, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 137. Originally written in 1995, this essay was revised for *Touching Feeling*.

<sup>38</sup> Ellis Hanson, ‘The Future’s Eve: Reparative Reading after Sedgwick’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 110 (2011), 105.

<sup>39</sup> Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading’, 138.

<sup>40</sup> See for example, Anne-Marie Reynaud, ‘Dealing with Difficult Emotions: Anger at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’, *Anthropologica*, 56.2 (2014), 372; Gaertner, *The Theatre of Regret*, 162; Niezen, *Truth and Indignation*, 47.

<sup>41</sup> TRC, *Honouring the Truth*, 183; emphasis mine.

first-person plural ‘we’ in the TRC’s final report suggests that settlers were the intended audience, while Indigenous peoples are referred to in the third person plural, ‘they’, further enforcing a duality. Reconciliation is described as ‘necessary’ for Canada to ‘remove a stain from its past and be able to maintain its claim to be a leader in the protection of human rights among the nations of the world’.<sup>42</sup> This discourse is state-centred and absorbs ‘reconciliation’ into a neoliberal narrative of democratic progress. Instead of considering Indigenous self-determination and wellbeing as primary aims, examining the state and its system of violence as the object of study, the report foregrounds Canada’s reputation as ‘a prosperous, just, and inclusive democracy within [the] global world’, rather than the rights of First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities to lead healthy and safe lives with attention paid to Indigenous laws and cultures.<sup>43</sup> Contrary to the ethical values that are the foundation of the TRC, misjudgement of priorities could enforce, rather than oppose, structural violence. Canada’s TRC relegates past and present injustices to a specific temporal and institutional framework that is the IRS system. Various injustices resulting from ongoing colonial practices are minimised and contained as a legacy of past abuse. Although the Commissioners and the ninety-four calls to action *do* situate residential schools within a broader context of ongoing colonial violence, the TRC was limited by its mandate to focus on residential schools and ‘put the events of the past behind us’.<sup>44</sup> This corresponds to a pattern identified by Glen Coulthard, according to which in settler-colonial contexts ‘state-sanctioned approaches to reconciliation must ideologically manufacture such a transition by allocating the abuses of settler colonization to the dustbins of history, and/or

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<sup>42</sup> TRC, *Honouring the Truth*, 183. Niezen notes that Canada’s TRC was ‘oriented from the outset toward public exposure, staging noteworthy and newsworthy events, garnering press coverage, and reaching out to a global audience via the Internet — all with a focus on victim narratives’, *Truth and Indignation*, 60

<sup>43</sup> TRC, *Honouring the Truth*, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Schedule “N” Mandate for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission  
[https://www.residentialschoolsettlement.ca/SCHEDULE\\_N.pdf](https://www.residentialschoolsettlement.ca/SCHEDULE_N.pdf)

purposely disentangle processes of reconciliation from questions of settler-coloniality as such'.<sup>45</sup>

If relationships are to be established or mended, and then nurtured, that colonialism prevails into the twenty-first century must be acknowledged. A state-sponsored model for relationality like 'reconciliation' may obscure the ways in which relationships continue to be broken by colonialism if it is limited to the framework of the residential schools. The removal of Indigenous children from their families remains as a contemporary issue. The child welfare system effectively works as a continuation of the IRS system through a persistent colonial narrative of 'Indigenous deficiency' according to which Indigenous peoples lack inherent qualities of character, biology, and intellect.<sup>46</sup> This narrative 'logic' explains the over-representation of Indigenous children in the child welfare system, which the TRC recognises began in the 1960s when children were transferred from residential schools to the child-welfare agency and placed in foster homes or put up for adoption by white families, in what has come to be known as the 'Sixties Scoop'.<sup>47</sup> According to the 2016 census, 52.2% of children in foster care are Indigenous, even though Indigenous children account for only 7.7% of children in Canada.<sup>48</sup> Cindy Blackstock, Gitksan activist for child welfare and executive director of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada, asserts, 'There are more First Nations kids in child welfare today than at the height of residential schools'.<sup>49</sup> The spurious logic of deficiency also justifies the targeting of Indigenous youth by the criminal justice system and frames Indigenous men as violent and lacking in self-control. The poverty, mental

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<sup>45</sup> Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 108.

<sup>46</sup> Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures*, 3.

<sup>47</sup> TRC, *Honouring the Truth*, 68.

<sup>48</sup> 'Reducing the numbers of Indigenous children in care', *Government of Canada*, January 2022, <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1541187352297/1541187392851> [accessed September 2022]

<sup>49</sup> Cindy Blackstock qtd in Ashifa Kassam, 'Ratio of indigenous children in Canada welfare system is "humanitarian crisis"', *The Guardian*, November 4, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/04/indigenous-children-canada-welfare-system-humanitarian-crisis> [accessed October 2022]

distress, and addictions that affect Indigenous communities, with suicide rates four times higher than the national average, are viewed through the same logic as proof of deficiency rather than the result of colonial assaults and settler violence. Indigenous women and Two-spirit persons, in particular, are targets of colonial violence, and the TRC's final report highlights a series of factors that have harmful effects on the lives of women, ranging from racism and sexual violence to poor educational and health opportunities. It emphasises this interplay of factors as 'part of the legacy of the residential schools' that needs to be addressed in the process of 'reconciliation'.<sup>50</sup> The MMIWG National Inquiry (2016-2019) had a broad mandate to report on forms of genocidal violence that stem from colonial structures, including 'purposeful, chronic underfunding of essential human services' in Indigenous communities; physical, sexual and mental abuse inflicted on Indigenous women and girls in state institutions; deaths of women in police custody; failure to protect Indigenous women, girls and Two-Spirit people from known killers, exploitation, and trafficking; coerced sterilisation; and the removal of children from families and the child welfare crisis.<sup>51</sup> Among its findings, the MMIWG inquiry recorded indifference and neglect on the part of the Canadian government and the police over the deaths and disappearances of Indigenous women to the extent that 'there is no reliable estimate of the numbers of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA persons in Canada'.<sup>52</sup>

The TRC acknowledged from the outset that the IRS system was a central element of Canada's policy of assimilation and that it amounted to a 'cultural genocide'.<sup>53</sup> At the closing ceremony for the MMIWG inquiry, chief commissioner Marion Buller made the accusation of genocide more fiercely, and unsparingly, when she stated:

The significant, persistent, and deliberate pattern of systemic racial and gendered human and Indigenous rights violations and abuses, perpetuated historically and

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<sup>50</sup> TRC, *Honouring the Truth*, 228.

<sup>51</sup> MMIWG inquiry, *Reclaiming Power*, 1.a, 53.

<sup>52</sup> MMIWG inquiry, *Reclaiming Power*, 1.b, 234.

<sup>53</sup> TRC, *Honouring the Truth*, 1.

maintained today by the Canadian State, designed to displace Indigenous peoples from their lands, social structures and governments, and to eradicate their existence as nations, communities, families and individuals is the cause of the disappearances, murders, and violence experienced by Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQIA people. *And this is genocide*.<sup>54</sup>

Canadian politicians have been at odds over the terminology employed by the inquiry. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau worried that people were ‘getting wrapped up in debates over a very important and powerful term’, before allowing that ‘we accept the finding that it was *genocide* and we will move forward to end this ongoing national tragedy’.<sup>55</sup> The leader of the Conservative Party Andrew Scheer countered that the issue of MMIWG was ‘its own tragedy’ but that it did not ‘fall into that category of genocide’.<sup>56</sup> ‘Tragedy’ was used instead of genocide as a less precise term, to suggest that fault was more diffuse than government policy and intervention. On another occasion, Trudeau stated that he believed the expression ‘cultural genocide’ more appropriate, with the implication that the latter, formulated as separate from physical and biological genocide, could be more easily accepted by a settler culture.<sup>57</sup> While the law has not settled on a definition of cultural genocide, the term is generally employed to refer broadly to the obliteration of a people’s identity by means of cultural extermination, and the TRC report defines it as ‘the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group.’<sup>58</sup> Robert Cohen’s definition is more nuanced and imputative: ‘Cultural genocide happens when a government or state tries to destroy a people’s special identity by forbidding their language, religion, way of life, or ability to live together according

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<sup>54</sup> CTV News, “*This is genocide*”: Full Statement on MMIWG Report, YouTube, 3 June 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTuXJwwRMr0> [accessed January 2023]

<sup>55</sup> Vincent Shilling, ‘The national MMIWG report’s use of the word genocide sparks an international debate’, *Indian Country Today*, 8 June 2019, <https://ictnews.org/news/the-national-mmiwg-reports-use-of-the-word-genocide-sparks-an-international-debate> [accessed January 2023]. Tessa Vikander, (tweet) @TessaVikander, 4 June 2019. John Paul Tasker, ‘It is “its own thing”’: Andrew Scheer disagrees with Indigenous inquiry’s genocide finding’, *CBC News*, 10 June 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/scheer-mmiwg-genocide-1.5169000> [accessed January 2023]

<sup>56</sup> John Paul Tasker, ‘It is “its own thing”’: Andrew Scheer disagrees with Indigenous inquiry’s genocide finding’, *CBC News*, 10 June 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/scheer-mmiwg-genocide-1.5169000> [accessed January 2023]

<sup>57</sup> Tasker, ‘It is “its own thing”’, *CBC News*.

<sup>58</sup> TRC, *Honouring the Truth*, 1.

to their traditional culture.’<sup>59</sup> Oftentimes, settlers fail to see the connection between extermination via cultural assimilation and extermination via biological genocide.<sup>60</sup> In May 2021, the remains of 215 children were found in unmarked graves in a residential school site in British Columbia.<sup>61</sup> Jenny Kwan, MP for Vancouver East, addressed the political importance of recognising the residential schools as ‘institutions that were designed to perpetuate genocide’ — not only ‘cultural’ but genocide ‘as defined by the UN convention’.<sup>62</sup> As of September 2022, more than 1700 unmarked graves have been discovered near the former sites of seven residential schools in the Northwest Territories and in the provinces of Manitoba, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan.<sup>63</sup> Research shows Indigenous children were subjected to medical experiments in residential schools and that Indigenous women have been and continue to be subjected to coerced sterilisation.<sup>64</sup> The slow genocide of Indigenous peoples, over centuries, is incremental and can be invisible. For Lauren Berlant, ‘slow death’ describes forms

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<sup>59</sup> Robert Cohen, *Canada’s First Nations and Cultural Genocide* (New York, NY: Rosen Publishing, 2017), 9.

<sup>60</sup> For example, Paulette Regan cites a white woman failing to see the connection between residential schools and genocide during a TRC event, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010), 114.

<sup>61</sup> Tracey Lindeman, ‘Canada: remains of 215 children found at Indian residential school site’, *The Guardian*, 28 May 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/28/canada-remains-indigenous-children-mass-graves> [accessed January 2023]

<sup>62</sup> Peter Zimonjic, ‘“The fault of Canada”: Trudeau addresses Commons on discovery of remains at BC residential school’, *CBC News*, 1 June 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/trudeau-house-commons-debate-residential-school-kamloops-1.6049312> [accessed January 2023]

<sup>63</sup> Carina Xue Luo, ‘Missing Children of Indian Residential Schools: on discovery of unmarked graves at former Indian residential school sites in Canada’, *Academic Data Centre*, Leddy Library, University of Windsor, ON, 7 September 2022, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/cfe29bee35c54a70b9621349f19a3db2> [accessed January 2023]

<sup>64</sup> Ian Mosby, ‘Administering Colonial Science: Nutrition Research and Human Biomedical Experimentation in Aboriginal Communities and Residential Schools, 1942-1952’, *Histoire Sociale*, 46.91 (2013), 145–72; Ashifa Kassam, ‘Canada sued over years of alleged experimentation on indigenous people’, *The Guardian*, 11 May 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/11/canada-indigenous-people-medical-experiments-lawsuit> [accessed January 2023]; Zoe Tennant, ‘The dark history of Canada’s Food Guide: How experiments on Indigenous children shaped nutrition policy’, *Unreserved*, *CBC Radio*, 19 April 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/how-food-in-canada-is-tied-to-land-language-community-and-colonization-1.5989764/the-dark-history-of-canada-s-food-guide-how-experiments-on-indigenous-children-shaped-nutrition-policy-1.5989785> [accessed January 2023]; Roger Collier, ‘Reports of Coerced Sterilization of Indigenous Women in Canada Mirrors Shameful Past’, *Canadian Medical Association Journal* (CMAJ), 189.33 Special Issue (2017), 1080–1081; Christine Shawana, Chaneesa Ryan, and Abrar Ali, ‘Forced or Coerced Sterilization in Canada: An Overview of Recommendations for Moving Forward’, *International Journal of Indigenous Health*, 16.1 (2021), 275–90; Kirsty Kirkup, ‘Indigenous women coerced into sterilizations across Canada’, *The Canadian Press*, *CBC News*, 12 November 2018, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/sterilization-indigenous-1.4902303> [accessed January 2023]

of violence and oppression that are insidious and take place across a long arc of time, which may not be given full cognition by a society that embarks on ‘the physical wearing out of a population’.<sup>65</sup> Rob Nixon defines ‘slow violence’ as occurring ‘gradually and out of sight’, delaying destruction in ‘an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all’. Two sides of the same coin — slow death as the cumulative effect of deterioration of a population, and the ‘incremental and accretive’ intensity of slow violence — if they remain ‘unspectacular’ may also remain invisible as ‘calamitous repercussions pla[y] out across a range of temporal scales’.<sup>66</sup> The TRC and, to a lesser extent, the MMIWG inquiry, produced a robust discourse of ‘reconciliation’ that has been promoted and mobilised by the state, but ‘reconciliation’ is fraught with problems if it corresponds to an attempt to reconcile Indigenous peoples to a settler colonial state that continues to harm, kill, and exploit them. The literature examined across this thesis does not rescue ‘reconciliation’ from how it has been understood in the national discourse, nor do the writers react directly to the TRC, in the way that poets Halfe and Deerchild do, but they open up discursive space in which the dominant tenets of reconciliatory discourse can be seen to be challenged.

### **Relationality and Healing**

Reconciliatory discourse diverts attention from the realities of ongoing dispossession and occupation of lands by foregrounding personal trauma and promoting a neoliberal and linear narrative of individualistic healing when, as Cherokee author Daniel Heath Justice contends in *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (2018), the ‘central ethos’ of Indigenous literatures is *relationship* in its broadest sense: ‘relationship to the land, to human community, to self, to the other-than-human world, to the ancestors and our descendants, to our histories and our futures,

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<sup>65</sup> Lauren Berlant, ‘Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)’, *Critical Inquiry*, 33.4 (2007), 754.

<sup>66</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

as well as to colonizers and their literal and ideological heirs'.<sup>67</sup> Speaking at the TRC, Elder Reg Crowshoe of the Piikani First Nation emphasised that storytelling informs relational practices because it is a means through which '[we] defin[e] our environment' and relate with 'authorities that come from the land'.<sup>68</sup> Other Indigenous witnesses at the TRC highlighted that reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and settlers cannot take place without prior reconciliation with all relations that have been damaged and, in particular, with the earth.<sup>69</sup> Intergenerational trauma affects entire ecosystems if family relationships are understood as 'networks of reciprocal responsibilities formed between Indigenous peoples and their non-human/animal kin, the land and waters that comprise their territories, and the spirit world which forms their cosmology'.<sup>70</sup> Building respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples is dependent upon the 'resurgence' of self-determining Indigenous communities and their storytelling practices. As theorised by Anishinaabe scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, 'resurgence' shifts the focus from paranoia to reparation, from struggle to affirmation, 'from trying to transform the colonial outside into a flourishing of Indigenous inside' in everyday acts of Indigenous self-determination.<sup>71</sup> The resurgence of Indigenous ways of living does not imply a return to an essentialised past but entails 're-creating the cultural and political flourishing of the past' to support prospering Indigenous identities in the present.<sup>72</sup> In primary texts that feature in the chapters that follow, writers define

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<sup>67</sup> Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018), xix.

<sup>68</sup> Reg Crowshoe quoted in *Honouring the Truth*, 18.

<sup>69</sup> This view is also articulated in *Resurgence and Reconciliation* (2018), where contributors shift focus away from models where reconciliation and resurgence are inevitably opposed, to explore how they work in complementary and 'transformative' ways. The authors formulate 'resurgent reconciliation' as a set of interrelated practices of independence and interdependence based on collective reconciliation that is grounded in Indigenous cultural renewal and ecological teachings. Michael Asch, John Borrows, and James Tully eds., *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous Settler Relations and Earth Teachings* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 5.

<sup>70</sup> Cindy Holmes and Sarah Hunt, *Indigenous Communities and Family Violence: Changing the Conversation* (Prince George, BC: National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2017), 7.

<sup>71</sup> Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*, 17.

<sup>72</sup> Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*, 51.

home and family in ways that differ from how both terms are understood according to the (still) dominant paradigm of the nuclear family. Instead, they foreground ‘circles of care’ as deeply intertwined relationships among and between extended family members, with kinship ties reaching into the nonhuman world.<sup>73</sup> They offer readers what Daniel Heath Justice contends should also be at the heart of understanding relationality: ‘helpful pathways for maintaining, rebuilding, or even simply establishing’ meaningful connections.<sup>74</sup> The selected writers imagine models of testimony, and ways of speaking and listening more broadly, that are strategically different from the model which underpins the TRC and, in my reading, they suggest how dialogue may strengthen relationships by drawing from a rich tradition of Indigenous theory that celebrates Story as a vital force through which Indigenous peoples resist erasure and shape their identities and ways of being in the world. I use *story* or *narrative* to indicate a series of connected events, factual or imaginary, conveyed through multiple cultural forms, including but not limited to words (written or spoken), imagery (still and moving), performance, and music. Athabaskan scholar Dian Million posits that ‘story is Indigenous theory’, a kind of ‘practical vision’ that is ‘strategic’ and ‘restorative’, and Maracle describes stories as ‘spiritual helpers’ that lead readers and listeners ‘to right living, to the good mind, to relationship with one another and the land’.<sup>75</sup> Transcending individual experience but grounded in subjective history, such stories are the medium through which relationships, experiences, identities, and worldviews may be articulated collectively.

Many Indigenous scholars, with Jo-Ann Episkenew representative, have been theorising about the healing power of stories and in 2021, Michelle Coupal (Bonnecher

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<sup>73</sup> Jessica Ball, ‘Indigenous Fathers’ Involvement in Reconstituting “Circles of Care”’, *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 45.1-2 (2010), 134.

<sup>74</sup> Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, xix.

<sup>75</sup> Dian Million, ‘There Is a River in Me: Theory from Life’, *Theorizing Native Studies*, Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith eds., (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 35. Lee Maracle, *My Conversations with Canadians*, 119. More about how stories shape lives and relationships in Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) and Richard Wagamese, *One Story, One Song* (Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre Publishing Group, 2016).

Algonquin) and Sam McKegney (settler) summarised the ‘current trepidation around healing theory’ in relation to residential school stories for the ways in which it risks being solely ‘damage-focused’. As Eve Tuck (Unangax̂) argues, damage-centred approaches reinscribe ‘a one-dimensional’ picture of Indigenous peoples as ‘depleted, ruined, and hopeless’.<sup>76</sup> But Coupal is critical of how a countertrend may risk some critics shying away from substantial engagement with trauma. Deflecting from a consideration of how pain continues to be foregrounded by writers can become a means to ‘avoid difficult conversations’.<sup>77</sup> Countering colonial narratives of erasure, deficit, and victimisation, the Indigenous stories highlighted in this thesis celebrate Indigenous presence without denying trauma. They are narratives of ‘survivance’ — what Anishinaabe cultural theorist Gerald Vizenor describes as ‘an active sense of presence over absence, deracination, and oblivion’.<sup>78</sup> If it is ‘more than survival, more than endurance or a mere response’, survivance is best described as ‘the continuance of stories’.<sup>79</sup> Like resurgence, it is about Indigenous self-determination in the present, and wisdom that derives from Indigenous experiences — both joyful and harrowing. Survivance carries a ‘tragic wisdom’ that comes from confronting genocide and myriad injustices, a kind of ‘genetic’ or ‘blood’ memory that suggests Indigenous strength and brilliance through stories.<sup>80</sup> Terese Marie Mailhot addresses this directly when she states, ‘I don’t want a joyous future nearly as much as I want the freedom to present the tragedy in our lives — *and not be bound to it*’.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Eve Tuck, ‘Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities’, *Harvard Educational Review*, 79.3 (2009), 409.

<sup>77</sup> Michelle Coupal and Sam McKegney, ‘Called to Relationship and Reckoning through Story: Reflections on Reading, Teaching, and Writing about Residential School Literatures’, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 46.2 (2021), 36.

<sup>78</sup> Gerald Vizenor, ‘Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice’, in Gerald Vizenor ed. *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>79</sup> Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses: Native American Scenes of Absence and Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 15. Vizenor, ‘Aesthetics of Survivance’, 1.

<sup>80</sup> Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses*, 19.

<sup>81</sup> Terese Marie Mailhot, ‘Native American Lives Are Tragic, But Probably Not In The Way You Think’, *Mother Jones*, November/December (2018), emphasis mine,

<https://www.motherjones.com/media/2018/11/native-american-story-tragic-terese-mailhot-tommy-orange-poverty-porn/?src=longreads> [accessed May 2022]

Tragic wisdom involves the courage and potential to be empowered rather than victimised by pain.

The TRC provided a space for recounting violence but ‘reconciliation’ needs to include full acknowledgement that there are multiple ways of addressing trauma if ‘languages of affect [are] to be generated organically from within particular histories’, as settler scholar Ann Cvetkovich advocates.<sup>82</sup> When settler critical geographer Sarah de Leeuw invites ways of writing that may ‘open new spaces’ to begin the ‘never-ending process’ of ‘unsettling and righting colonial violence’, she cites an experimental Canadian poet, M. NourbeSe Philip, for describing poetry as a form that pushes ‘against the boundaries of language’ and beyond ‘sensical’ representation, to reach modes of expression that refuse rationality, predictability, and smooth comprehension.<sup>83</sup> Philip points to an idea that I will discuss in the context of Indigenous writing: that the instrumentalisation of speech for the purpose of transparency reduces multifaceted experiences to an absolute, ‘ordering an experience’ when it is inevitably ‘disordered (and can never be ordered)’, and may amount to committing ‘a second violence, this time to the memory of an already violent experience’.<sup>84</sup> Drawing from Philip and other experimental writers, including Peter Cole (Stl’atl’imx), de Leeuw pays attention to how language may be a decolonial tool if it unsettles received models of knowledge in writing that works ‘to not tell, to un-tell, or to break the traditions of telling’.<sup>85</sup> My selected texts are reparative and chosen because although they evoke and even foreground trauma, specific abuses are often left unnarrated, and healing represented as a journey rather than a destination reached in an ameliorative finale.

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<sup>82</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, ‘Public Feelings’, *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106.3 (2007), 465.

<sup>83</sup> Sarah de Leeuw, ‘Writing as Righting: Truth and Reconciliation, Poetics, and New Geo-graphing in Colonial Canada’, *Canadian Geographer*, 61 (2017), 311.

<sup>84</sup> M. NourbeSe Philip quoted in de Leeuw, ‘Writing as Righting’, 312-13.

<sup>85</sup> de Leeuw, ‘Writing as Righting’, 315.

The TRC Mini-Doc Highlights, which condense TRC events into key moments and take-home messages, opens with stories of residential school suffering and closes with a new narrative in which forgiveness is equated with healing in the form of liberation from anger, pain, grief, shame, and guilt. Survivors' statements that are compatible with this narrative, such as 'happiness is my revenge' and 'anger is spiritual sickness', close the Mini-Doc.<sup>86</sup> Healing from intergenerational and colonial trauma and from incapacitating or toxic forms of anger is not simply an 'imposed fabricatio[n] of the dominant society', as Matt James (settler) also highlights, but reflects Indigenous concerns and aspirations.<sup>87</sup> However, the risk remains that Indigenous understandings of healing, compassion, and even forgiveness will be, and are, co-opted to fit a neoliberal narrative. As a narrative of suffering which invokes healing through forgiveness, the TRC Mini-Doc privileges healing as a cure (through which more 'productive' subjects will be constituted), even as the TRC report acknowledges holistic understandings of healing as a journey.<sup>88</sup> Although the TRC included private events which offered space for narratives other than residential school suffering and for feelings other than compassion and forgiveness to be expressed, they did not receive the publicity that narratives of forgiveness and reconciliation produced. For example, Rosemary Nagy (settler) remembers that at an open microphone session that she attended in Montreal, 'anger, and even hate' towards the government and the Catholic Church were evident.<sup>89</sup> The TRC film highlights do not make room for such rage or discomfort to be captured. As Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō), Peter Morin (Tahltan), and Anne-Marie Reynaud (settler) all emphasise, Indigenous peoples at TRC events

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<sup>86</sup> National Centre For Truth and Reconciliation, *TRC Mini-Doc Highlights*, 28 May 2015, <https://collections.irshdc.ubc.ca/index.php/Detail/objects/1662> [accessed July 2022]

<sup>87</sup> Matt James, 'A Carnival of Truth? Knowledge, Ignorance and the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission', *The International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 6.2 (2012), 18.

<sup>88</sup> TRC, *Honouring the Truth*, 163, 209.

<sup>89</sup> Rosemary Nagy, 'Settler Witnessing at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada', *Human Rights Review*, 21.3 (2020), 234.

often employed highly varied forms of testimony.<sup>90</sup> In this way they contested the way in which ‘reconciliation’ was framed as a biopolitical ‘humanitarian project’ by the TRC.<sup>91</sup>

Cree-Métis scholar Emma LaRocque contends that healing is ‘fast becoming the new cultural marker by which we define or judge Aboriginal literature’ and a way for non-Indigenous peoples to ‘translate’ Indigenous worldviews and experiences into a “language” accessible to most today’, one which may enable forms of empathy that are not always ethical.<sup>92</sup> ‘Most’ may contain multitudes but it inevitably privileges settlers over testifiers who need no translation to understand each other’s pain. That is why I argue in this thesis that opacity must be respected because if it is refused, empathy becomes unsteady terrain for listening sensitively.<sup>93</sup> A US feminist scholar, Leigh Gilmore, contends that empathy is ‘inadequate ground for an ethical engagement with unsympathetic witnesses, as women are likely to be’, and ‘a form of sociality that reproduces historical asymmetries in race, gender, and credibility’.<sup>94</sup> She identifies a credibility deficit when listeners fail to empathise with speakers if they do not perceive them to be deserving of compassion. But I argue that an excess of

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<sup>90</sup> See Dylan Robinson, ‘Reconciliation Relations’, 61; Peter Morin, ‘this is what happens when we perform the memory of the land’, *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action In and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin eds., (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 76; Anne-Marie Reynaud, ‘Dealing with Difficult Emotions’, 374.

<sup>91</sup> Million, *Therapeutic Nations*, 6.

<sup>92</sup> LaRocque, *When the Other Is Me*, 168.

<sup>93</sup> If empathy is defined as the ‘experience of feeling someone else’s feelings’ and sympathy as a cognitive ability to understand someone else’s perspective and ‘feeling concern for another, without feeling what the other feels’, I use these terms interchangeably because they co-occur and because I reject a dualistic opposition that separates affect and cognition. This is also why I consider empathy within a framework of epistemology and epistemic (in)justice. Indigenous scholars emphasise that knowledge involves different dimensions of human experience, including but not limited to an intellectual one. For example, Anishinaabe scholar Leanne Simpson describes ‘heart knowledge’ as ‘emotional intelligence’ that is ‘balanced with the physical, intellectual and spiritual intelligence to create a fully embodied way of being in the world’. Similarly, Athabaskan scholar Dian Million’s ‘felt theory’ suggests a form of affective knowing that blurs boundaries between intellect and affect, a knowledge that is intuitive, felt, and embodied. This is a decolonising and holistic view of truth and knowledge that moves beyond the binary emotions/reason to embrace spirit, body, and imagination. Some Western scholars, particularly feminist and queer theory intellectuals, challenge the Cartesian logic of duality which separates reason and emotion, acknowledging an emotional dimension to cognition. British philosopher Miranda Fricker, for example, suggests that empathy is ‘an emotional cognitive capacity’. Eva Maria Koopman, ‘Empathic Reactions after Reading: The Role of Genre, Personal Factors and Affective Responses’, *Poetics*, 50 (2015), 63. Leanne Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, 94. Dian Million, ‘Felt Theory’, 53. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 80.

<sup>94</sup> Leigh Gilmore, *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017), 25.

empathy may also produce epistemic harms.<sup>95</sup> Without critical and intersectional analysis, identification risks denying difference of experience as a gesture towards assimilation. Scholars have used different terms to define dimensions of empathy that I describe as ‘unethical’. In her critique of the South African TRC, for example, British scholar Annie Coombes identifies ‘narcissistic’ empathy as voyeuristic consumption. The term ‘voyeurism’ is recurrent in criticism of unethical empathy and Maracle employs it strategically in *Celia’s Song* when the eponymous character ‘force[s] herself to watch’ the shapeshifter Mink being skinned alive. If, initially, she ‘feels like mink’, soon she realises that she is only a ‘voyeur’ and ‘this isn’t fair’ to Mink.<sup>96</sup> Settler Canadian scholar Megan Boler describes ‘passive’ empathy as ‘the voyeuristic pleasure of listening and judging the other from a position of power/safe distance’ and suggests that it ‘produces no action towards justice’.<sup>97</sup> In the precise context of Canada’s TRC, empathy risks reproducing what Eve Tuck (Unangax̂) and Wayne Young (settler) call ‘settler moves to innocence’.<sup>98</sup> Paulette Regan describes this as a particular type of ‘colonial’ empathy that involves the appropriation of pain ‘in voyeuristic ways that enable non-Indigenous people to feel good about feeling bad but engender no critical awareness of themselves as colonial beneficiaries who bear a responsibility to address the inequities and injustices from which they have profited’.<sup>99</sup> ‘Reconciliation’ is a space where unethical empathy is performed, if, as Michelle Daigle (Cree) suggests, it becomes a ‘spectacle’ in which Indigenous suffering is sensationalised, fetishised, and consumed by white settler audiences

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<sup>95</sup> I focus on identification excess as a form of credibility excess. Miranda Fricker does not consider excess as conducive to epistemic harms, but scholars such as Emmalon Davis and José Medina have argued that an excess of credibility operates alongside deficit in sustaining the epistemic oppression of marginalised individuals. See Emmalon Davis, ‘Typecasts, Tokens, and Spokespersons: A Case for Credibility Excess as Testimonial Injustice’, *Hypatia*, 31.3 (2016); José Medina, ‘The Relevance of Credibility Excess in a Proportional View of Epistemic Injustice: Differential Epistemic Authority and the Social Imaginary’, *Social Epistemology*, 25.1 (2011).

<sup>96</sup> Annie E. Coombes, ‘Witnessing History/embodying Testimony: Gender and Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 17 Special issue (2011), 97; *Celia’s Song*, 49.

<sup>97</sup> Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 162, 160.

<sup>98</sup> Eve Tuck, and K. Wayne Yang, ‘Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1.1 (2012), 10.

<sup>99</sup> Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, 47.

engaged in ‘hollow performances of recognition and remorse’.<sup>100</sup> Settlers’ empathic expressions may risk acting as a substitute for enacting political change if systemic problems are elided. When empathy turns into voyeurism, or ‘consumptive objectification’, it engenders forms of epistemic appropriation, which Emmalon Davis theorises as a twofold process involving epistemic ‘detachment’ and ‘misdirection’.<sup>101</sup> The former occurs when the ‘participatory role of marginalized contributors in the process of knowledge production is obscured’, while the latter ensues when ‘epistemic resources developed within, but detached from, the margins are utilized in dominant discourses in ways that disproportionately benefit the powerful’.<sup>102</sup> If a speaker is demoted from subject to object, from informant and ‘active epistemic agent’ to a passive source ‘from which knowledge can be gleaned’, epistemic objectification compounds appropriation.<sup>103</sup> This form of injustice is challenged in some of the criticism mounted against the TRC, like Coulthard and Simpson who contend that when Indigenous peoples testify to abuse they are locked into victimhood.<sup>104</sup> The participatory role of Indigenous peoples is obscured in the process if they are relegated to passive victims (through epistemic detachment) and reconciliation becomes a narrative of democratic progress that legitimises the continuation of the settler state (through epistemic misdirection), even when virtuous sentiments such as empathy are expressed. Literary texts, I posit, offer alternative ways to engaging ethically with testimony as literary witnessing. When Gilmore argues for the importance of a ‘literary witness’ it is because a text which performs this work is ‘capable of generating an ethical response that is not primarily grounded in identification or compassion’ because as a cultural form literature ‘offers a density of affect beyond sympathy or suspicion’ and an author may ‘permi[t] undecidability as a value’ affording readers space to consider and

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<sup>100</sup> Michelle Daigle, ‘The Spectacle of Reconciliation: On (the) Unsettling Responsibilities to Indigenous Peoples in the Academy’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 37.4 (2019), 703.

<sup>101</sup> Boler, *Feeling Power*, 159.

<sup>102</sup> Davis, ‘On Epistemic Appropriation \*’, *Ethics*, 128.4 (2018), 705.

<sup>103</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 132.

<sup>104</sup> Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 121.

maybe to ‘suspens[ion] of judgment’.<sup>105</sup> If this may seem to over-emphasise how politicised literary texts can be, Boler offsets this with her definition of ‘testimonial reading’ as an alternative to passive empathy because it requires the ‘self-reflective participation’ of readers who are placed in a ‘relative position of power by virtue of the safe distance provided by the mediating text’.<sup>106</sup> In this sense, active reading is a vital component in my contention that literary texts are a medium through which readers may learn how to empathise ethically.

The writers highlighted in this thesis present relationality as *elastic* and *multidirectional*, involving a wide spectrum of emotions enlivened by the agency of both humans and nonhumans, and as *expressive* and *embodied*, with testimony a sensory dialogical experience that encompasses speaking, listening, and understanding as relational practices that necessitate an accommodation of refusal. Relationality is *implied* when conveyed through prose that is layered and affords nuanced communication beyond plain speech, foregrounding opacity as a quality in relationships, because meaning is not stagnant or bound to the confines of clarity but in constant flux, and sometimes may be unquantifiable. If a respectful distance is, as I argue, a prerequisite in any form of relationship, it is also a guiding principle through which I relate to Indigenous literatures as a European scholar who is positioned differently from readers whose experiences, culture, and lineage align them more closely with the worldviews and values expressed in Indigenous texts. From Indigenous perspectives, narratives are the embodiment of both theory and practice, content and pedagogy, art and critique. As Peter Cole and Dian Million summarise, ‘storytelling is itself interpretation’ and ‘narratives both make links and are the links that have been made.’<sup>107</sup> Therefore, in this thesis I pursue methods of interpretation as suggested in the texts themselves, extending existing

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<sup>105</sup> This idea is partially derived from Gilmore, *Tainted Witness*, 3, 146.

<sup>106</sup> Boler, *Feeling Power*, 165.

<sup>107</sup> Peter Cole quoted in Million, ‘There Is a River in Me: Theory from Life’, 35. See also, Craig S. Womack, *Art As Performance, Story As Criticism: Reflections on Native Literary Aesthetics* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009).

theories into my own readings in order to draw out how the authors present their ideas in imaginative works and how these extend our consideration of testimony and relationality.

Of the chapters that follow, Chapter 1 explores the notion of incommensurability as crucial to any relationship. This idea underlines my reading of Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song*. Postcolonial theorists Édouard Glissant and Trinh Minh-ha suggest relational approaches that value ambivalence and indirection when they theorise 'opacity' and 'speaking nearby', both of which I deploy in my reading to draw out connections with Indigenous views on respectful distance that Maracle suggests through story. This chapter explores Maracle's spider telling technique as a means to question models of speaking and listening, with doubt used as a narrative tool with a generative potential for truth. I examine the ways in which Maracle puts under scrutiny relational frameworks of democracy and a discourse of trauma for how they may be used to supersede Indigenous sovereignty, suggesting instead more equitable relational models of treaty relations, oratory, and community healing.

Empathy is unsteady terrain for sensitive engagement if it is practised in the assumption that a hearer can access the speaker's thoughts and feelings, as I argue in Chapter 2 on Katharena Vermette's *The Break*. This chapter addresses how epistemic injustice occurs as a deficit in credibility, when Indigenous stories are not believed, and as an excess in identification, when listeners engage with testimonies via a kind of narcissistic empathy that objectifies another person's truths. When this occurs, listening becomes a site of consumption and testimony is reduced to spectacle. Just a few months before Vermette published *The Break*, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that Métis and non-status Indigenous persons are considered 'Indians' under section 91(24) of the Constitution. This landmark ruling means that Métis are now a constitutional responsibility of the federal government and not the provinces. Chelsea Vowel clarifies that it 'does *not* mean that they are now governed by the *Indian Act*,

nor that they have become “status Indians”<sup>108</sup>. The liminal status of Métis is a defining feature of this novel that Vermette sets in contemporary Winnipeg.

Neoliberal logics of individualism shape approaches to reconciliation, neutralising Indigenous resistance and locking Indigenous peoples into victimhood through the logic that disclosure of atrocity is healing.<sup>109</sup> Trauma becomes the language that Indigenous peoples must speak in order to be heard. In Chapter 3, I explore a reparative approach to trauma that is open to a plenitude of affects and experiences, to complicate understanding of the ways trauma impacts lived realities when it is less visible. Focussing on Tracey Lindberg’s *Birdie* and Terese Marie Mailhot’s *Heart Berries*, I examine how these experimental, non-linear, and open-ended narratives shift the focus away from pathology, victimisation, and sensationalism, to privilege Indigenous approaches to health as balance and healing as a journey that may lead to restoration of the self-in-relation.

A particular colonial narrative of ‘Indigenous deficiency’, described by Daniel Heath Justice as the most ‘corrosive’ and damaging colonial story, starts to emerge in Chapters 2 and 3 as a factor that negatively impacts Indigenous realities and relationships.<sup>110</sup> Indigenous peoples are not believed when they seek help in hospitals or from the justice system because a logic of deficiency suggests that they are responsible for their injuries or difficulties and are not deserving of protection. The same logic informs approaches to healing which define Indigenous peoples in term of deficit and pathology. ‘Indigenous deficiency’ is addressed more directly in Chapter 4 which examines short stories by Norma Dunning in which this particular

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<sup>108</sup> Chelsea Vowel, ‘What a landmark ruling means—and doesn’t—for Métis, non-status Indians’, *CBC News*, 16 April 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/landmark-supreme-court-decision-metis-non-status-indians-1.3537419> [accessed April 2021]

<sup>109</sup> Coulthard, Simpson, and Million raise these and other issues in their criticism of the TRC. Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 121. Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back*, 22. Million, *Therapeutic Nations*, 2-3. On neoliberal reconciliation and victim narratives see Leanne Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 46, 117. Dian Million, *Therapeutic Nations*, 6; Hannah Wylie, “‘The Currency that Reconciliation Discourse is in Canada’: Contesting Neoliberal Reconciliation’, *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 43.2 (2018), 122.

<sup>110</sup> Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 3.

colonial narrative is presented not as a legacy of residential schools but as a defining feature in Indigenous-settler relations. The stories I focus on in *Annie Muktuk and Other Stories* are set in the recent past, the latter half of the twentieth century, from the 1940s to the 1990s, and put under scrutiny colonial policies in the North, including residential schools and the disk identification system. The Inuit statement of reconciliation closes with emphasis on healing, and in this chapter, I examine how belief in healing is conveyed imaginatively by Dunning in short stories that centre Inuit knowledge and experience, and celebrate a revitalisation of Inuit traditions.

Focussing on motifs of mutual understanding, attentive listening, anger, pain, empathy, forgiveness, and healing, this thesis intervenes in discussions of ‘reconciliation’ and extends them. It puts under scrutiny a colonial narrative of ‘Indigenous deficiency’ and the role of epistemic injustice in Indigenous-settler relations. It is my contention that the primary texts authored by Indigenous women that I have selected for focus here offer alternative and more equitable pathways towards establishing, mending, and nurturing meaningful relationships between Indigenous peoples, settlers, and other beings on the land. Each text acts as cumulative testimony, with layers of witnessing suggesting that multiple truths and realities coexist with the complexities of subjective experiences of colonisation and Indigeneity. I explore how these contemporary Indigenous women writers emphasise the impossibility of fixedness and tidy conclusions that reconciliatory discourse typically promotes.

# 1

## Spin the Tale Inside: Opacity and Respectful Distance in Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song*<sup>1</sup>

Set in the late 1980s, *Celia's Song* (2014) is a story of Indigenous resurgence in the Nuu'chalnulth and Stó:lō territories on the North Pacific coast of Canada. Stó:lō author Lee Maracle imagines what it might mean for Indigenous peoples, settlers, and beings on the land to co-exist more equitably, by foregrounding modes of speaking and understanding which afford space for respectful distance. For Maracle, incomplete understanding is not an obstacle to respectful relationships but constitutive of them, especially when set against absolutist notions of achieving total understanding which risk recreating the colonial violence of assimilation. In claiming that understanding can be appropriative, I draw from postcolonial scholar Édouard Glissant's theory of opacity which develops out of etymological analysis of the French word for understanding, *comprendre*, which, like the English 'comprehend', is formed from the Latin roots *con-* (with) and *prendre* (to take, to grasp). In its etymology, the verb contains an almost aggressively appropriative property.<sup>2</sup> To accept, cohabit and cooperate, one does not need to understand other groups or individuals on every level to afford respect; 'opaque' understanding leaves space for unintelligibility and impenetrability and a model that

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<sup>1</sup> A shorter version of this chapter was published as 'Spin the Tale Inside: Opacity and Respectful Distance in Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song*', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 46.2 (2021), 88-107. See Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> The verb *comprendre*, to understand, Édouard Glissant writes, 'contains the movement of hands that grab their surroundings and bring them back to themselves. A gesture of enclosure if not appropriation', *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 191-2.

may be understood as ‘standing-with’ one another in respectful reciprocity and irreducible incommensurability.<sup>3</sup>

Glissant suggests that the instrumentalisation of speech creates finite parameters for expressing and conceptualising human experience, which is irreducibly disordered and non-linear, by turning it into something that is easily accessible and intelligible. Inherent to this discursive model is the notion of transparency, a process of understanding that involves measuring what is said, comparing it to one’s own system of knowledge, and reducing it to an absolute.<sup>4</sup> Dialogue may be built instead by a more respectful ‘speaking nearby’, an idea that derives from Trinh T. Minh-ha’s notion of a form of speaking that ‘reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it’.<sup>5</sup> This way of speaking, where ‘closures are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition’, resists fixed meanings and may defy listeners’ expectations.<sup>6</sup> In *Celia’s Song*, characters speak nearby because even as their voices chime, their individuality is retained; they do not always say what is expected, they often do not understand each other, they ask questions which are left unanswered, and answer questions that are left unasked. Glissant and Trinh Minh-ha emphasise the role that poetic language and ‘indirectness’ play in processes of non-reductive understanding, suggesting that any form of communication is characterised by ‘irreducible opacity’ and that, as meaning travels from sender to receiver, it cannot ever be transparent because it is always also assumed.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The English verb ‘to understand’, maintains in common usage the meaning of ‘to grasp the idea of’ but derives etymologically from Old English *understandan*, formed by *under* from Proto Indo-European *\*nter-* ‘between, among’, and *standan*, ‘to stand’. It literally means ‘to stand in the midst of’. Douglas Harper, ‘Understand’ (v.), *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/understand> [accessed 20 August 2020] Charles Talbot Onions, G. W. S. Friedrichsen, and R. W. Burchfield, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), 959.

<sup>4</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190.

<sup>5</sup> Minh-ha quoted in Nancy N. Chen, ‘Speaking Nearby: A Conversation with Trinh Minh-ha’, *Visual Anthropology Review*, 8.1 (1992), 87.

<sup>6</sup> Minh-ha quoted in Chen, ‘Speaking Nearby’, 87.

<sup>7</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 115.

The problem I pose in this chapter, then, is how to imagine and assay a model of speaking truths that avoids the risk of decontextualising Indigenous knowledges or de-politicising Indigenous texts when employing postcolonial conceptual frameworks and terminology in settler-colonial contexts. Postcolonial theories are often met with hostility by scholars of Indigenous studies because of these risks.<sup>8</sup> In an essay entitled ‘The “Post-colonial” Imagination’ (1992), Maracle rejects the term *post-colonial* and suggests the need for a space to ‘imagine something beyond the colonial condition’.<sup>9</sup> Indigenous scholars working with postcolonial paradigms invite this criticism. Glen Coulthard (Dene), Robert Warrior (Osage), and Jodi Byrd (Chickasaw) are among critics who theorise Indigeneity and decolonisation with recourse to postcolonial theories.<sup>10</sup> In the introduction to *ARIEL*’s special issue on ‘tensions’ and ‘interrelationships’ between Indigenous and postcolonial studies in 2020, Deanna Reder (Métis) and Sophie McCall (settler) assert that ‘the language and theoretical frameworks for conceiving and mobilizing comparative studies have changed’ precisely because ‘Indigenous and racialized scholars and writers have pushed to change them and to challenge the power relationships underpinning these disciplines’.<sup>11</sup> Postcolonial frames of interpretation may be

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<sup>8</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Māori) describes postcolonialism as a ‘convenient invention of Western intellectuals which reinscribes their power to define the world’, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 14. British scholars Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman employ the term ‘post-colonial’ as a temporal marker to signify that ‘the era of formal colonial control is over’. When they describe settler-colonial states like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand as ‘former white colonies’, they risk ignoring Indigenous peoples’ ongoing experiences of colonisation in these countries, *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), 3, 4.

Postcolonial keywords such as ‘hybridity’, defined as referring to ‘the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization’, are also perceived as inadequate to describe a contemporary Indigenous experience and, as Deanna Reder contends, as encouraging ‘already-existing essentialist pronouncements that perpetuate racist stereotypes’. Bill Ashcroft et al., *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2002), 135. Sophie McCall, Deanna Reder, and Eric Gary Anderson, ‘First Nations and Native Souths on Both Sides of the 49th Parallel’, *The Global South*, 9.1 (2015), 50, 51.

<sup>9</sup> Lee Maracle, *Memory Serves: Oratories* (Edmonton, AB: NeWest Press, 2015), 111.

<sup>10</sup> See for instance: Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); Robert Warrior, ‘The Subaltern Can Dance, and So Sometimes Can the Intellectual’, *Interventions*, 13.1 (2011), 85-94; Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Deanna Reder and Sophie McCall, ‘Indigenous and Postcolonial Studies: Tensions and Interrelationships, Creative and Critical Interventions’, *ARIEL*, 51.2-3 (2020), 10.

useful to emphasise interconnections between decolonisation and anti-colonial resistance across the globe. Glissant's approach as a French-Caribbean philosopher and Minh-ha's as a Vietnamese filmmaker working in different geographical contexts including Africa, foreground spaces for respectful distance, ambivalence, indirectness, poetic language, and non-reductive understanding. This approach resonates with Indigenous views and is suggested by Maracle through story.

The story she tells in *Celia's Song* also distinguishes its modes of telling from models for Indigenous-settler relations like 'reconciliation', which, since the establishment of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), has become a dominant paradigm through which the state negotiates relationships with Indigenous peoples. The TRC provided a forum in which to testify to colonial injustices, re-orienting the frame of public discourse and collective memory. However, national discourses of 'reconciliation' have been criticised for the instrumentalisation of speech in several contexts, including models for testimony. Settler anthropologist Ronald Niezen observes that 'preferred narratives' and templates for testimony were encouraged by the TRC.<sup>12</sup> The particular notion of healing employed in its discourse of reconciliation locks Indigenous peoples into a paradigm of trauma as part of a master narrative in which 'negative' affects such as pain and anger are expected to be overcome through narration and replaced by forgiveness. As Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō), Peter Morin (Tahltan), and Anne-Marie Reynaud (settler) all emphasise, Indigenous peoples at TRC events have often refused to abide by this narrative function and employed varied forms of testimony instead.<sup>13</sup> But, if 'reconciliation' is framed as a state-determined biopolitical 'humanitarian project', as

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<sup>12</sup> Ronald Niezen, *Truth and Indignation: Canada Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 68.

<sup>13</sup> See Dylan Robinson, 'Reconciliation Relations', *Canadian Theatre Review*, 161.1 (2015), 61; Peter Morin, 'this is what happens when we perform the memory of the land', *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action In and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin eds., (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 76; Anne-Marie Reynaud, 'Dealing with Difficult Emotions: Anger at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada', *Anthropologica*, 56 (2014), 374.

Dian Million (Athabaskan) contends, it becomes a neoliberal tool that ‘reaffirms the people’s systemic inequality and endemic social suffering as a pathology, a wound that is solely an outcome of past colonial policies’.<sup>14</sup> This model of witnessing is neoliberal. The ‘contemporary subject’ is constituted as ‘the site of healing or of overcoming trauma’.<sup>15</sup> *Celia’s Song* suggests that truth, testimony, and healing cannot be reduced to absolutist claims or tidy conclusions.

Instead, Maracle explores the intrinsic opacity in acts of telling through ‘spider storytelling’, a narrative technique in which temporal and storied layers challenge linear telling. Different notions of truth emerge when the limits of the known are exposed and incommensurable realities acknowledged. For Maracle, opacity is key because colonising empires granted themselves the rights to ‘define, delineate, and demarcate’, to ‘speculate’ on ‘what is in the mind, body, heart, and spirit of others’, and ‘arbitrarily determine the nature of their relations with all others, often without due consideration to those others’.<sup>16</sup> Colonialism cannot tolerate opacity, nor can a settler state if it aims to settle issues to ensure its continuity, rather than negotiating differences and ambiguities through constant renewal of relationships. Opacity informs treaty relations as a model of relationality that respects the unknown and unassimilable, in opposition to frameworks of democracy and equality that may be used to supersede Indigenous sovereignty. By imagining a model for ‘speaking nearby’ in *Celia’s Song*, Maracle opens up ways of understanding coexistence as mutual honouring that pays attention to the right to opacity and the right to say what is not expected, with the implication that testimony may neither be complete nor understood completely. This chapter traces the juxtaposed and interlaced webs that Maracle weaves as story through a spider telling technique; her emphasis on a precolonial model of treaty relations suggests an alternative and ethical form of reciprocity that involves speaking nearby.

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<sup>14</sup> Dian Million, *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, ‘Testimonial Cultures: An Introduction’, *Cultural Values*, 5 (2001), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Maracle, *Memory Serves*, 230.

## Spider Telling: The Generative Potential of Doubt

*Celia's Song* is a sequel to *Ravensong* (1993), where Celia James first appears as a child and secondary character to her sister Stacey. A seer who grows up without the guidance of her Elders, in *Ravensong* Celia is unable to make sense of her power and gradually withdraws from her family.<sup>17</sup> Both novels are characterised by multiple character focalisations, including the narrative voices of nonhuman figures, notably Raven the transformer in *Ravensong*, and the trickster Mink, 'the people's primary witness', in *Celia's Song* (5).<sup>18</sup> Many of the threads that run through *Celia's Song* originated in *Ravensong* and its setting in the 1950s during a swine flu epidemic. In *Celia's Song*, thirty years on, the James family faces a different 'epidemic' of 'suicide and violence' (218). In her forties, and having lost her son to suicide, Celia is unable to find meaning in her life and initially accepts a diagnosis of her visions as 'delusions' (6). But, when a member of Celia's family, five-year-old Shelley, is brutalised, raped and almost killed, Celia is compelled to ground herself in material reality and, together with family and friends, takes responsibility for Shelley's care. The novel traces Celia's personal resurgence and that of her community, how she learns to embrace and actively make use of her gift of vision to help Shelley and to provide guidance for her nephew Jacob, also a seer. As the villagers and allies from 'white town' come together to heal Shelley and deal with the perpetrator of the crime (Amos, a victim of abuse at residential schools), they find strength in Coast Salish philosophies and beliefs, connection to the land, and healing practices that have been undermined and damaged by colonial policies. The main narrator, Mink, recounts the

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<sup>17</sup> The contexts in which the novels were produced, and the historical periods they depict, reflect Maracle's concerns and the attention she pays to national debates. *Ravensong* was published when the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was investigating Indigenous-settler relations (1991–96), and *Celia's Song* was written while the TRC was meeting (2008–2015). As a seer, Celia is connected to 'a unique brand of power' which colonialism attempts to erase. Whereas she gradually fades in *Ravensong*, her personal resurgence in *Celia's Song* exemplifies her resistance. Lee Maracle, *My Conversations with Canadians* (Toronto, ON: Book Thug, 2017), 16.

<sup>18</sup> Lee Maracle, *Celia's Song*, (Toronto, ON: Cormorant Books, 2017), 5. Subsequent references are in parentheses. When quotations appear in italics, this follows the original. Italics in the novel are often employed to distinguish Mink's perspective from that of other narrators.

hardships of the James family and, concurrently, the vicissitudes of a double-headed sea serpent. Weaving in and out of Celia's tale, then, is a traditional story of the double-headed serpent, an archetypal symbol of crisis and of the incessant dialectical conflict between irreconcilable rationalities and moralities. Carved at the entrance of a long-forgotten longhouse as its protector, the serpent comes to life. Once a ceremonial place of song and dance, the longhouse has turned into a funerary site; it houses the bones of those who died because of the new diseases that colonisers carried, forcing the people to abandon the longhouse. The bones within are sentient — they feel, think, and rattle, and harbour rage: 'The bones want more than interment, they want to hear war songs that capture this drama, commit it to memory' (6). These feelings take material shape as the two heads of the sea serpent, named Loyal and Restless, enter into battle. Exhausted by waiting for humans to honour their promises to feed him with songs and ceremony, the serpent rips himself off the longhouse, slips into the depths of the sea, and heads towards the village for 'spirit food' (27).<sup>19</sup> Stirring in disgust and rage over a contract breached, he stirs up a terrible storm, which is witnessed by Celia in her visions. The havoc the serpent wreaks is equated to Amos's abuse of Shelley: two moments of crisis mimic the double exposure of the mythical and the social upon which Maracle builds in this fiction.

Temporal layering suggests the novel's historical and socio-political contexts and constitutes one way in which Maracle scrutinises modes of telling and understanding. *Celia's*

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<sup>19</sup> Nonhuman characters like the serpent, Mink, and Raven are gendered in Maracle's novel. Mink and the serpent are male, and Raven female (5, 2, 269). Diana Brydon interprets gender codification as 'insisting upon their sentience and personhood, not in any anthropomorphizing way, but in recognition of their integrity in themselves'. The matriarchal structure of clan-based life in Stó:lō communities may also play a role. Maracle explains that 'males are responsible for direction' but if 'the women are still, the men don't move'. Mink and the serpent witness, guide, and influence human characters, but it is Raven who creates change and transformation, or brings about life and death; she sets the path for Mink and the serpent to walk or slide across. Diana Brydon, 'Imagining Community Resurgence: Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song* Revisions a West Before and After the West', *Globalization and Cultural Studies*, 11 May 2016, <https://dianabrydon.com/2016/05/11/imagining-community-resurgence-lee-maracles-celias-song-revisions-a-west-before-and-after-the-west/> [accessed May 2020] Lee Maracle quoted in Sam McKegney, 'This is Vision: A Conversation with Lee Maracle', *Masculindians: Conversations About Indigenous Manhood* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2014), 31-34.

*Song* is an expressly non-linear narrative, drawing simultaneously on Celia's visions, described as 'scattered moving pictures' with 'no order' and on the traditional story of the serpent (45, 46). Visions are narrative portals through which to tell a multigenerational story of colonial contact, largely through memories that Celia has inherited from her great-great-grandmother, the 'first Alice'.<sup>20</sup> The arrival of the European colonisers, the illnesses they brought with them, how they traded Christian names for medicines, enacted land dispossession and created residential schools, and the poverty, addiction, and suicides, criss-cross in a web of interweaving patterns of colonialism and gendered violence. Maracle weaves together the particulars of her characters' lives with a longer history and the ongoing processes of colonialism, with storytelling and witnessing overlapping tiles in the same mosaic. Countering chronologies of time is a narrative technique employed by many Indigenous and postcolonial authors, a decolonial aesthetic strategy that decentres linear order and unsettles colonial conditioning. This emerges compellingly through the story of the serpent who moves in a dimension that is seemingly both outside of time and contemporaneous with Celia's story. Temporal markers situating the serpent are created by storytellers: for Mink, the story of the sea serpent has just begun, but when Celia witnesses the serpent's storm in a vision, she says '*It happened a long time ago*' because, as an origin story, it takes place at 'the beginning of the world' (26, 13, 79). This may seem to suggest that Celia witnesses the storm after it occurs, but the serpent moves cyclically across time, not incrementally. The moment Celia witnesses the storm does *and* does not correspond to the moment of the storm because the storm '*happened even if it didn't*' (7).

In *Celia's Song*, Maracle performs the role of spider, the storyteller who spins a story so that 'you don't know what her story is about until after she has spun the tale inside, twisted

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<sup>20</sup> Maracle emphasises that Celia's visions 'sit in her mind, independent of her voice' as though they 'have met each other on some arc of light, a place between where her voice originates and where it can be heard reciting memory and the origins of memory' (46).

you in all kinds of crazed directions' (128). Indigenous storytelling evades directedness and works like 'a spider web', as Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Marmon Silko observes, 'with many little threads radiating from the centre, crisscrossing one another. As with the web, the structure emerges as it is made, and you must simply listen and trust [...] that meaning will be made'.<sup>21</sup> Spider storytelling emphasises the importance of what Jo-Ann Archibald (Stó:lō) calls 'story listening' and 'learning to make meaning from stories'.<sup>22</sup> Stó:lō Elders stress that a 'hearer isn't meant to understand the story at all levels, immediately' because meanings 'are revealed to the listener at different stages of life'.<sup>23</sup> The relationship that takes shape during the storytelling process, between storyteller and listeners, generates a model in which opacity is cherished. In *Memory Serves* (2015), Maracle emphasises oratory as a model of relationality that is based on a 'concatenation' between storytellers and listeners, and on stories that 'activate the listener's community-based thought process without prescribing a response'. Listening carefully is shown to be more important than knowing or understanding because stories do not necessarily 'offer answers to problems' but 'stimulat[e] thought in the listener'.<sup>24</sup> Maracle recreates some of the characteristics of oral traditions she values in the novel by building levels of story through scattered memories, conversations, origin tales, dreams, and more. In this sense, *Celia's Song* should be understood in the rich context of Indigenous writers across North America, most notably Silko's spider storytelling in *Ceremony* (1977). This narrative technique suggests that multiple truths may emerge from what is left unsaid and what is said indirectly. It is an example of strategic opacity that illustrates how 'Truth can only be approached indirectly if one does not want to lose it [...] Even when the indirect has to take refuge in the

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<sup>21</sup> Leslie Marmon Silko, *Yellow Woman and A Beauty of The Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 48, 49.

<sup>22</sup> Jo-Ann Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008), 76, 85.

<sup>23</sup> Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork*, 84, 125.

<sup>24</sup> Maracle, *Memory Serves*, 173, 170.

very figures of the direct, it continues to defy the closure of a direct reading'.<sup>25</sup> This ambivalence that Minh-ha points out is inherent to Stó:lō oratory in ways that Maracle emphasises: words are 'spoken with care' and 'poetic force, vision, and poignancy', with listeners having the responsibility to pay careful attention to 'what is said, what is not said, and what is connected to what is not said' in order 'to peel back each layer and gain deeper understanding'.<sup>26</sup> Maracle uses doubt generatively to explore where storywebs may lead readers and listeners.

Maracle's claim that '[f]iction is powerful truth' is echoed by Mink when he confides, '*some piece of me believes that doubt is somehow the best part of being alive; I love the suspiciousness of doubt and all the angles for retelling stories that this doubt spawns*'.<sup>27</sup> Like an optical prism refracting light, doubt is an aperture onto the infinite possibilities of not-knowing. Nothing can ever be fully comprehended; everything exists in a continuum and exerts influence, so that one story becomes the starting point for many more. Recognising a multiplicity of stories is crucial to rebutting settler colonialism, wherein one story is made sovereign and the colonial moment magnified so that it becomes the central authority that determines reality, and 'history' becomes the history of colonialism. In *Celia's Song*, Maracle returns to 'an old story' in order to 'tell it like it's happening now so people will continue to grow and learn from it'.<sup>28</sup> She suggests that re-telling stories from different perspectives is 'the heart of where transformation comes from'.<sup>29</sup> Maracle recovers 'stories of implosion' that narrate how Indigenous peoples have traditionally dealt with crisis. These stories are survival

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<sup>25</sup> Minh-ha quoted in Chen, 'Speaking Nearby', 87.

<sup>26</sup> Maracle, *Memory Serves*, 233.

<sup>27</sup> Maracle, *My Conversations with Canadians*, 82.

<sup>28</sup> Lee Maracle and Leanne Simpson, 'Lee Maracle's tale', *Quill & Quire*, November 2014, <https://quillandquire.com/authors/lee-maracles-tale/> [accessed May 2020].

<sup>29</sup> Transformation is a pivotal concept in the philosophy of the peoples of the Northwest Coast that is embodied in traditional stories, with Raven the 'harbinger of social transformation' who 'sings when the world itself is amiss'. Jennifer Kelly, 'Coming Out of the House: A Conversation with Lee Maracle', *ARIEL*, 25.1 (1994), 86, 87.

mechanisms that policies of assimilation were meant to destroy. Maracle has spoken of how residential schools ‘separated us from those stories’ and explained that she decided to ‘write from those stories’ and tell about the double-headed serpent.<sup>30</sup> If the serpent acts as an emblem of coloniality and unsustainable relations, re-storying the colonial encounter via the serpent creates ‘new myths out of the old myths’.<sup>31</sup> Blending gritty social realism with lyricism and myth, Maracle reanimates traditional Coast Salish stories by adapting them to contemporary contexts.

Multiple stories meet on a narrative arc across *Celia’s Song* to convey Indigenous perspectives on historical occurrences and to question Western frames of reference, through an event, for example, which took place in 1988 when ‘three whales were stuck in the Arctic ice’ (18). Known as ‘operation breakthrough’ or ‘the big miracle’, saving the whales was celebrated in the media as an international effort between the US, Russia, and Inuit.<sup>32</sup> As it emerges in the novel in a conversation between four settler scientists, they are unaware that their laboratory is ‘smack dab in the middle of Musqueam territory’, and are puzzled by the shadow of the sea serpent that appears in a segment of their film recording (14). The scientists lack a scientific explanation for what they see and dismiss it, their beliefs and biases preventing them from speculating about a being they cannot fathom. Only one, Sam, admits, ‘We aren’t the only people who know things’ and suggests it is worth investigating stories about sea monsters told by the local population (16). He is met by apathetic disbelief, or lack of inquisitiveness, but

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<sup>30</sup> Maracle elucidates that, in her view, truth lies in the lessons contained in the original story, ‘and if you tell it back different but the same, and apply it to today, you can create fiction from it, but it’s still true. And it happened even if it didn’t’. In this way, her method breaks open putative boundaries between orality and literacy by recreating in writing typical features of oral traditions: repetition and adaptation, re-telling stories with changes adapted to different contexts and situations, while maintaining the original lessons. Lee Maracle, Radio Interview with Carol Off, ‘Lee Maracle’s Celebrated 2014 Novel *Celia’s Song* finally hits the awards circuit’, *As It Happens, CBC Radio*, September 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/1596811843957> [accessed May 2020]

<sup>31</sup> Maracle, Radio Interview with Carol Off; Maracle quoted in Margery Fee and Sneja Gunew, ‘From Discomfort to Enlightenment: An Interview with Lee Maracle’, *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 83 (2004), 218.

<sup>32</sup> The event is recounted in Tom Rose, *Freeing the Whales: How the Media Created the World’s Greatest Non-Event* (New York, NY: Birch Lane Press, 1990); *Big Miracle*, dir. by Ken Kwapis (Universal Pictures, 2012); Maracle retells this story in more detail in *My Conversations with Canadians*, 59.

recounts how the Inuit saved the whales, an event which occurs in the novel ‘[j]ust this past spring’ (18).<sup>33</sup> Sam emphasises how Inuit leaders have repeatedly offered to talk to whales to help them return to open sea, but marine biologists dismiss their knowledge and ‘forbade them to try’; only after a whale dies do authorities relent and ‘let the Inuit talk them out’ (18). Recounted by Maracle through Sam, this story is less about international cooperation and more about Inuit wisdom, how they ‘walked across the ice, humming’ and the ‘whales followed’ (18). Maracle re-writes this story from a perspective that is often neglected, putting Western science under scrutiny and exposing how it is practised according to anti-Indigenous biases. Maracle has Mink witness this exchange and comment that ‘*some intelligence is born*’, with Sam a voice of questioning reason because he possesses ‘a nagging doubt about the veracity of all beliefs’ (19).

Maracle practises spider storytelling to question closed models of thinking. When Celia’s nephew Jacob reflects on settler colonialism, he asks about the loss of traditional smells in Indigenous homes and initiates a conversation that generates more questions, none of which are answered (63). Jacob’s grandfather Ned reflects on rampant suicides and asks, ‘How did we come to this?’ (69). Jacob’s grandmother, Momma, addresses her sense of loss in a monologue marked by the repeated question ‘Where is my family?’ (93). Sometimes, too, Maracle suggests answers to questions that are left unasked, as when Momma confides ‘to no one’ her concern that ‘we are not who we used to be’, until she cannot ‘bear the question anymore’ and faints under the weight of it (77). Inside such storied layers, Maracle lays bare the painful knowledge that there are ‘too many threads to this web’ and that ‘a simple answer is impossible’ (139). What is left ‘opaque’ is not obscure, ‘though it is possible for it to be so

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<sup>33</sup> There is no explicit indication of time period in the novel, but temporal markers suggests that *Celia’s Song* is set in the late 1980s. This is confirmed by Maracle, when discussing autobiographical elements in *Ravensong* and *Celia’s Song*: ‘I grew up in the 50s, and the 50s and the 80s up to 89 were very different periods in our life. I wanted to capture both those periods’, Lee Maracle, Radio Interview with Carol Off.

and be accepted as such', but 'that which cannot be reduced' to a fixed and absolute truth.<sup>34</sup> Maracle illustrates that truths cannot be contained within finite parameters or elicit smooth comprehension and that a deeper appreciation of difficult truths may be reached through opacity, with doubt intrinsic to spider telling and generative in Maracle's imagining of respectful relationships.

### **Opacity in Relationality**

In *Celia's Song* as in *Ravensong*, epidemics constitute a dominant line of enquiry in conceptualising community support and relationality, not least because Maracle believes the nuclear family was a by-product of epidemics for Stó:lō communities.<sup>35</sup> The 1954 swine flu epidemic, the memory of which pervades *Celia's Song*, was the last in a series that decimated Indigenous communities in the first half of the twentieth century. *Ravensong* references the Spanish flu at the end of World War I and a tuberculosis epidemic that 'plagued [the] village for some thirty years', so that 1954 is 'the first tuberculosis-free year'.<sup>36</sup> In *Celia's Song*, multiple references are made to illnesses brought by colonising newcomers, including sexually transmitted diseases and 'the ill-fated blanket death' of smallpox (100).<sup>37</sup> Threaded through Maracle's spider storytelling is how epidemics determined a shift from clan-based kinship structures to a nuclear family structure: 'We chose it to survive [...] The state didn't force us to burn our longhouses. But we did'.<sup>38</sup> She posits that this separated families and expresses it

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<sup>34</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 191.

<sup>35</sup> Maracle quoted in McKegney, 'This is Vision: A Conversation with Lee Maracle', 34. The many references to epidemics also suggest there is unresolved grief for how they were handled and the repercussions they still have. Both novels in different ways also picture the apathy of white communities and authorities in the face of physical illnesses and social crises. The neglect of 'flu victims depicted in *Ravensong* is reiterated in *Celia's Song* in the indifference of white authorities and the impossibility of searching for justice in a white system.

<sup>36</sup> Lee Maracle, *Ravensong: A Novel* (Vancouver, BC: Press Gang Publishers, 1993), 25.

<sup>37</sup> An epidemic that precedes the arrival of European colonisers is suggested in a passage about the discovery of bones, and the reaction of anthropologists who study 'epidemic survivors', who are surprised that 'these bones so far west suffered epidemic loss more than two hundred years earlier' (84). The researchers do not know, as Celia does, about 'indigenous traders who preceded the newcomers, who brought with them the diseases of the east' (84). Anthropology, like natural science, is revealed to be lacking because it erroneously takes European knowledge bases and history as the foundation of truths and knowledge.

<sup>38</sup> Maracle quoted in McKegney, 'This is Vision: A Conversation with Lee Maracle', 34.

as an ironic parallel between the isolation required to contain an epidemic and the isolation built into the nuclear family structure: ‘There’s us quarantined. And that’s a very Euro tradition’.<sup>39</sup> Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kim TallBear contends similarly that ‘the dispossession of relations is tied to settler identity appropriation as settler definitions of family and relatedness come to redefine Indigenous identity’.<sup>40</sup> Maracle has written about how family members experienced the extended family as ‘fractured’ as a result of residential schooling, for example, but her novel explores multiple ways in which Indigenous relational and social practices were undermined and decimated.<sup>41</sup>

In *Celia’s Song*, Maracle scrutinises liberal frameworks of equality that are generally considered pillars of democratic progress and perceived as commensurate with the goals of different communities. As Eve Tuck (Unangax̂) and K. Wayne Yang (settler) posit, ‘an ethic of incommensurability’ is crucial to developing models of relationality that recognise what is ‘distinct’ and ‘sovereign’ for ‘project(s) of decolonization in relation to human and civil rights’.<sup>42</sup> Maracle threads ideas about social progress through conversations between characters, with the 1954 flu epidemic a watershed after which the ‘their world changed [...] The shift began with Rosa Parks and it turned into a movement for civil rights. It finally came to the villages as Aboriginal rights’ (86). In 1960, the Canadian Parliament granted all registered First Nation peoples the right to vote in federal elections. In *Celia’s Song*, however, the James family discusses how the vote followed a prohibition law banning access to mountains from which they gather wood to build houses. Indigenous chiefs protested but the government ‘demanded a vote’ in exchange for houses being built, suggesting that in this

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<sup>39</sup> Maracle quoted in McKegney, ‘This is Vision: A Conversation with Lee Maracle’, 36.

<sup>40</sup> Kim TallBear, ‘Caretaking Relations, Not American Dreaming’, *Kalfou*, 6.1 (2019), 32.

<sup>41</sup> Lee Maracle, ‘I Couldn’t Forget: Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation’, *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 29 July 2015, *Historica Canada*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/i-couldnt-forget-reflections-on-truth-and-reconciliation> [accessed May 2020]

<sup>42</sup> Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, ‘Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1.1, (2012), 28.

context voting loses its associations with freedom and participatory democracy on which it is usually understood to be founded as a civil right (64). In this way, Maracle challenges the idea of voting as an expression of political will and imaginatively conveys what anthropologist Audra Simpson (Mohawk) would argue later, that ‘law in colonial contexts [...] granted freedom through the legal tricks of consent and citizenship’, what she calls the ‘ruse of consent’ that ‘marks the inherent impossibility of that freedom after dispossession’.<sup>43</sup> In *Celia’s Song*, then, a tool of democracy *par excellence* atomises the community: ‘The vote was silent, ominous in its lack of community and collaboration [...] powerful in its ability to silence the village and isolate each from the other. It was like the white men, all-powerful and silencing, except it was invisible’ (64, 65). The isolation from extended community that is inherent in the nuclear family is emphatic in the text: ‘After the prohibition and the vote everything changed. Children grew up but stayed in their parents’ homes [...] Squeezed into too few rooms, the racket and lack of space made them edgy and desperate’ (66). Maracle suggests that such a clear-cut separation between the public and the private is also a result of colonial processes at the same time that she clarifies how, traditionally, Stó:lō interacted ‘not merely from within longhouse families’ but that ‘extended longhouse families had relationships to other extended longhouse families’.<sup>44</sup> Celia remembers how decisions were made by talking, ‘men to women, from women to women, between children who overheard the women, back to the men, then back to the chief’ but that ‘the chatter died with the vote’ (64). In this instance, the right to vote serves the status quo and supersedes Indigenous claims to land and autonomy. Political scientist David MacDonald warns against applying liberal frameworks of equality, multiculturalism, and civil rights to Indigenous-settler relations because they have been used ‘to suppress Indigenous peoples and their *sui generis* rights to self-determination, and may continue to do

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<sup>43</sup> Audra Simpson, ‘The ruse of consent and the anatomy of “refusal”: Cases from Indigenous North America and Australia’, *Postcolonial Studies*, 20.1, (2017), 19, 20.

<sup>44</sup> Lee Maracle, *My Conversations with Canadians*, 107.

so in the future'.<sup>45</sup> He observes that the 'most popular ideas of reconciliation' among settlers are framed as 'closing gaps, making Indigenous peoples equal with settlers, [and] working to create a shared vision of a harmonious future'.<sup>46</sup> Dian Million similarly criticises policies employed by the Canadian government to 'stall' self-determination efforts as 'adaptive inclusions' into 'neoliberal multiculturalism'.<sup>47</sup> These frameworks render the goals of Indigenous communities commensurable to those of the settler state but, in *Celia's Song*, Maracle explores how incommensurable they may be. A precolonial model of treaty relations that is based on principles of non-interference and constant renewal is recovered in the novel as a potentially more ethical framework for relationships between Indigenous peoples and settlers, as well as between humans, nonhumans, and the land.

To understand how treaty relations are represented, it is necessary to consider how Maracle's blend of tradition and social critique conveys colonialism's disruptive potential but reduces its authority. In *Celia's Song*, the serpent provides an explanation for the material effects of colonialism, feeding off individuals who have taken 'the wrong path when faced with a fork in their journey' (123).<sup>48</sup> Forced relocation, the outlawing of spiritual practices, exploitation of the land, harrowing abuses, and the everyday slow violence of racist misogyny all lead to psychological and emotional traumas that accumulate over generations. The serpent

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<sup>45</sup> David B. Macdonald, 'Paved with Comfortable Intentions: Moving Beyond Liberal Multiculturalism and Civil Rights Frames on the Road to Transformative Reconciliation', *Pathways of Reconciliation: Indigenous and Settler Approaches to Implementing the TRC's Calls to Action*, Aimée Craft and Paulette Regan eds., (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020), 5.

<sup>46</sup> Macdonald, 'Paved with Comfortable Intentions', 7.

<sup>47</sup> Million, *Therapeutic Nations*, 158.

<sup>48</sup> For Laura J. Beard, the serpent 'represents the violence of the colonial force [...] that swallows you, distorts you, gets you to do things you wouldn't do' in "'This Story Needs a Witness": The Imbrication of Witnessing, Storytelling, and Resilience in Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song*', *Studies in American Indian Literature*, 30.3-4, (2018), 164.

The double-headed serpent should not be conflated with the symbol of the snake as embodiment of evil in the Christian tradition. The dichotomy good/evil is another model that is challenged in *Celia's Song*, because even Loyal's virtuousness is faulty: 'righteousness is so much more complex and difficult than [Loyal's] aims' (100). This serpent contains the dualities of good and evil, but he also transcends them. He exists in a system of gift-reciprocity, of giving and receiving as a practice of mutual honouring rooted in Indigenous laws and philosophies of relationality.

feeds on these, ‘lurk[ing] in the shadows behind bushes’, waiting to hear ‘the shrieking sound of rage or desperation’ that signals a meal (236). Maracle uses the serpent to explain Amos’s murderous desires, Stella’s addictions and neglect of her daughter Shelley, feelings of self-hate and violence in abused boys — and to foreground how colonialism dehumanises oppressors (40, 155, 98, 41).<sup>49</sup> The symbology of the serpent suggests a parallel between settler colonialism and warfare (9).<sup>50</sup> The notion of colonialism as a permanent state of war resonates with how ‘slow genocide’ builds on notions of ‘slow violence’ and ‘slow death’.<sup>51</sup> Settler colonialism takes the shape of a slow genocidal war that, because it plays out over a long arc of time, can remain largely invisible. Invisibility adds layers of oppression because it enables systematic programmes of suppression to persist, unnoticed and unquestioned. Maracle’s imaginative text suggests that settler colonialism is a condition of imbalance between settlers, Indigenous peoples, and the earth in which all parties are harmed, a ‘slow’ and incremental but permanent crisis that requires transformative relationships to penetrate layers of oppression rather than skimming over them. Yet, I would argue that *Celia’s Song* focusses less on the exposure of colonial trauma, abuse, and violence (which Indigenous readers already know all too well) and more on the reparative process of ‘reconstructing a sustainable life in their wake’, with a major stimulus for transformation conveyed in Coast Salish storytelling.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The serpent does not spare settlers, feeding off a pig farmer that kills and mutilates a woman (41). Gendered colonial violence is faced through Indigenous stories which emphasise how oppressors and oppressed are affected, in different ways, by colonialism as a violent encounter. As Laura Beard indicates, readers may associate the pig farmer in the novel with Robert Pickton, arrested in 2002 for the murder of dozens of women, mostly Indigenous, “‘This Story Needs a Witness’”, 165. The Pickton case highlighted the issue of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, leading to the establishment of the Missing Women Commission of Inquiry (MWCI) in 2010. See Allison Hargreaves, *Violence Against Indigenous Women: Literature, Activism, Resistance* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2017), 165, 39.

<sup>50</sup> This is a view voiced by other Indigenous writers and scholars, summarised by Dallas Hunt in “‘Of Course They Count, But Not Right Now’”: Regulating Precarity in Lee Maracle’s *Ravensong* and *Celia’s Song*’, *Biopolitical Disaster*, Jennifer Lawrence and Sarah Marie Wiebe eds., (London: Taylor and Francis, 2017), 174.

<sup>51</sup> Lauren Berlant, ‘Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)’, *Critical Inquiry*, 33.4 (2007), 754; Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>52</sup> Ellis Hanson, ‘The Future’s Eve: Reparative Reading after Sedgwick’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 110 (2011), 105.

In his reading of *Ravensong* and *Celia's Song*, Dallas Hunt (Cree) evokes Judith Butler's 'frames of war' to suggest that Maracle brings to the foreground what is otherwise foreclosed from examination.<sup>53</sup> I would extend the argument to suggest that Maracle employs moments of crisis not primarily to make frames of war apparent, but to communicate the need for transformation, even when the conditions that enable crises fail to be fully brought into cognition, or the web of story is too twisted to be easily disentangled. The serpent may be interpreted as representing the force of colonialism, but he is also configured beyond it; he originates pre-contact. Maracle stresses symbolically what she has asserted in interview: that the 'history of this country is not made up of conquest' but is 'thousands and thousands of years old'.<sup>54</sup> In *Memory Serves* (2015), Maracle writes: 'We have been off the path before. Our teachings, our ceremonies, our counseling methodologies, our oratory on governance, conduct and spirit-to-spirit relations are all born of our having met with disaster, reacted badly, and from our efforts to reclaim our original path. Our stories are full of pathfinders. I retreat to original story to conjure the myths of colonialism'.<sup>55</sup> In *Celia's Song*, she embeds in one of Momma's dreams the origin story of how the serpent 'rose up from the receding waters' to swallow the people in one of a series of ecological crises (80).<sup>56</sup> Negotiation with the serpent is unsuccessful until, in the midst of war, a woman pleads 'with the two heads for her child's life' (80). This story is left open-ended in Momma's dream; it is left open to deduction whether this lone woman's pact with the serpent may have restored harmony in the village, and the extent to which the serpent changes from threat to protector in exchange for songs and

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<sup>53</sup> Hunt, "'Of Course They Count, But Not Right Now'", 172.

<sup>54</sup> Kelly, 'Coming Out of the House', 84.

<sup>55</sup> Maracle, *Memory Serves*, 141.

<sup>56</sup> Maracle decentres colonial authority, presenting it as an ongoing crisis in a series of crises. This is made clear by Mink when he ponders '[t]he earth has been through cataclysmic change a few times, every time a lot of humans perished, but the earth survived' (16). James Tully puts forward the notion of the meta-cycles of life as cycles of crisis-reconciliation that the earth and humans undergo periodically. He argues that the 'history of relationships between Indigenous peoples and settlers also can be seen in terms of cycles of conciliation, conflict and crisis, and reconciliation — successful and unsuccessful', 'Reconciliation Here on Earth', *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*, Michael Asch, John Borrows, and James Tully eds., (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2018), 95, 96.

ceremony.<sup>57</sup> The serpent exists in a system of treaty relations where stability is ensured through contract. Indigenous peoples have contracts with ‘all beings’ on the land, Maracle writes, and ‘[v]iolation of these agreements has consequences’.<sup>58</sup> The serpent is obligated to protect the people of the longhouse if they feed him with songs and ceremony, but colonialism disrupts this pact: the ‘singing had stopped for the house protector before the inhabitants had died. It stopped during the prohibition laws’ (2). The damage, then, originates in the breaching of a contract which grants ‘*permission to the serpent to slide from the house front and return to sea*’ (2). Treaty negotiations are a system of reciprocity, and Maracle suggests ways of understanding treaties outside the discourse in which they are usually contained. For settler scholar Michael Asch, treaties have come to be considered ‘relatively insignificant in the story of our country’ because of a failure to see ‘the centrality of relations with Indigenous peoples to [Canada’s] story’, and the government’s failure to honour treaty promises contributed to this misreading of history.<sup>59</sup> Asch refers to historic treaties signed between 1871 and 1921 which cover most of Western and Northern Canada, formal agreements between Indigenous peoples and the government.<sup>60</sup> Maracle’s novel is set in unceded Coast Salish territory, and the treaties she imagines include Indigenous practice that pre-dates colonial contact, a model of treaty

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<sup>57</sup> The serpent is a dyadic symbol on multiple levels and, from this perspective, it symbolises balance and justice, the two heads the scales of justice. An important figure for the Kwakwaka’wak Indigenous group of the Pacific Northwest Coast is the two-headed sea serpent Sisiutł who is also the chosen logo for the programme First Nations Journeys of Justice, an elementary school curriculum that teaches justice from a First Nation perspective. The association between Sisiutł as symbol of justice and the serpent as symbol of war emphasises the dualistic value of the serpent in this novel. Incorporating war and peace, chaos and balance, conflict and resolution, the double-headed serpent symbolises the interrelation and complementarity of seemingly opposite forces and how they may give rise to each other. See ‘First Nations Journeys of Justice’, *Justice Education Society*, <https://www.lawlessons.ca/teaching-resources/first-nations-journeys-of-justice>

<sup>58</sup> Maracle, *My Conversations with Canadians*, 113.

<sup>59</sup> Michael Asch, ‘Confederation Treaties and Reconciliation: Stepping Back into the Future’, *Resurgence and Reconciliation*, 41, 45.

<sup>60</sup> British Columbia is not covered by any historic treaty, except for Vancouver Island where the Douglas Treaties were signed between 1850 and 1854 between certain Indigenous groups (not the Nuu’chalnulth) and the Crown colony of Vancouver Island. Modern treaties have been signed in British Columbia since 1975. Métis legal scholar Chelsea Vowel clarifies that ‘inter-Indigenous treaties were highly sophisticated oral agreements between sovereign peoples’ which ‘covered everything from trade arrangements to the settlement of conflicts, with specific consequences for their breach, and specific ways in which these treaties would be renewed’, *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis and Inuit Issues in Canada* (Winnipeg, MB: Highwater Press, 2016), 244.

negotiation derived from observation of the natural world and negotiations with more-than-human relatives. Leanne Simpson (Nishnaabeg) suggests that precolonial treaty-making practices provide ‘insights into the kind of relationship’ that Indigenous peoples intended to have with settlers, based on principles of sustainability, respect, renewal, and non-interference.<sup>61</sup> Simpson advocates for decolonising the Euro-Canadian view of treaties as entrenched in written record, ownership of land, and static understandings of relationships — what Garneau describes as the ‘government’s frantic race to a post-historical space of reconciliation, rather than submission to a permanent state of negotiation, of treaty’.<sup>62</sup> If a treaty represents an ‘ongoing reciprocal and dynamic relationship to be nurtured’ which, when practised ‘continually and in perpetuity, maintains peaceful coexistence, respect, and mutual benefit’, continuous negotiation of reciprocity is necessary to navigate incommensurability.<sup>63</sup> Maracle’s claim that oratory ‘lead[s] us onto a path of continuous growth and transformation’ suggests how closely politics and aesthetics are linked in Indigenous storytelling traditions, where stories contain protocols for forming relationships so that all beings enjoy a ‘perfect right to be as they are’.<sup>64</sup> A principle of non-interference and a ‘survival right’ ensures that each being maintains a respectful distance from others. Treaties ensure that this distance is respected and maintained, and, Maracle contends, oratory is about ‘cherishing the distance between them; it is about relationship, and as such it is about life. Oratory is comprised of the complex relations between disparate characters in their concatenation or their lack of it’.<sup>65</sup>

By a series of juxtapositions — mythic/social, individual/collective, human/non-human — Maracle suggests a complex system of place-based and kin-centric relations between

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<sup>61</sup> Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, ‘Looking after Gdoo-Naaganinaa: Precolonial Nishnaabeg Diplomatic and Treaty Relationships’, *Wicazo Sa Review*, 23.2, (2008), 36.

<sup>62</sup> David Garneau, ‘Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation: Art, Curation, and Healing’, *Arts of Engagement, Taking Aesthetic Action in and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin eds., (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 37.

<sup>63</sup> Simpson, ‘Looking after Gdoo-Naaganinaa’, 35.

<sup>64</sup> Maracle, *Memory Serves*, 236.

<sup>65</sup> Maracle, *Memory Serves*, 241.

peoples and more-than-human beings (including animals, plants, ecosystems, ancestral spirits), a belief shared across Indigenous groups in paradigms of ‘all my relations’ and ‘the seventh generation’, through which connections expand temporally and spatially.<sup>66</sup> The expression *haitchka siem*, the ‘song’ that ‘rolls out’ of Celia’s mouth when she finally releases her grief and pain over the loss of her son, is defined by Maracle as conveying relationality succinctly (245):

In my language we say *hay čxw qə siyam*, and they translate that as ‘thank God’. But Seattle clearly says that God never came to us, we didn’t have a God, we don’t have a monotheistic framework — we’re it. I stand between my infinite grandchildren and my infinite grandmothers. The farther backward in time I go, the more grandmothers I have. The farther forward, the more grandchildren. And I am obligated to that whole lineage: this lineage holds up the spirit of all things — trees, flora, fauna, human. That’s what that word means.<sup>67</sup>

Celia sings *haitchka siem* as a healing prayer for reconnection to members of her family, dead, alive, and yet to be born. Relationalities posed in Maracle’s definition of *haitchka siem* are reiterated in her novel where they are evoked in passages that describe Jacob’s retreat to the mountain and conversations with his great-great-great-grandmother, first Alice, who tells him that everything he sees from the top of the mountain is ‘all your relatives’ (176). Jacob’s

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<sup>66</sup> ‘All my relations’ is a loose translation of a phrase shared across Indigenous territories in North America (from the Lakota *mitakuye oyasin*, the Mi’kmaq *msit no’kmaq*, the Anishinaabe *nii’kinaaganaa*, the Alonquin *kakina ni dodem*, the Cree *niw-hk-m-kanak*, and the Halkomelem *ə siyam*), which means ‘we are all interconnected’. It indicates an extended family of life-sustaining relationships among human and non-human beings. It is spatial relationality: the rootedness of beings in the land generates wisdom that entails responsibilities towards and among animate and inanimate forms that share a habitat. Temporal relationality is a concept practised via storytelling: ‘seven generations both ways’ indicates ‘the time depth of direct transmission through oral tradition’. Regna Darnell explains that the seventh position, ‘the pivot’, is ‘held in temporary stasis at the key standpoint of the contemporary transmitter. The alternate generations [...] come into more active roles in each pivot position with each shift in the succession of generations. The pivot is always emergent. Past, present, and future cannot be separated’. From this perspective, history is not *that which happened in the past*, but *that which my kin experienced*, and is mediated and re-enacted through storytelling. Regna Darnell ‘Reconciliation, Resurgence, and Revitalization: Collaborative Research Protocols with Contemporary First Nations Communities’, *Resurgence and Reconciliation*, Asch, Borrows and Tully eds., 240, 241.

<sup>67</sup> Maracle quoted in Fee and Gunew, ‘From Discomfort to Enlightenment’, 214-5. References to Chief Seattle and his teachings are frequent in Maracle’s speeches and writings, including *Celia’s Song* when Celia hears Seattle saying: ‘The white man should understand that there is another way of seeing’ (8). Seattle’s presence in Maracle’s work could be explained by the fact that he is an Elder in her family lineage (Fee and Gunew, 212). Maracle is also recognised as an Elder in her community, but as Walter Lightning (Cree) writes, ‘when [Elders] teach others they very often begin by quoting the authority of Elders who have gone before. They do not state the authority is coming from themselves. They will say things like “This is what they used to say”’, Walter Lightning quoted in Jo-Ann Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork*, 13.

journey signals the beginning of a collective revitalisation of his community because it leads to rebuilding the longhouse — the ‘traditional location for telling stories’ — and revitalising Indigenous storytelling modes for law and relationality.<sup>68</sup>

### **Speaking Nearby**

In *Celia’s Song*, Maracle conceptualises language as carrying ‘reference posts’, criteria for making meaning and implementing action that are embedded in Indigenous languages and derived from observation of the natural world.<sup>69</sup> Illustrative of Maracle’s strategic opacity in this context is a vignette about salmon: *‘Their dancing is done in their ocean playground [...] In this place of dance and play their language is born. This language has reference posts that head them up the right stream to the river the fish-women know well’* (109).<sup>70</sup> This passage sets the tone for how the dynamic language of salmon is translated into the lives of humans: as Alice’s spirit leaves her body, she ponders that language *‘needs a post [...] a reference marker to remind, to tell the rememberer they are hooked to some moment’* (110). With the removal of children to residential schools and outlawing of Indigenous practices, Alice lacks an immediate family relation to whom she may pass her knowledge. She dies but finds it impossible to *‘really leave’* and floats betwixt *‘the stars and earth’*, past and present, until Jacob begins to access her ancestral teachings affectively when he *‘feels something’*. Synchronicities sit at different poles in the novel’s arc of time, as Jacob is hit with the felt knowledge of his grandmother’s last words which afford him space to perform a *‘different kind of see’* (110). Maracle employs the verb ‘to see’ as substantive, without nominalising it via the

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<sup>68</sup> Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork*, 71.

<sup>69</sup> For John Borrows (Nishnaabeg), for example, ‘legal practice starts with understanding our language and drawing analogies from the earth’, ‘Earth-Bound: Indigenous Resurgence and Environmental Reconciliation’, in *Resurgence and Reconciliation*, 51. A connection between language and justice emerges in *Celia’s Song* when Momma discusses what punishment would suit Amos: ‘if she could say it in her language, the word for it would lead her to name the kind of death she should make sure he gets’ (149).

<sup>70</sup> Archibald recounts how the life cycle of salmon, the ‘circle of life’, is described by Elders as ‘the foundation’ for an educational model, because it contains reference posts that teach children about the cycles of life, *Indigenous Storywork*, 110.

suffix -ing. If it maintains the quality of action, it now holds the value of intuitive knowledge, brought into cognition when Jacob reaches the top of the mountain and converses with Alice. Such characters inhabit a 'lanscape', defined as 'a place where physical space interacts with human observation to give meaning to the natural and human worlds'.<sup>71</sup> In this novel, language is a system of knowledge with reference posts rooted in the land and in the stories of those who inhabit it. As the environment changes, language is adapted.

Reading *Celia's Song* through these reference posts allows emphasis to be placed on the gaps in language that are created by changes in the environment and cultural gaps that exist not only between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples but also across generations. When Jacob listens to women discuss the epidemic, the vote, and suicides, for example, he 'feels as if he does not have reference posts to understand' (110). Jacob belongs to a younger generation, more disconnected from his Indigenous heritage, and feels that 'each woman by turns shreds [...] his linguistic markers, rendering useless as slugs the words he so carefully learned at school' and that the women 'speak in a language that contravenes everything those marks stood for' (111). Jacob internalises the white reference posts he has been schooled to know and distances himself from his mother's and grandmother's beliefs because teachers and classmates 'refer to the beliefs of the old people in this village as superstitions' (113). Education plays a crucial role in Jacob's epistemological and existential displacement because it forces the imposition of white reference posts as it erases Indigenous ones, leaving him feeling unable to connect to either and exposed to assimilation into the dominant system, even as he feels the need 'to know he is part of something' (111). The English that the women speak, and that Jacob will learn to speak, is conceptually bent to convey Indigenous consciousness; it carries reference posts that have been created over time and is reclaimed and imbued with Coast Salish

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<sup>71</sup> Borrows, 'Earth-Bound', 51.

consciousness.<sup>72</sup> The need to forge a new language is a concern voiced by Jacob's grandfather Ned, who declares, 'Jacob doesn't speak our women's language, in either his English or theirs. They talk like they are stuck back in some old yesterday and Jacob talks like he is headed for tomorrow. We have to build a bridge between yesterday and tomorrow' (73).<sup>73</sup> Here, linguistic tension is less about epistemologies and more about orientations. While the women's English may be more substantially connected to Indigenous worldviews than Jacob's, their conversations are stuck in the past: the epidemic, the prohibition laws, the false victory of the vote. It is not only Jacob's language that is probed to show its limits but also the women's because all models of speaking are approached with doubt in this novel.

A mode of speaking that Maracle challenges with subtlety is healing. The belief that truth-telling can have a therapeutic effect underpins ideas of emotional healing and rehabilitation and is said to be aligned with Indigenous conceptions of restorative justice. Leanne Simpson emphasises that, in the specific instance of the Nishnaabeg legal system, Indigenous restorative processes 'rely upon the abuser taking full responsibility for his/her actions in a collective setting'.<sup>74</sup> Survivors have the agency to decide restorative measures and to hold perpetrators accountable, in order to begin to repair relationships.<sup>75</sup> Celia is part of a

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<sup>72</sup> Maracle bends the grammatical elements of the English language so that it can more adequately express Stó:lō experiences. The expression 'a different kind of see' is one example. Another is the use of the intransitive verb 'to dance' in the transitive form, to 'dance someone' (234, 251). The verb breaks free from its fixed form in order to suggest a ceremonial practice. English is not, then, 'the enemy's language' but 'reinvented' and adapted, as Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird suggest when they argue that 'a particular way of perceiving the world' has survived despite continuous attacks on Indigenous languages, and that 'there is a native literature produced in English that incorporates a native perception of the world in limited ways', *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writings of North America* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 21.

<sup>73</sup> Other characters contemplate the (im)possibility of different systems of knowledge to converge. Momma internalises language as a form of split identity: 'Two languages run along parallel tracks in Momma's mind, neither of which ever crosses over; she shifts between them as though she is one person in one language and another in the other. She has never felt sure of who she is in either, because the words of both have never come together to speak her memories to her' (86). Forging a new language is not a definite goal, but a constantly negotiated process that generates possibilities from the interplay of differences.

<sup>74</sup> Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Recreation, Resurgence and A New Emergence* (Winnipeg, MB: ARP Books, 2011), 23.

<sup>75</sup> An example of restorative justice is represented in *Celia's Song* when Amos dies during a dancing ceremony, a 'comeuppance' that is planned by Jacob in agreement with Celia and first Alice who instructs him that it is 'not about anger, vengeance, or retaliation' but 'about ritual, about ceremony, and about restoring our original

‘healing circle’ where people talk about experiences of violence to begin to heal themselves. This restorative practice risks being sensationalised when co-opted by national projects for Indigenous-settler relations. TRC events, for example, are modelled upon such traditional ‘circle talk’ but displace the idea of restorative justice into a neoliberal master narrative of individual healing because perpetrators are absent and cannot be held accountable, testimonies are reinterpreted when they gather media attention, and speech is instrumentalised to promote a narrative where pain is overcome for the purpose of ‘reconciliation’.<sup>76</sup> The assumption that testimony is ‘curative’ is not only characteristic of TRC events but nearly ubiquitous in the proliferation of testimonial forms.<sup>77</sup> Lauren Berlant offers one critique of how testimony participates in neoliberal agendas if it promotes a heroic construction of the individuated self and risks its commodification.<sup>78</sup> In this model, ‘the contemporary subject is achieved through a proximity to trauma’.<sup>79</sup> Healing is reduced to a ‘simple answer’ if it does not leave space for unintelligibility or for differing expressive styles (139). Celia is aware of the fallacy of this model, which seems to have infiltrated even private and traditional practices and ponders how circle talk may be ‘limited to disclosing hurt and trauma, or rage’ (64). This feels ‘narrow and tiring’ to her; although she knows ‘they need it’, she wants hurt to be ‘peppered between the other kinds of conversations they never seem to have anymore’ (64). Celia does not reject this model entirely but understands it as insufficient if it eclipses other modes of talking and reduces multifaceted experiences to the shadow of an illness.

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*direction*’ (251, 212). Amos is made to reintegrate in the community through participation in the rebuilding of the longhouse culminating in the dancing ceremony during which he takes full responsibility for his actions and ‘determines’ to ‘dance himself’ to ‘the other side’ (255). This process is restorative and healing for Amos, and his release, albeit through death, is witnessed by Shelley’s family. Readers may not understand the value of the practice, how Amos dies, or Jacob’s role in his death. Details are purposely left out of the story because Maracle is not interested in redeeming her characters or making ceremony understandable to a non-Indigenous audience.

<sup>76</sup> Niezen, *Truth and Indignation*, 3, 88.

<sup>77</sup> For Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, ‘[t]estifying to historical injustice since the Holocaust has radically transformed our very notion of politics and its relationship to both truth and justice’, ‘Testimonial Cultures: An Introduction’, *Cultural Values*, 5 (2001), 1.

<sup>78</sup> Lauren Berlant, ‘Trauma and Ineloquence’, *Cultural Values*, 5.1 (2001), 50.

<sup>79</sup> Ahmed and Stacey, ‘Testimonial Cultures’, 4.

Maracle creates a model of reciprocity whereby discrepancies in language and rationalities exist in moments of convergence that are characterised by a willingness to doubt one's ability to understand properly, and to accept that one cannot fully understand another person's subjective experience. These are the moments in which characters 'speak nearby' in Minh-ha's sense, in a way that 'reflects on itself' because it does not involve explicative questions or immediate answers, but solicits a process of learning how to listen and make meaning from what is left unspoken. Jo-Ann Archibald suggests that traditional Stó:lō ways 'favour no or very little direct guidance from the storyteller', but that 'colonization, assimilation, and acculturation, predominantly thorough schooling, have left many people unable to engage in story listening and to make story meaning, unless directly guided'.<sup>80</sup> In the novel, when Jacob asks a question and the women reply with a story, he 'resents' not receiving a clear answer and seems unable to 'imagine enough' to find answers in their stories, until he realises that he is less 'concerned about the question' and is seeking 'the sound of the women's voices' (64, 66). Jacob learns how to listen and to negotiate meanings even when they seem to elude him. In this way, understanding is represented not as a rapacious act of grasping and seizing but as one of generous reciprocity.

This model of reciprocity is not confined to Indigenous characters but spun outward in the tale so that speaking nearby emerges in conversations with non-Indigenous characters who are trying to surmount barriers to understanding, like those that Steve and Judy face as white minor characters. They first appear in *Ravensong*, where Judy's 'whiteness' is raised by Momma: 'She's white and so she don't count'.<sup>81</sup> In *Celia's Song*, Maracle recalibrates what may 'count', drawing perhaps on her observation that a naturalisation process whereby non-Indigenous people are accepted as part of an Indigenous Nation exists traditionally, but

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<sup>80</sup> Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork*, 112.

<sup>81</sup> Maracle, *Ravensong*, 123.

‘Canada does not allow it, because if it did, that would make us nations’.<sup>82</sup> It is an Elder, Ned, who decides that Judy ‘has earned a place in this village’ and tells her, ‘you are one of us to me’ (71, 73). Exercising Indigenous sovereignty, albeit informally, Ned welcomes Judy as a member of his Indigenous family. In this way, and borrowing Métis scholar David Garneau’s terminology, in *Celia’s Song* non-Indigenous people enter ‘irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality’ as ‘guests’, in contrast to colonial models of Indigenous-settler relationships that are focused on assimilating Indigenous peoples to the settler state.<sup>83</sup> This is a part of story that Mink needs to witness and upon which he comments, ‘*Screw those who decided she was white and so didn’t really count [...] About time you decide to face that she lives here and that she belongs here*’ (71).<sup>84</sup> Judy earns her place and acquires some knowledge of ‘*the Sto:lo way of doing business*’, yet she maintains white reference posts and a desire for simple explanations: every now and then, as when it is noted, ‘Judy is back to her Prussian self’ (73, 75).<sup>85</sup> Being part of the family is dependent on a willingness to stand together and speak nearby.

Moments of crisis in the novel foreground how cooperation and reciprocity may be reached, despite incommensurability of understanding, when doubt generates possibilities. At a moment of the highest tension, when Shelley’s life is at risk, the contrast between worldviews and different conceptions of justice brings Judy into conflict with the Indigenous women who refuse to take Shelley to a hospital. Judy does not realise how the intervention of the child-welfare system would likely cut her off from the women who are her family. She fears that ‘[e]very second they spend trying to save her will be damned in the eyes of the law as proof of negligence, criminal negligence’ (143). Judy cannot see that the girl needs her grandmother’s

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<sup>82</sup> Maracle, *My Conversations with Canadians*, 81.

<sup>83</sup> Garneau, ‘Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation’, 26, 35.

<sup>84</sup> By declaring, ‘[t]his part of the story is over’, before shifting his attention elsewhere in the narrative, Mink stresses that moments of friendship and acceptance are stories that *need* to be witnessed (75).

<sup>85</sup> Judy is sometimes characterised through epithets such as ‘German Judy’ and ‘Prussian Judy’, despite living in the community for many years as Rena’s partner. These expressions carry negative connotations of exclusion and division that seem to rely on white reference posts. Maracle may be challenging readers’ expectations about Indigenous characters as free of prejudices and biases, an essentialised characterisation that is reductive.

‘golden-throated’ voice to talk her through the experience no less than she needs ‘glucose, a sanitary room, and surgical instruments’, while Celia knows ‘those sterile things alone will not be enough’ (137, 145). As Judy struggles to trust the possibilities of the story unfolding around her, she asks Stacey how she reconciles the realities she lives with the reference posts she has been taught at school. Stacey explains that she attended ‘with several pound of doubt’ and that they all need to have ‘some doubt right now’ if Shelley is to be healed (147). This assertion foregrounds the generative potential of doubt in convergence and cooperation, as a spark of hope and a tool of questioning and improvement.

Doubt drives Steve and Stacey to choose to stay together despite the obstacles they face in building a romantic relationship. In *Ravensong*, their relationship fails because of a ‘gulf’ that they fear no two people alone could ‘bridge’.<sup>86</sup> As adults, they embark on a journey, negotiating each other without the pretension of permanently succeeding in bridging the gulf. When Steve proposes and Stacey confronts him with the inevitable incommensurability between them, Steve begins to realise that ‘he will never understand her’ and that ‘her loving him might be painful for her’ (189). In my reading, this exchange is indicative that he is beginning to know himself and unpack his white privilege. Going ‘within oneself’ and doubting one’s place is an important stage in making story meaning, as stressed by Elder Ellen White.<sup>87</sup> In the context of Indigenous-settler relations, it pivots less on the need for white settlers to understand Indigenous peoples and more on understanding colonialism through white privilege. In *Celia’s Song*, then, co-existence may be a spinning tale that can only be known as it unfolds and, like Steve and Stacey’s marriage, it requires ‘the rest of our lives’ to ‘negotiate the maze’ of its telling (196). Opacity is presented as fruitful in any relationship that is

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<sup>86</sup> Maracle, *Ravensong*, 185.

<sup>87</sup> Ellen White quoted in Jo-Ann Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork*, 135. Archibald describes a process that involves ‘interrelating with the story to make meaning’ in order to acquire self-understandings. Questions may be asked but their purpose is ‘not to check comprehension’ and ‘[i]t is expected that children and adults may not understand all of a story’, *Indigenous Storywork*, 133, 115.

continuously negotiated. In the case of Stacey and Steve, '[s]he would try, he would try, but they would not always be successful' (201). Maracle dramatises multiple moments in which intentions converge; they may be fleeting but they are hopeful and bear the promise of more permanent meaning. Each moment is characterised by generative doubt, incommensurability of understanding, and a willingness to stand together. Steve and Judy learn how to listen to each other but, by the end of the novel, they are still questioning whether they hear accurately and accepting that they may never understand. Steve declares, 'I have no intention of leaving. I worry, though, that I am ever going to get it right', and Judy echoes his words more acutely in the knowledge she has gained: 'I am never going to get it right' (195, 269).

Speaking nearby becomes *singing* nearby when Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices come together to sing: 'Judy can't get past her Prussian accent, and Steve can't get past his lyric-less English, but it doesn't matter' (205). Reciprocity is a wilful act of love and respect, of voices touching without melting into each other, voices that ring with individuality but forge a communal song. In *Celia's Song*, Maracle suggests the *potential* of moments of non-reductive understanding and for successful relationships if they are rooted in reciprocal, interweaving modes of telling. In doing so, she problematises models of relationality that are framed as unequivocal and definitive, even when they are grounded in acts of resurgence. The rebuilding of the longhouse and the ceremony performed constitute a form of resurgence, but they do not correspond to full revitalisation or to a conciliatory solution. By the end of the novel, the serpent still roams and the divide between the Indigenous community and the white town may be wider than before. Resurgence and co-existence are depicted as more complex than readers might expect or imagine.

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'There is something helpless in being a witness'. The opening sentence of *Celia's Song* foregrounds witnessing as a major preoccupation for writer and readers (1). Witnessing evokes

vulnerability: not the vulnerability of victimhood, or the inability to escape an overbearing violence, but the wilful vulnerability of choosing to witness what is difficult to watch and listen to, what might evade understanding. In the Stó:lō context of witnessing and storytelling that emerges through the novel, attentive listening is key to making story meaning, as is doubting the outward meaning of a story and exploring all potential paths that doubt creates. This chapter is my attempt to trace the webs of story that Maracle weaves, with respect, and not to disentangle them. Maracle re-covers old models, adapts them, creates new ones, and questions and exceeds established modes of history and coloniality, science and democracy, time and reciprocity, treaty relations, language, and testimony. Doubt emerges as generative because new possibilities come into view when *the suspiciousness of doubt* renders evident the limits of the known. In my reading, Maracle's novel invites readers to consider a model of relationships that is fluid, grounded in respect for another's opacity and for speaking in ways that do not fit expected models.

The cornerstones of doubt and opacity, like speaking nearby and listening attentively, are relevant to how testimonial narratives of trauma and healing are encouraged in national discourses and models for Indigenous-settler relations such as 'reconciliation'. Testimonial complexities fail to be taken fully into account when neoliberal ways of telling operate according to 'a model of agency which depends on separating the story of the individual from the story of the collective, and which sees both trauma and healing in individualistic terms'.<sup>88</sup> This model of testimony risks undermining what may be 'indescribable' by 'turning it into news rather than, more sublimely, *communication*', as Berlant fears.<sup>89</sup> Maracle would seem to reject neoliberal logic by offering an instance of writing as polyphonic singing, where voices meet to *communicate* the ineffable. Focalised from multiple perspectives, this novel is a form

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<sup>88</sup> Ahmed and Stacey, 'Testimonial Cultures', 5.

<sup>89</sup> Berlant, 'Trauma and Ineloquence', 55, italics in the original.

of cumulative testimony made of different layers of witnessing through which characters accept incommensurability and together add intonation and variation to an infinite web of story.

*Celia's Song* is a communal song that is rooted in the land and sung for generations past, present, and future. In it, Maracle explores some of the effects of colonialism which, like the double-headed serpent, slip and slide, swallow and poison the lives of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. The novel has a regenerative quality because it recovers and conveys stimuli for self- and social transformation that are characteristic of traditional Stó:lō stories: song 'move[s] you through life. We are not lost. We are travelling in the wrong direction. Song moves us toward our humanity' (213). If song is reparative, it is because it signals the ability to dream hopes and sing them into being. Song is poetry, relation, movement, transformation. It is the felt knowledge of stories, the impression and expression of humanity and interconnectedness. *Celia's Song* is a tale spun inside, its thick webs rendering it irreducible to any single model of understanding. It suggests ways in which story is a tool for transformation — when different models are probed for how useful or defective they may be, when voting is silencing, linear time is limiting, trauma is narrowing, and truths lie in possibilities created by doubt and imagination.

## 2

### Epistemic Injustice and Dimensions of Empathy in

#### Katherena Vermette's *The Break*

In the previous chapter, I suggest that Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song* invites a model for relationality in which listening emerges as a critical and relational practice that necessitates an accommodation of respectful distance. In this chapter, I focus on the novel *The Break* (2016), by Métis author Katherena Vermette, to examine how the failure of Canadian authorities to listen or engage ethically with Indigenous testimonies is one crucial factor in a larger systemic failure to protect Indigenous communities. Through a lens of epistemic injustice, I explore how Vermette portrays power relations and suggests ways of engaging ethically with testimony. In 2007, British philosopher Miranda Fricker defined epistemic injustice (testimonial and hermeneutical) as consisting of 'a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower'.<sup>1</sup> In Vermette's representation of Canadian society, epistemic injustice affects everyday interactions between Indigenous peoples and settler institutions and figures of authority — specifically, the police — because Indigenous peoples are not believed and their experiences neglected or negated by the authorities. Epistemic injustice is conceptualised by Fricker as a deficit in credibility (in the case of testimonial injustice), or intelligibility (in the case of hermeneutical injustice). In Vermette's novel, epistemic injustice also has an affective dimension that is depicted in performances of empathy. It is exposed as identification excess

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<sup>1</sup> Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

in the forms of appropriation and consumption of another person's truths, when the harm done to the speaker involves the obliteration of her right to have an inassimilable experience.

Set in Winnipeg's North End, Manitoba, *The Break* opens on a deserted winter landscape, a liminal space characterised by whiteness and a violent crime. Vermette asserts the significance of this location in the first line of the novel, 'The Break is a piece of land just west of McPhillips Street' (3). This bleak in-between space is surrounded by Hydro towers which 'feel close, low' and when snow touches their wires, they make an 'intrusive buzzing sound', the kind of white noise that is 'just quiet enough that you can ignore it' (5). In this barren field of snow, someone is assaulted by a group of people. The assault is witnessed by Stella, a Métis woman who, awakened by her crying baby, watches from the window of her home. She feels a responsibility to help, but she is 'frozen' (172). Stella feels unable to leave her children, even briefly, to intervene for the victim. Instead, she calls the police. The officers who finally arrive do not believe Stella's claim that she witnessed a sexual assault, and later she struggles with additional guilt when she discovers that she is related to the victim. Emily, the thirteen-year-old daughter of Stella's cousin Paulina, survives sexual abuse but refuses to identify her attackers. This crime triggers the plot and initiates a narrative which recalls, in part, the genre of detective fiction. *The Break* was the *Sunday Times*'s 'Crime Book of The Month' in February 2018, and reviewers have described it as a 'police procedural', 'essentially a literary thriller', and 'Canadian noir'.<sup>2</sup> Carleigh Baker (Cree-Métis-Icelandic) has argued instead that this mislabels a book that is 'a powerful indictment of the real-life investigation of crimes

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<sup>2</sup> Marjorie Celona, 'Review: Katherena Vermette's *The Break* is an incredible feat of storytelling', *The Globe and Mail*, 23 September 2016, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/book-reviews/review-katherena-vermettes-the-break-is-an-astonishing-act-of-empathy/article32021013/?ref=http://www.theglobeandmail.com&> [accessed April 2021]  
Barbara Fradkin, 'Canadian Noir? Eh?', *The Strand Magazine*, 6 September 2017, <https://strandmag.com/canadian-noir-eh/> [accessed April 2021]

involving indigenous victims'.<sup>3</sup> An exposé of how justice operates for Indigenous communities, *The Break* employs and exceeds expectations of a literary genre that has a history of being white-authored and male-dominated. Vermette has said that she was propelled to begin the novel when reflecting on why a person may commit violence and how tragedy 'begets more tragedy', but that she 'didn't want to tell that story in isolation' because 'more important than the how or why [...] is how we survive, how these women and girls get through and end the cycle'.<sup>4</sup> *The Break* is much more than the physical location from which it takes its title; it explores an emotional location because as one character says, 'we have all been broken in one way or another' (175). The heart of the novel is how Indigenous women pick up the pieces and 'hol[d] each other up' (291).

*The Break* is divided into four parts and told from the shifting perspectives of ten different narrators, all women except for a Métis police officer, Tommy, who investigates the case. Like Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song*, which also inspired Vermette, *The Break* acts as cumulative testimony, but in a very different way and in a differently-inflected popular genre.<sup>5</sup> Chapters bear the names of their narrators who tell family stories that develop into a complex intergenerational mosaic of interwoven personal histories. The narrators are all connected to Emily, directly or indirectly, and seven are members of the same Métis family headed by Stella's grandmother Flora, or *Kookom* ('grandmother' in Cree and Michif). Among the narrators are Flora's daughter Cheryl, an artist, and Cheryl's daughters Lou (Louisa), a social worker, and Paul (Paulina) who is Emily's mother and a nurse. The three youngest narrators are Emily, her Anishinaabe best friend Zegwan, and Phoenix, a homeless Métis teenager with

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<sup>3</sup> Carleigh Baker, 'The Mythical Indigenous Protagonist: Katherena Vermette's new novel and how we read indigenous fiction', *Literary Review of Canada*, November 2016, <https://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2016/11/the-mythical-indigenous-protagonist/> [accessed April 2021]

<sup>4</sup> Katherena Vermette interviewed by Christine Fischer Guy, 'These Characters Affected My Core: Christine Fischer Guy in Conversation with Katherena Vermette', *Hamilton Review of Books*, <http://hamiltonreviewofbooks.com/vermette-interview> [accessed April 2021]

<sup>5</sup> Lee Maracle's praise of *The Break* as 'unforgettable' is included among pre-publication reviews, 'These Characters Affected My Core'.

a painful history who flees a youth centre and seeks shelter in the home of her uncle, a gang leader who refuses to protect her. The sole male narrative voice is that of the police officer Tommy who emphasises systemic racism within the police force and what historians Mary Jane Logan McCallum and Adele Perry have called the ‘structures of indifference’ that perpetuate cycles of violence.<sup>6</sup> Chapters focalised through Tommy’s perspective also focus on the challenges he faces as a young Métis police officer who is disconnected from his Indigenous heritage and discriminated against at work, and how he navigates settler impositions and definitions of Indigeneity.

Negligence and carelessness about violence against Indigenous peoples is a primary line of concern and enquiry in *The Break*. It works figuratively in the Hydro towers’ white noise, which is constant yet easy to ignore, and the snow that covers the blood after the attack on Emily. The white noise evokes how violence may be ignored and normalised: ‘some people can ignore things like that. Some people hear it but just get used to it’ (5). The Break is a figurative space marked by ‘whiteness’, where snow, white noise, and white privilege intersect semantically to convey the effects of a colonial ideology that distorts and dampens Indigenous voices, stories, and testimonies — what settler scholar David Gaertner calls ‘colonial static’. He describes it as the ‘noise produced in a settler colonial state by ideological or settler-made disturbances’, emphasising that it is not ‘a glitch in nation-state machinery’ but a ‘defense mechanism devised to protect the interests and futurity of the settler nation’.<sup>7</sup> Gaertner draws from Cree author Sky Dancer Louise Bernice Halfe and how she articulates bearing witness through the metaphor of a snowstorm in her long poem *Blue Marrow* (1994). In a similar fashion but in a different genre, Vermette’s white landscape affords visualisation of ‘the ways in which colonial thinking permeates the air we breathe and blankets the land we walk on —

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<sup>6</sup> Mary Jane Logan McCallum and Adele Perry, *Structures of Indifference: An Indigenous Life and Death in a Canadian City* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2018), 1.

<sup>7</sup> David Gaertner, *The Theatre of Regret: Literature, Art, and the Politics of Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2020), 78.

even as another reality sleeps beneath it', as Gaertner suggests it certainly does.<sup>8</sup> In *The Break*, Stella observes that 'the snow made everything clean' and that she 'won't be able to tell' exactly where the assault took place, 'Not even her. And no one else knows it happened' (83, 90). Because proof of what she witnessed is lost, Stella worries that it will not be known. This is true for many missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and Two Spirit persons, when there are no witnesses, no investigations, and ignorance blankets the nation like snow on blood. Even when there are no traces, loved ones cannot forget, and like Emily's mother, still 'smell the blood' (183).

Vermette focuses on social issues that affect Indigenous communities in Winnipeg. This is Treaty 1 territory, the ancient lands of the Anishinaabeg and Cree peoples and the homeland of the Métis Nation. The city with the largest urban Indigenous population in Canada, Winnipeg was infamously labelled 'the most racist city in Canada' in 2015.<sup>9</sup> Attention to Winnipeg was sparked by the abuse and murder of fifteen-year-old Tina Fontaine of the Sagkeeng First Nation, whose body was found in Winnipeg's Red River in 2014. Tina Fontaine is not the only Indigenous girl reported missing who was found dead in Winnipeg, as emerged from the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) National Inquiry's Manitoba Hearings in 2017. The story of Brian Sinclair, chronicled by McCallum and Perry, is another example of systemic racism. An Indigenous man, Sinclair was literally 'ignored to

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<sup>8</sup> Gaertner, *The Theatre of Regret*, 84.

<sup>9</sup> Author not attributed, 'Ethnicity in Winnipeg', Winnipeg Population 2021, *Canada Population*, <https://canadapopulation.org/winnipeg-population/> Nancy MacDonald, 'Welcome to Winnipeg: where Canada's racism problem is at its worst', *Maclean's*, 22 January 2015, <https://www.macleans.ca/news/canada/welcome-to-winnipeg-where-canadas-racism-problem-is-at-its-worst/> and 'Maclean's Exclusive: Winnipeg Most Racist City in Canada'. *Toronto CityNews*, 22 January 2015, <https://toronto.citynews.ca/2015/01/22/macleans-exclusive-racism-in-winnipeg/> [accessed August 2021]

In 2014, Brian Bowman (Métis) was elected in municipal elections to become the first Indigenous mayor in Winnipeg's 140-year history. If the situation in Winnipeg is improving, as Colleen Simard and Nancy Macdonald claim, it is because discussions of longstanding systemic racism are being had, and *The Break* makes a contribution. Colleen Simard, 'Beyond Reconciliation: Winnipeg's shameful past shows the way forward', *Literary Review of Canada: A Journal of Ideas*, March 2019, <https://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2019/03/beyond-reconciliation/> and 'Winnipeg's changing, says writer of Maclean's article that called city racist', *CBC News*, January 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/winnipeg-macleans-racist-1-year-1.3415039> [accessed August 2021]

death' in 2008 when he visited a Winnipeg emergency room for a treatable infection and was found dead in his wheelchair thirty-four hours later. McCallum and Perry emphasise that the colonial logic of control 'filters' through the health and justice systems, schools, the police force, and all 'ideologically driven structures of settler colonialism' that 'reinforce claims of European settler populations as those first and most rightful served by the state'.<sup>10</sup> Vermette experienced the Winnipeg police and justice system when her brother Donovan disappeared, a tragedy that informs my reading of the novel. In its representation of Indigenous-settler relations, *The Break* stands out from other texts analysed in this thesis because it contains no positive white characters. An underlying sense of disappointment builds in the novel to underline that settler institutions and figures of authority who should be responsible for protecting all citizens do not protect Indigenous peoples.

Vermette tackles sensitive issues without passing judgment, affording readers of *The Break* space to form opinions about topics that are complex and often misunderstood, as is the case with fifteen-year-old Phoenix who resorts to toxic behaviour and violence in an effort to attain some sense of power. As her girl gang pins Emily down, Phoenix sexually abuses her using a glass bottle that breaks inside Emily in an almost fatal way. In this way, Vermette troubles 'established' narratives about violence against women and assumptions that readers may make about the dynamics of the crime. Specifically, readers may resist narrative clues that suggest that Emily's attacker is another girl. Like Tommy who believes that 'a girl couldn't have done that', and Emily's relatives whose disbelief is suggested through ellipses — 'How can it...girls?' — readers may also struggle to think outside of a socially established 'universal' narrative in which only men are rapists and toxic masculinity is exclusively a male issue (297, 346).<sup>11</sup> *The Break* is a brave novel. By imagining a woman committing a violent sex crime,

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<sup>10</sup> McCallum and Perry, *Structures of Indifference*, 8-9.

<sup>11</sup> Jamie Paris has analysed toxic masculinity in the novel and read Vermette's novel through the lens of Indigenous masculinities in "'Men Break When Things Like That Happen": On Indigenous Masculinities in Katherena Vermette's *The Break*', *Canadian Literature*, 239 (2019), 68-84.

Vermette puts into jeopardy ameliorative thoughts of sisterhood at the same time as she tells a story of women's resilience through acts of care. Phoenix's crime is a horrific act of violent rape, but in the daily interactions between the police officers and the Indigenous women abuse of power is made evident in quotidian ways.

In this chapter, I explore how epistemic injustice works in *The Break*, foregrounding power relations as operations of social control that is exerted individually and structurally. In Fricker's definition, 'identity power' is a particular operation of social power 'that depends in some significant degree upon [...] shared imaginative conceptions of social identity', that is, categories such as class, gender, and race which are 'alive in the collective social imagination'.<sup>12</sup> Identity power plays out in the novel in the racialisation of Indigenous identity through colonial notions of blood quantum and racial mixedness which narrowly define and diminish Indigenous peoplehood, as I examine in relation to Tommy's experience of epistemic injustice. 'Indian status' is another category that is often misunderstood as if it is the same as Indigenous identity when it is an administrative category created by the government as a form of control. Not all Indigenous peoples have legal status because it is only held by 'Indians' as defined in the *Indian Act*. This includes First Nations who are under federal jurisdiction and not Métis, Inuit, and non-registered First Nations.<sup>13</sup> In the novel, epistemic injustice affects Indigenous communities also through police and hospital neglect, and objectification in media representation.

If felt testimony is subject to epistemic injustice, it may be assumed that a hearer who perpetuates it lacks humane sentiments such as empathy. However, empathy may also be 'narcissistic', as British scholar Annie Coombes has argued in the context of post-Apartheid South Africa, when it is practised in the assumption that a hearer can access completely the

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<sup>12</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> For an in-depth discussion of status and Métis identity see Chelsea Vowel, *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis and Inuit Issues in Canada* (Winnipeg, MB: Highwater Press, 2016), 26-38.

speaker's feelings and thoughts, which does not afford space for opacity.<sup>14</sup> The latter part of this chapter maps a model of ethical listening as it emerges from my reading of *The Break*, where I assay the dangers of epistemic appropriation through unethical performances of empathy. Vermette creates a sense of intimacy with characters and enables reader empathy, even towards a hostile character like Phoenix. There is no justification for the atrocious crime she commits against Emily. But, the chapters focalised through Phoenix's introspection suggest the complexities that readers are forced to address: separation from her family and her mother's absence, abuse suffered as a child, experiences in foster care and juvenile detention, and the death of her sister. When she commits the crime, Phoenix is isolated, pregnant, and lacks a kinship web, despite the gang of girls she takes up with to commit a heinous attack. Phoenix is an outsider. Marjorie Celona suggests *The Break* is 'an astonishing act of empathy' because instead of 'easy answers' — and emphasis on a single victim and single perpetrator — it 'gives us the actual mess of life'.<sup>15</sup> I would expand on Celona's claim by suggesting that the novel invites readers to consider a model of empathy that is *ethical* because it acknowledges a horizon of context which extends beyond individual experience. In the words of Lou, in some ways a mouthpiece for Vermette, 'we can never feel all of someone else's pain, even a sister's' (289). Much more than a crime story, then, *The Break* contains family histories and stories of kinship; it is about women's strength and resilience, the safety and care they provide in the face of trauma, as well as the hurt they experience. It is a story about the complexities of Métis identity, racism and misogyny, isolation and belonging, vulnerability and power and, by extension, of how testimonial and hermeneutical injustice affect the reconciliation process in Canada.

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<sup>14</sup> Annie Coombes, 'Witnessing History/embodying Testimony: Gender and Memory in Post-Apartheid South Africa', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 17, Special issue (2011), 92.

<sup>15</sup> Celona, 'Review'.

## Reconciliation: Contextualising Epistemic Injustice

Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker is not believed due to negative stereotypes and prejudices held about a speaker and her social group. In the context of ‘reconciliation’, testimonial injustice affects the process of deciding financial compensation measures, such as the Independent Assessment Process (IAP). Through the IAP, which closed in 2012, former students could pursue claims of sexual abuse, physical abuse, or other serious injuries if they could prove that they suffered in this way whilst in a residential school. The IAP involves a ranking system which attributes points to determine reparations due and Indigenous peoples undergoing this process have said that ‘payment did not bring about a sense of validation’ because ‘parts of their stories were not believed by the adjudicating committee’.<sup>16</sup> At a public lecture in 2017, for example, Patricia Barkaskas (Métis) spoke of her personal experience of working as a lawyer and of expecting that, in ‘the spirit of the settlement agreement’ stories ‘were to be believed’, but she discerned that legal processes were less concerned with substantiating survivors’ stories and acting on them, and more with ‘trying to disprove them’.<sup>17</sup> Categorising, scrutinising, and corroborating stories of abuse — treated as evidence and tested for credibility — and then dismissing part or all of the testimony, framed the IAP as a site of colonial and epistemic injustice. To be found ‘not credible’ or ‘not reliable’ is, Barkaskas and Hunt contend, ‘a profound act of violence’ which reiterates the erasure of ‘personal, collective, and embodied experience’.<sup>18</sup> The underlying colonial assumption that Barkaskas identifies is that ‘experts’ are not Indigenous — even though Indigenous peoples are the only ‘true experts’ on their lived experience. This constitutes a form of epistemic injustice in the way that Abigail

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<sup>16</sup> Anne-Marie Reynaud, ‘Dealing with Difficult Emotions: Anger at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’, *Anthropologica*, 56.2 (2014), 372. Survivors have often described the IAP process as abusive; see Gaertner, *The Theatre of Regret*, 162, and Ronald Niezen, *Truth and Indignation: Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Indian Residential Schools* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 47.

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Barkaskas and Sarah Hunt, Institute for the Humanities, *Truth Before Reconciliation: Reframing/Resisting/Refusing Reconciliation*, YouTube, 20 March 2017,

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mB\\_7odACIpI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mB_7odACIpI) [accessed March 2021]

<sup>18</sup> Barkaskas and Hunt, *Truth Before Reconciliation*.

Gosselin suggests, when ‘a credible witness to first-person experience’ is not, by extension or automatically, also assumed to be ‘a credible third-person theorizer about that experience’.<sup>19</sup> The mode in which survivors’ stories were shared was deemed not to be reliable by adjudicators of their validity for monetary compensation. Barkaskas witnessed how survivors who ‘could not produce what were considered clear and concise memories of specific evidence’ had their claims dismissed because storytelling was not acknowledged as a valid form of truth-telling.<sup>20</sup> In this example, testimonial injustice is compounded by hermeneutical injustice.

Trystan Goetze suggests that hermeneutical injustice occurs when individuals who are marginalised, or are members of a marginalised group, have some ‘distinctive and important social experience that at some crucial moment lacks intelligibility’.<sup>21</sup> In Fricker’s terms, that ‘crucial moment’ occurs when ‘a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences’.<sup>22</sup> However, her account has been criticised for failing to acknowledge cases in which individuals within a marginalised group are able to make sense of their collective experience but their hermeneutical resources are ignored by the authorities that judge them.<sup>23</sup> For example, as Christine Koggel writes in the context of Canada’s TRC, ‘it is not that Indigenous peoples cannot make sense of their social experiences, but that the collective interpretative resources they call on make little or no sense to non-Indigenous Canadians’.<sup>24</sup> Restricting the format in

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<sup>19</sup> Abigail Gosselin, ‘Philosophizing from Experience: First-Person Accounts and Epistemic Justice’, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 50.1 (2019), 53.

<sup>20</sup> Barkaskas and Hunt, *Truth Before Reconciliation*.

<sup>21</sup> Trystan S. Goetze, ‘Hermeneutical Dissent and the Species of Hermeneutical Injustice’, *Hypatia*, 33.1 (2018), 79.

<sup>22</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 1. For Fricker’s revised account see ‘Epistemic Injustice and the Preservation of Ignorance’, in *The Epistemic Dimensions of Ignorance*, Rik Peels and Martijn Blaauw eds., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 163.

<sup>23</sup> See for example: Rebecca Mason, ‘Two Kinds of Unknowing’, *Hypatia*, 26 (2011): 294–307; José Medina, ‘The Relevance of Credibility Excess in a Proportional View of Epistemic Injustice: Differential Epistemic Authority and the Social Imaginary’, *Social Epistemology*, 25.1 (2011), 15–35; Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., ‘Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance’, *Hypatia*, 27 (2012): 715–35.

<sup>24</sup> Christine M. Koggel, ‘Epistemic Injustice in a Settler Nation: Canada’s History of Erasing, Silencing, Marginalizing’, *Journal of Global Ethics*, 14.2 (2018), 241.

which truths will be heard and accepted highlights a gap in intercommunal interpretation if settlers lack the hermeneutical resources to understand Indigenous forms of storytelling as reliable testimony.<sup>25</sup> More expressive styles of telling were restricted during the TRC's public sharing panels because 'preferred narratives' were encouraged according to TRC templates.<sup>26</sup> For example, artist Peter Morin (Tahltan) writes that TRC events left him feeling that his understanding of truth and reconciliation was 'not invited to the party'. As a result, he was driven to create a performative counter-monument that could afford opportunities for 'culturally based witnessing'.<sup>27</sup> Morin highlights the tensions that characterise the TRC because it makes room for Indigenous storytelling but also restricts the forms in which testimony should be supplied.<sup>28</sup>

That epistemic injustice affects 'reconciliation' through complex dynamics is not always evident in the work of the TRC, but what emerges from testimonies is a singular lack of trust in settler institutions. In TRC public panels, as well as testimonies made available on the Legacy of Hope Foundation website, former residential school students speak of how abuse generated a deep distrust in figures of authority that they carried into their adult lives. Tim Antoine, who attended Lejac Residential School in Fraser Lake, links his struggles with the police to his experience as a student: 'I hated people in uniforms. I don't know why, maybe it was because of the priests. I never trust anybody in a uniform. I always had trouble with cops.'

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<sup>25</sup> Emmalon Davis distinguishes between *intracommunal* hermeneutical resources, which are shared within a specific group, and *intercommunal* hermeneutical resources, which are shared across different communities in 'On Epistemic Appropriation', *Ethics*, 128.4 (2018), 703.

<sup>26</sup> Niezen, *Truth and Indignation*, 68.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Morin, 'this is what happens when we perform the memory of the land', *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action In and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin eds., (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 69, 71.

<sup>28</sup> Julia V. Emberley suggests that 'the production of residential school testimony' emerging through the work of the TRC 'is not entirely disconnected from the cultural production of Indigenous storytelling', and Christine Koggel interprets the work of the TRC as positively contributing to the expansion of hermeneutical resources as a result of its focus on survivors' testimonies, arguing that '[a]cknowledging these as collective interpretative resources can better achieve the kind of reconciliation called for'. While this may be true to some extent, TRC spaces are also informed and restricted by hermeneutical constructions that sustain the settler state, as Morin's account suggests. Julia V. Emberley, *The Testimonial Uncanny: Indigenous Storytelling, Knowledge, and Reparative Practices* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2014), 56. Christine Koggel, 'Epistemic Injustice in a Settler Nation', 246.

I think it happened because of residential school’.<sup>29</sup> Brent Burnstick, who spoke at a TRC sharing panel in Alberta in 2013, shared his belief that ‘the residential school era is still here today... it’s in our own tribes, leaders, in our education system, in our government [...] and these are individuals who are supposed to take care of others?’<sup>30</sup> Relations of trust are necessarily fraught if people in positions of power endanger the lives of those whom they should protect by failing to listen to them.<sup>31</sup> Witnesses at the MMIWG National Inquiry consistently denounced institutions that purport to help and protect all citizens, notably the police, hospitals, schools, and the justice system, because they repeatedly fail Indigenous peoples.<sup>32</sup> Even public commissions designed for redress like the TRC and MMIWG inquiry have sometimes left testifiers feeling as if they are ‘on trial’.<sup>33</sup> Protection, trust, and the lack thereof, emerge as narrative threads in *The Break*.

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<sup>29</sup> Tim Antoine, Where Are the Children, *The Legacy of Hope Foundation*, <https://legacyofhope.ca/wherearethekids/stories/antoine/> [accessed August 2021]

<sup>30</sup> National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR) Archive, University of Manitoba, Part SP116\_part15 - Brent Burnstick, [https://archives.nctr.ca/SP116\\_part15](https://archives.nctr.ca/SP116_part15). Burnstick’s intervention suggests that the lack of trust many Indigenous peoples feel extends from settler society into their own Indigenous communities. Anishinaabeg scholar Amy Bombay and her co-authors analyse mistrust of their communities as an effect of student-to-student abuse in residential schools, summarising: ‘Staff abuse might have undermined levels of trust towards people in authority positions and non-Indigenous people in general, but by fostering abuse from their peers, staff practices made children more likely to mistrust other Indigenous people’. This is consistent with what Emma LaRocque calls a ‘spectrum of betrayal’, often felt as the ‘disloyalty of kin and community in looking the other way’ or participating in violence, as well as the ‘betrayal of “coldstone Canada” for creating the conditions’. LaRocque identifies betrayal as a less discussed legacy of colonialism which permeates Indigenous women’s writings. Many of the texts analysed in this thesis depict forms of betrayal where Indigenous characters are victims of abuse at the hands of members of family (*Birdie* and *Heart Berries*) or their community (Shelley in *Celia’s Song* and Emily in *The Break*). Kimberly Matheson, Amy Bombay, S. Alexander Haslam, and Hymie Anisman, ‘Indigenous Identity Transformations: The Pivotal Role of Student-to-Student Abuse in Indian Residential Schools’, *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 53.5 (2016), 561. Emma LaRocque, ‘Here Are Our Voices — Who Will Hear?’, *Writing the Circle: Native Women of Western Canada*, Jeanne Perreault and Sylvia Vance eds., (Edmonton, AB: NeWest Publishers, 1991), xxix.

<sup>31</sup> Vanessa Corado, a witness at the MMIWG National Inquiry, makes this link clear when she shares the feeling that the police ‘think they can do whatever they want and not listen to you’ which, she stresses, ‘makes me trust them so much less’. *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, Community Hearings, Edmonton, Alberta, [November 9, 2017-Part I Vol 24](https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/transcripts/), <https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/transcripts/>

<sup>32</sup> This is summarised by Commissioner Qajaq Robinson when he states, ‘We’ve heard from a lot of families that they don’t trust schools. They don’t trust hospitals. They don’t trust police. And, I just want to say to all those listening, all those Canadians who are listening and going, “Why don’t you trust the police? Why don’t you trust teachers? Why don’t you trust doctors? They’re there to help.” What you’ve heard today is that for Indigenous families in your communities, they were not there to help’. *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, Community Hearings, Montreal, Québec, [March 13, 2018-Part I Vol 63](https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/transcripts/), <https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/transcripts/>

<sup>33</sup> Terri Szabo’s critique of the MMIWG inquiry is that ‘it feels like you’re on trial here’. Paul Daniels, testifying in relation to his relative Nicole Ashley Daniels, said ‘as I listen here today and I feel that she’s on

## Negligence by Police and in Hospitals

The novel begins with an instance of testimonial injustice as credibility deficit when police officers — a senior white officer named Christie, accompanied by Tommy who is Métis — interview Stella but do not trust her judgment about the nature of the crime she has witnessed nor respect her as a rational informant. Condescendingly, Christie even excludes Stella by turning to her white husband Jeff to explain that in his view the crime ‘just doesn’t look like a sexual assault’, despite Stella stating repeatedly, ‘it was rape. Someone *was* raped’ (13). This kind of silencing involves the exercising of ‘identity power’: Stella is not believed because she is an Indigenous woman. Christie invokes the misogynistic myth of hysterical women when suggesting to Tommy that Stella is ‘just a crazy bitch’ whose testimony is worthless (70). Christie’s dismissal is directly linked to racist stereotypes of Indigenous peoples whom he calls ‘[d]ime a dozen’ (70). Christie is patronising but purports to hide his prejudice behind ‘the facts’: that ‘there was a broken beer bottle at the scene’, that drinking and blood suggest a gang fight, and that sexual assaults ‘don’t usually happen in the cold’ (13). Supported by what he assumes to be infallible logic, Christie dismisses Stella’s account, not with the racist comments that he disperses when she is not present but by alluding to her inability to maintain objectivity and rationality: ‘It was probably very violent. It’s common to... panic’ (13). Jeff also risks pathologising Stella when he suggests that ‘with [her] past’, she ‘could’ve been just dreaming’ or even ‘confused’ (15). Although Stella states defiantly that she is neither crazy nor mistaken, the distorted perception of her projected by Christie and Jeff imposes itself and she begins to doubt herself, allowing that she may be mistaken after all because it was ‘so dark’ and she is ‘so tired’ (13). Stella is forced to question her capacity to provide a reasoned account. She experiences testimonial injustice — as does Tommy when he asserts that the case requires more

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trial, why is that? Why do I feel that? Is she on trial?’, *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, Community Hearings. Whitehorse, Yukon, [May 30, 2017-Part I Vol 1](#), and Winnipeg, Manitoba [October 16, 2017-Part I Vol 9](#), <https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/transcripts/>

attention than Christie is giving it and is ridiculed for taking an intuitive approach. Christie teases Tommy for his ‘in-stinked’, where ‘stink’ is used figuratively to suggest that Tommy’s instinctual knowledge is not only of poor quality but also reeks of Métis collusion. Christie denies Tommy his authority as a competent knower or interpreter as a police officer. Vermette’s focus on Stella’s doubts and the brakes that Christie puts on Tommy performing his job expose key elements of epistemic injustice as an everyday occurrence in the context of a criminal investigation.

Although it initially appears that Tommy may distrust Stella’s account, subsequent chapters emphasise his willingness to believe that she has witnessed a rape. On the one hand, Tommy appears to be motivated by a desire to reclaim his epistemic authority, to the extent that, after hearing Stella’s testimony, he listens for reports of sexual assault on the radio ‘hoping for it, just to prove the old guy [Christie] wrong’ (72). On the other hand, as a result of suffering testimonial injustice himself, he may be motivated to correct prejudiced credibility judgments. Tommy may think that Stella’s testimony ‘doesn’t sound like the truth’ but he suspends his judgement and comes to the informed conclusion that she is ‘not lying’ (78). He recalls that his mother Marie ‘always lied when the police came to their house’ because she could not trust them, and with ‘*reflexive* critical social awareness’, considers the impact of his identity as a police officer on Stella’s ability to trust him.<sup>34</sup> While Tommy and Christie evaluate Stella’s trustworthiness, Stella evaluates their reliability, whether they listen and attend. Christie demonstrates apathy and disdain by not looking at Stella while she speaks but instead studying her home ‘like he’s trying to find evidence of something’ (7). In contrast, Tommy observes Stella, asks her questions directly, and carefully takes notes of what she says. Nevertheless, Stella perceives Tommy’s involvement as a ‘practiced sympathy’ and initially judges it as ‘fake’ (8). Whereas Christie seems ‘bored’, Tommy is ‘eager, maybe even excited’ (8). These

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<sup>34</sup> The term is used by Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 91.

contrasting behaviours, of apathy and eagerness, result in Stella feeling that both officers are ‘trying to trip her up’ (11).

Tommy is not perceived as trustworthy by the Indigenous women who are Emily’s close relatives either. As a police officer he makes them suspicious, which Vermette represents as understandable given the history of abusive policing and failure to protect Indigenous peoples in Canada. The epidemic of MMIWG2S is one example, but Vermette also has direct experience of police apathy which she addresses in ‘indians’ in *North End Love Songs* (2012). The poem communicates Vermette’s anger over the tragic disappearance of her brother Donovan in 1991: ‘indians go missing / they tell the family [...] / blue suits shrug / no sense looking’.<sup>35</sup> In 2014, Vermette shared the feeling in an interview that the police ‘didn’t understand’ and that her brother’s disappearance ‘wasn’t taken seriously’. The police did not investigate and her family received ‘no reassurance from outside their community that the situation was real’. Donovan’s body was discovered by accident six months later.<sup>36</sup> In *The Break*, Vermette depicts Tommy as having ‘a certain belief in the system’ that she does not share because she ‘only saw contention’ between the police and Indigenous peoples.<sup>37</sup> Tommy is disappointed that the job is not what he expects it to be: he thought he would be ‘always in action’ and involved in community engagement, but he only ‘takes notes, makes reports’ and ‘never does anything about them. Incidents become reports [which] become just words on a screen [...] filed away’ (76). Vermette makes explicit her social commentary on police negligence, empty gestures and words, empty apologies and promises of reconciliation. For Tommy, ‘this case is different’ and he comes to believe that he has ‘never done anything so important’ (221). Committed to bringing justice to bear and to not let Métis stories become

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<sup>35</sup> Katherena Vermette, *North End Love Songs* (Winnipeg, MB: The Muse’s Company, 2012), 90.

<sup>36</sup> Katherena Vermette interviewed for CBC Radio, ‘A broken family: Katherena Vermette’s life changed when her brother disappeared’, *CBC*, 9 May 2014, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/dnto/a-broken-family-katherena-vermette-s-life-changed-when-her-brother-disappeared-1.2802859> [accessed May 2021]

<sup>37</sup> Vermette interviewed by Fischer Guy, ‘These Characters Affected My Core’.

mere ‘words on a screen’, he also fears that ‘[t]his could be his last chance before he’s back to breaking up three-day parties and the other usual Sunday night things’ (76, 223). Tommy expects the job to be about ‘breaking down doors’ and wants his girlfriend Hannah to think he is ‘tough’, but this complex and challenging case ushers in a sense of responsibility to protect the Indigenous community and is a reminder of how institutions can fail in that regard (222).

Each of the four parts of *The Break* is preceded by a short prologue from the perspective of an unnamed woman who addresses Stella and guides her. Readers begin to be able to identify the voice as that of Stella’s mother Rain (Lorrain), whose death haunts the family and evokes connections with the latest tragedy, the criminal assault on Emily.<sup>38</sup> By including the perspective of an Indigenous woman who has died, Vermette creates an impression of participatory ancestral witnessing, which Peter Morin describes as ancestors ‘guiding and shaping the process’ of ‘shatter[ing] colonial spaces’ while ‘reinforc[ing] ancient memory’ and ‘indigenous history as a guiding creative force’.<sup>39</sup> In *The Break*, Rain’s voice is heard briefly and sporadically but her presence permeates the novel. Her story emerges through Stella and involves several forms of injustice — colonial, gendered, racial, and epistemic. After she is raped and beaten during a night out, Rain seeks help at a hospital but medical staff judge that she is drunk and has ‘made her own head injury’, and decide she should wait (272). Unheard and uncared for, Rain tries to walk home but loses consciousness and freezes to death. Rain’s story echoes what has happened to Indigenous women who seek help and assistance but are maltreated, blamed, not believed, and sometimes die. In September 2020, for example, Joyce Echaquan, a 37-year-old Atikamekw woman died at a hospital in Joliette, Québec, and the

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<sup>38</sup> Tracey Lindberg’s *Birdie*, which I analyse in Chapter 3 alongside Terese Marie Mailhot’s *Heart Berries*, also opens on the perspective of a dead mother. Like Lindberg and Mailhot, Vermette dedicates her novel to her mother and ‘those who have been lost’ as well as ‘those who have found a way through’.

<sup>39</sup> These are Morin’s descriptors in ‘this is what happens’ 78.

circumstances were broadcast on social media.<sup>40</sup> A video, showing Echaquan screaming in distress and pleading with hospital staff for help, shows her being ignored, insulted, and subjected to racist slurs by nurses in her final moments alive.<sup>41</sup> Vermette's imagined story also reverberates with that of sixteen-year-old Nicole Ashley Daniels of the Sagkeeng First Nation, as recounted by her family at the MMIWG Winnipeg public hearing in 2017. In 2009, Nicole was found frozen in an alley in Winnipeg, her clothes partially removed. Nicole's grandmother, Joan Winning, told commissioners that the police dismissed the concerns expressed by Nicole's mother and told her that the case was 'closed' because Nicole 'froze to death'. The autopsy report revealed that several assumptions were made by police and medical staff because Nicole was an Indigenous woman. It was assumed that Nicole 'had a history of drug and alcohol abuse' and that she 'may have been under the influence of benzodiazepines, which she would have taken from her mother'. Despite the autopsy revealing that Nicole had abrasions and contusions, which would suggest a fight, for the coroner that her clothes were partially removed suggested 'paradoxical undressing due to hypothermia'. Her family testified that, the night before, Nicole had gone out with an older man she met on a telephone chat line and denounced the incompetency of Winnipeg police for failing to investigate despite knowing his identity and connection to the case. Nicole's aunt, Isabel Winning, expressed her belief that the Winnipeg Police considered her possible assailant 'an upstanding citizen in our community' but that Nicole was viewed otherwise: 'What was she to society? Nothing? Like the 1,200 other

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<sup>40</sup> Benjamin Shingler, 'Investigations launched after Atikamekw woman records Quebec hospital staff uttering slurs before her death', *CBC News*, 29 September 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/quebec-atikamekw-joliette-1.5743449> [accessed 01 April 2021]

<sup>41</sup> Echaquan recorded the events and broadcast them in an attempt to increase awareness. Without her video evidence, this tragic story would have been hidden from her family and the general public, and the hospital staff would not have been held accountable. Other women survive similar experiences and tell their stories but, without evidence, they are not believed. Women shared similar stories at the MMIWG National Inquiry. Maggie Gisle spoke of when she was treated as a drug addict and kicked out of hospitals. Barbara Sevigny attested that 'doctors think we're complainers'. Nancy Weinhert linked Indigenous people's disappearances to negligence in hospitals. *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, Community Hearings. Vancouver, British Columbia, [April 7, 2018-Part I Vol 107](#), Maggy (Margaret) Gisle. Montreal, Québec, [March 14, 2018-Part I Vol 65](#), Barbara Sevigny. Vancouver, British Columbia, [April 7, 2018-Part I Vol 109](#), Nancy Weinhert. <https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/transcripts/>

Aboriginal women that are murdered and missing?’<sup>42</sup> Witnesses at MMIWG inquiry hearings have consistently emphasised how police, hospital staff, and the courts neglect the human and civil rights of Indigenous women, girls, and gender diverse people, and blame them for the abuse they suffer, that families are not believed, and too often the system protects the perpetrators instead of seeking justice for the victims.<sup>43</sup>

In the novel, as for testimonies outside of it, women’s experiences of violence are not represented accurately or sensitively in the media. When they are covered as news, Indigenous women are objectified and the violence they suffer sensationalised. In her study of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, for example, Elisha Corbett (Irish-Cherokee) assesses that Indigenous women receive ‘disproportionately less media coverage’ than non-Indigenous women and that it is ‘overwhelmingly more negative in tone’.<sup>44</sup> She emphasises that Indigenous

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<sup>42</sup> *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, Community Hearings. Winnipeg, Manitoba, [October 16, 2017-Part I Vol 9](https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/transcripts/), Joan Winning, Isabel Winning & Stephanie Daniels, <https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/transcripts/>

<sup>43</sup> Countless instances appear in the testimonial archive of the MMIWG inquiry. Cheryl MacDonald testifies that the police talk women out of pressing charges. Lillian Cook attests that the police convinced her not to charge the man who raped her because she would not be believed. Juanita Desjarlais makes clear her view that the police ‘didn’t believe me, yet they believed the perpetrator’. Carol Quagon testifies to being kidnapped and assaulted as a teenager; she escaped and reported it to the police but they put her in a straightjacket. Anni Phillips talks of how Indigenous peoples are treated by the police as if sub-human, and of how families refrain from asking for a crime to be investigated because they are afraid of being abused by the police. Gail Cyr believes suicides and self-harm result from the fact that Indigenous peoples are not believed. For multiple sources including these, see *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, Community Hearings. Winnipeg, Manitoba, [October 16, 2017-Part I Vol 9](https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/transcripts/), Isabel Winning. Montreal, Québec, [March 12, 2018-Part I Vol 59](https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/transcripts/), Cheryl McDonald. Thompson, Manitoba, [March 20, 2018-Part I Vol 73](https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/transcripts/), Lillian Cook. Vancouver, British Columbia, [April 4, 2018-Part I Vol 87](https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/transcripts/), Juanita Desjarlais. Thunder Bay, Ontario, [December 4, 2017-Part I Vol 37](https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/transcripts/), Carol Quagon. Vancouver, British Columbia, [April 4, 2018-Part I Vol 80](https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/transcripts/), Anni Phillips. Yellowknife, North West Territories, [January 25, 2018-Part I Vol 43](https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/transcripts/), Gail Cyr.

<sup>44</sup> Elisha Corbett, ‘No News Isn’t Always Good News: Media Representation of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women in Canada’, *Academia EDU*, 2019, 1. Corbett’s study is limited to an analysis of articles published before 2010 because she assumes that media frames in Canada changed following the TRC and MMIWG National Inquiry, but further research is needed to ascertain the truth of this. In the US state of Wyoming, the disappearance in September 2021 of Gabby Petito, a 22-year-old non-Indigenous woman, sparked a national outcry that has rendered even more evident the gap in media representation between white and Indigenous women. A report documents that 710 Indigenous peoples, mostly women and children, went missing in Wyoming in the last decade, yet none received such a significant amount of attention from the media and general public. Kelsey Vlamis, ‘710 Indigenous people, mostly girls, were reported missing over the last decade in Wyoming, the same state where Gabby Petito reportedly disappeared’, *Insider*, 19 September 2021, <https://www.insider.com/710-indigenous-people-missing-in-wyoming-where-gabby-petito-disappeared-2021-9> See also Emily A. Grant, Lena Dechert, Laurel Wimbish, and Andria Blackwood. *Missing and Murdered Indigenous People: Statewide Report Wyoming*, Wyoming Survey and Analysis Centre, University of Wyoming, 2020, <https://wysac.uwyo.edu/wysac/reports/View/7713>

women are framed as ‘high-risk’ individuals who ‘choose to engage in precarious behaviour’.<sup>45</sup> Assumptions are made about Indigenous women who live in poverty and may have a history of alcohol or drug abuse. Vermette makes Rain an addict to expose how the media ‘perpetuates a narrative that violence against Indigenous women is a result of individual choice, rather than social and structural inequalities’.<sup>46</sup> In this regard, *The Break* echoes Indigenous women forced to remind the courts that ‘the problems that we suffer [do not] warrant an early death sentence’.<sup>47</sup> As a child, Stella learns the details of her mother’s final night alive from a newspaper article’s raw description of Rain’s body, found ‘behind a dumpster’ with ‘her pants around her ankles’, and a grainy picture of the location (271). Her mother is made an object and it traumatises her. At the MMIWG hearing in Edmonton, Joanne Ahenakew testified to how the media framed her aunt as a prostitute and sensationalised a violent crime with similar gory details: ‘I was just a kid at the time, but I remember her bloody, knife-torn clothing being displayed on the news. That image stayed with me since then. It traumatized me [...] What purpose did it serve? None. This was only the beginning of the media circus that began and brought more suffering and pain to an already difficult situation’.<sup>48</sup> By representing Indigenous women as battered and sexualised bodies, the media participates in cycles of violence that Vermette puts under scrutiny in this novel. Objectification leads to invisibility because the falsified construction of Indigenous women is naturalised, but violence is rendered as hypervisible and thus acceptable. The ways in which media shapes interpretive resources is described by Corbett as ‘heuristics’ that work as a ‘distorted mirror’.<sup>49</sup> Vermette emphasises

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<sup>45</sup> Elisha Corbett, ‘No News Isn’t Always Good News’, 1.

<sup>46</sup> Corbett, ‘No News Isn’t Always Good News’, 7.

<sup>47</sup> Isabel Winning in Community Hearings. Winnipeg, Manitoba.

<sup>48</sup> *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, Community Hearings. Edmonton, Alberta, [November 9, 2017-Part I Vol 24](#), Vanessa Corado, Muriel Whiteman, Joanne Ahenakew.

Drawing from her work on pornography, Fricker quotes Catharine MacKinnon on objectification as a component of testimonial injustice: ‘Objects do not speak. When they do, they are by then regarded as objects, not as humans, which is what it means to have no credibility’, Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 139.

<sup>49</sup> Corbett, ‘No News Isn’t Always Good News’, 5.

how the medical negligence suffered by Rain and her objectification in the media are connected by a common ‘tracker prejudice’ which reinforces ‘credibility deflation’.<sup>50</sup> The dehumanising of Indigenous women enforces an identity-prejudice which leads to other forms of violence, and the cycle continues.<sup>51</sup>

### **Métis Identity and Hermeneutical Marginalisation**

Rain is tragically affected by epistemic injustice, but all Indigenous characters suffer its effects to some degree. Stella and Tommy are marginalised from white society and estranged from their Indigenous families. After marrying Jeff, Stella drifts away from her grandmother Flora, her aunt Cheryl, and her cousins Lou and Paulina with whom she lives after the death of her mother — a separation that Vermette suggests is not a courageous act of independence, but an effect of childhood trauma that further weakens Stella.<sup>52</sup> Emily’s tragedy is the trigger for Stella to reconnect with the women in her family so that she may begin to heal. Tommy is even more disconnected from his Indigenous heritage because as a child, he is forced by his white father, a violent and racist man, to hide that he is Métis. As an adult, he continues to do so, partly because his white girlfriend Hannah discriminates against him in more subtle ways. Tommy reveals his Indigenous identity for the first time in his application to join the police, but it is in

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<sup>50</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 29, 160.

<sup>51</sup> Vermette portrays cycles of violence that revisit upon women, while male predators remain out of the picture. In Part Four of the novel, readers learn that fifteen-year-old Phoenix is pregnant by Clayton, an older boy who lures Emily to a party and does nothing when Phoenix, blinded by jealousy, attacks her there. Despite his clearly predatory tendencies, Clayton remains at the fringes of the novel and of the investigation. He is protected by Emily who refuses to give his name to the police, and he is safe from Phoenix who, in a fit of jealousy, directs her anger towards Emily instead. When the rape is described in graphic details at the end of the novel, it is made to mirror the abuse of Phoenix’s mother Elsie, whose story comes together slowly via different narrators and most fully as recounted by Stella, her best friend. Elsie is sexually abused at a house party by a group of white men, a crime witnessed by Stella who is unable to intervene (202). When Phoenix and her gang attack Emily, her head is ‘pushed’ down ‘into the snow’, while Elsie’s face is ‘pressed down’ on a bed by a man’s ‘large hand’; their attackers deny their humanity by turning them into faceless objects (308, 202). A chain of violence links Elsie, Stella, Phoenix, and Emily and is based on iterative violent acts in the exercise of power. It is cyclical violence that starts with abusive white men but is perpetuated against women. Rarely do writers turn to revenge but in the play *Deer Woman* (2019) by Tara Beagan (Ntlaka’pamux), violence is directed back towards men. The main character Lila, a Blackfoot woman, avenges the death of her sister by mutilating and then killing the man she suspects has abused and killed her. Tara Beagan, *Deer Woman*, Summerhall, Canada Hub, Edinburgh Fringe Festival, August 2019.

<sup>52</sup> Vermette interviewed by Fischer Guy, ‘These Characters Affected My Core’.

the course of the investigation and through interaction with Indigenous women that he begins to reconnect with his heritage, despite Hannah exhibiting ‘no desire to understand’ a crime against Métis people and preferring him to forget it and enjoy ‘nice Sunday dinners and pleasant conversation’ (223). Described by Vermette as ‘fragile and innocent’, Hannah makes utterly dehumanising jokes about ‘her man’s wild ways’ and ‘how she tamed him’ (74, 77). In more subtle ways, Hannah is made to echo Tommy’s father’s aggressiveness towards his wife, but whereas he shamelessly humiliates Marie as his ‘wild’ and ‘discounted’ wife whom he got ‘off the reservation for cheap’, Hannah’s strain of neocolonial racism hides behind jokes and Tommy justifies her behaviour because he believes, or chooses to believe, that ‘she mean[s] well’ (77, 73). It may also be assumed that Hannah’s racism is less a symptom of her own beliefs and more the result of ‘stealthier residual prejudices’ in a ‘well-intentioned liberal society’ which, as Fricker also emphasises, is where ‘we find the most surreptitious and philosophically complex forms of testimonial injustice’.<sup>53</sup> Structural discrimination as embedded in Canadian law is configured in the story of how Tommy’s grandmother, an Anishinaabe woman, loses ‘Indian status’ when she marries a Métis man.<sup>54</sup> Even if his grandmother were to retain status and pass it on to her daughter, Marie would have ‘lost it again’ when she married a white man because ‘[t]hey did that back then. If you were a woman and married outside your community, they just took away your status card’ (73). In the novel, Vermette alludes to the oppressive *Indian Act* which, for more than a hundred years, beginning in 1876, determined who was ‘Indian’ in a way that was unilateral — Indigenous peoples were not consulted in the process — and discriminatory — especially towards women who would either gain status when they married a registered First Nation man or lose it when they married

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<sup>53</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 58.

<sup>54</sup> I am led to believe that Tommy’s grandmother is Anishinaabe because Tommy takes Ojibwe language classes. As Aubrey Hanson remarks, Vermette ‘resists explicit labels, taxonomies, or division, relying on implicit cues about characters’ positionings or experiences rather than explaining them clearly for readers’. Aubrey Hanson, ‘Holding Home Together: Katherena Vermette’s *The Break*’, *Canadian Literature*, 237, (2019), 28.

a non-Indigenous man or an Indigenous man without status. With Bill C-31 in 1985, the *Indian Act* was amended to remedy the gender discrimination that had caused Indigenous women — represented by Tommy’s mother and grandmother in the novel — to lose their status. Tommy suggests that he could obtain status through his mother, as other members of his family have done, but Hannah tells him not to bother, and that ‘Métis is good enough’ (74).

Vermette articulates a keen socio-political critique in *The Break* by suggesting the convoluted web of misconceptions surrounding Métis identity, including issues of blood quantum, status and membership cards, and benefits. It appears that none of the white characters has a clear understanding of what ‘Métis’ means, even when living and working closely with individuals and groups who identify as Métis. Rather than employing the term as a socio-political category indicating an Indigenous group with a distinct cultural and national identity, the white characters use it as a racial category — derived from the French term *métis* (meaning ‘mixed’) — to indicate someone who is not fully First Nations. Hannah and Christie also restate widespread myths and misconstructions about ‘Indian status’ and believe that anyone who identifies as Indigenous automatically receives a status card. ‘Indian status’ is not the same as Indigenous identity but rather ‘an administrative category created and applied by the federal government of Canada’ and only held by First Nations who are registered as ‘Indians’ under the *Indian Act*.<sup>55</sup> As Chelsea Vowel writes with irony, a status card is often seen by settlers as ‘a magical relic bestowing upon the bearer: tax exemptions, free gas, new trucks, houses, and pretty much anything else’.<sup>56</sup> When Tommy applies for the police position, and Hannah encourages him to state that he is Métis and to obtain a card which, she believes, may afford him ‘a tax break’, Christie informs him bitterly, ‘your special treatment ends here’ (74, 73). Hannah and Christie both believe that a Métis card is the same as a status card, but

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<sup>55</sup> Vowel, *Indigenous Writes*, 25.

<sup>56</sup> Vowel, *Indigenous Writes*, 25.

the card that Tommy requests is a membership card for a provincial Métis organisation and does not include the limited benefits that status entails.<sup>57</sup> He explains to Hannah, ‘in terms she’d understand’ and that betray his belief that he is afforded only sub-status, that ‘Status is Indian, Métis is just Métis — half-breeds’ (74). The different imaginaries associated with status First Nations living on reserves and urban Métis are addressed when Lou idealises her First Nation boyfriend who has left her to live in ‘a real house in a real community with a real family. Real Indians! Not city half-breeds like us’ (42). Such spurious dichotomies take shape in conversations between Métis women — urban/rural, Métis/First Nation, and women/men — because in the novel men are associated with the reserves, rural areas, extended families, and traditional ways, while women have a ‘city childhood and little family,’ and are ‘so small and wrecked’ (42). Vermette has said that many Métis share the feeling that they are ‘not enough’.<sup>58</sup> Marginalisation from both settler and First Nations communities explains, at least in part, the feeling of not belonging that is pervasive for Métis characters.<sup>59</sup> When Christie confides to his white colleagues that he does not expect Tommy to be a good worker because he is Métis, another white officer says, ‘they will surprise you [...] Not full-blooded Indians or anything. Good little horses them May-tee [Métis]’ (72). The offensive comparison is revealing of the officers’ ignorance, not least because Métis *are* an Indigenous people, and Vermette ensures that readers are forced to examine blood quantum as a colonial and racist construction that feeds into the police service. She also highlights that blood quantum is a settler construction: Tommy’s mother tells him, ‘it was the white people who made a big deal about how much

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<sup>57</sup> There is a narrow tax exemption for registered First Nations which only applies to personal property and income located on a reserve. For a more substantial discussion on status and the ‘Myth of Taxation’ see Chelsea Vowel, *Indigenous Writes*, 135-142.

<sup>58</sup> Vermette interviewed by Fischer Guy, ‘These Characters Affected My Core’.

<sup>59</sup> In the poem ‘Leather and Naughahyde’ from the collection *A Really Good Brown Girl* (1996) by Cree-Métis poet Marilyn Dumont, the Métis narrator expresses the rejection and objectification felt while interacting with a ‘treaty guy’, a First Nation man who makes her feel inferior and not authentically Indigenous: ‘I say I’m Métis like it’s an apology and he says, “mmh,” like he forgives me, like he’s got a big heart and mine’s pumping diluted blood’, as if ‘he’s leather and I’m naughahyde’. Marilyn Dumont, *A Really Good Brown Girl* (London, ON: Brick Books, 2015), 77.

Indian you were, but Indians never cared as much. They welcomed all their family into the family, even if you were only half the same colour as them' (300). Indigenous scholars Kim TallBear (Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate) and J. Kēhaulani Kauanui (Kanaka Maoli) undertake robust critique of blood discourses derived from colonial models of Indigeneity that are rooted in the nineteenth-century anthropological imaginaries and imperial logic.<sup>60</sup> In *The Break*, Vermette depicts them as alive in contemporary Winnipeg's North End. Blood quantum objectifies Indigenous peoples whose humanity is dissected, quantified, and catalogued, and objectification precedes speech; the Indigenous person's body becomes a source of information which automatically generates a deflation of credibility.

Vermette details interactions between Christie and Tommy that are marked by racist projections that distort Tommy's self-perception.<sup>61</sup> He feels 'suddenly dirty' when he first meets Christie and their encounter makes him think, 'I'll always just be a half-breed, half of both sides' (73, 299). 'May-tee', a caricatured pronunciation of 'Métis', is a label used like a barbed epithet that reduces Tommy to an essentialised identity and is imbued with a cohort of deleterious images about Indigenous peoples contained in a jokey façade. By the end of their investigation, Christie congratulates Tommy on solving the case and finally acknowledges his competence, and Tommy takes the opportunity to ask Christie not to call him 'May-tee' anymore, but insults continue to mark their conversation: 'it's not like I think of you like you're those Nates out there' because 'you're different' (296). He patronises him as a 'good kid' who is 'even getting to be a decent cop' (296). Tommy knows these are 'compliments laced with insults' and Christie's closing and condescending remark that 'nicknames don't mean shit

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<sup>60</sup> Kim TallBear, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and The False Promise of Genetic Science* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, *Hawaiian Blood: Colonialism and The Politics of Sovereignty and Indigeneity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008). Jenny Reardon and Kim TallBear, "'Your DNA Is Our History'" Genomics, Anthropology, and the Construction of Whiteness as Property', *Current Anthropology*, 53 Special issue 5 (2012), 237.

<sup>61</sup> Fricker suggests that prejudice against a speaker affects a 'category of social identity' that is 'essential to who he is', *Epistemic Injustice*, 54.

around here’ is reasoned from his privileged perspective (296). Being called ‘Whitey’ for Christie ‘makes no difference’ because his epistemic authority is never questioned: Christie is ‘a man used to being listened to’ (295, 126).

Tommy finds passing as non-Indigenous ‘easier’ because it allows him to be perceived as trustworthy and reliable in a prejudiced society (301). Stating his Métis identity in his application to serve as a police officer means that ‘everyone’ will know ‘what’ he is, and when they do indeed treat him differently he feels ‘more... Indian’ (301).<sup>62</sup> This is a concern that has been voiced by Indigenous witnesses, like Kim McPherson in a public hearing in Winnipeg in 2017, when testifying that ‘it doesn’t matter if you’re a parliamentarian’ or ‘just an average person’, knowledge and expertise are made irrelevant ‘[i]f you’re Indigenous’.<sup>63</sup> Métis characters in *The Break* navigate such impositions each time they face epistemic marginalisation. Stella is a university graduate, Lou a social worker, Paulina a nurse, and Tommy a police officer, but despite education or professional expertise, they are not trusted as carriers of knowledge.<sup>64</sup> The credibility deflation reinforced by the label May-tee affects Tommy profoundly, but Christie’s remark that he is ‘different’ even more so. He asks his mother, if ‘I’m not a real Indian’, then ‘I’m just in between? I’m not like anybody?’ (301). Marie helps him to realise that it is not checking a box in a job application or being treated differently by white people that affords connection to his Indigenous heritage, but his

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<sup>62</sup> Structural prejudice amounts to objectification in the way that Elizabeth Anderson identifies ‘a practice whereby a dominant group (a) views a subordinate group as inherently fit for serving its desires and (b) enforces that view by assigning the subordinate group to servile roles, and denying it access to alternative roles’, ‘The Epistemology of Justice’, *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 58.1 (2020), 14.

<sup>63</sup> At another public hearing, Sylvia Murphy shares that she only stated that she was Mi’kmaw after she got a government job, and she found out that ‘[it] doesn’t matter today if you’re a lawyer or a doctor’ because ‘if you’re Mi’kmaw, if you’re Indigenous’, then ‘you’re always last on the list’. *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*, Community Hearings. Winnipeg, Manitoba, [October 16, 2017-Part I Vol 9](#), Kim McPherson. Happy Valley Goose Bay, Newfoundland, [March 8, 2018-Part I Vol 56](#), Sylvia Murphy.

<sup>64</sup> In this light, Stella’s decision at the end of the novel to resume her academic career is an instance of ‘epistemic courage’ that Stella acquires through reconnecting with her family. She is encouraged by her grandmother Flora who tells her ‘you can do anything’ and ‘you have always been a storyteller, a story keeper, a watcher’ (335). As a child, Stella listens to her cousins Lou’s and Paulina’s stories of abuse and internalises other women’s stories as a form of protection. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 49, 50.

relationships with other Métis. By building a professional relationship with the women in Emily's family Tommy is brought closer to a sense of belonging. He confides to Marie: 'I don't feel different from [...] any of them, any of you. I see them and they remind me of you, of your sisters, of me' (301). Marie's reply, 'they're your people', is powerful and helps Tommy to recover a sense of selfhood through inter-identification which leads him to rebuild his Indigenous kinship web, starting with a visit to his aunt.

Tommy and Stella long to be with their families because they know that with family members they will be believed and understood. Tommy regrets discussing the criminal case with Hannah who reduces complex dynamics to generalisations, whilst his mother 'really knows' because she shares similar experiences (223). Stella regrets not telephoning her Kookom or aunt Cheryl when she witnesses the crime; she knows they would have listened to her and 'yelled at the cops when they started acting like they didn't believe her' (15). Reconnection with Indigenous family is crucial for both Tommy's and Stella's (epistemic) confidence and helps them to navigate the (hermeneutical) gap they otherwise feel unable to bridge with the white people in their lives. In this novel Vermette appears more sceptical of interracial relationships than other writers examined in this thesis: even as Tommy tries to justify how Hannah behaves — she 'tries real hard' — he is forced to conclude that 'she just doesn't know', while Stella confides in her grandmother that Jeff 'just doesn't get it' and concludes, 'I don't know if I can be with someone who doesn't understand' (302, 334). The white characters in *The Break* are oblivious to these quotidian feelings and, in my reading, commit acts of epistemic injustice on the people they purport to love most. Marie tries to impress on Tommy that 'you can't do nothing with stupid. Can't fix it... You just go on being who you are. They can't change you', and Flora tells Stella that although Jeff 'understands in his own way', Stella can choose to be alone 'and that will be fine' (300, 334). Ethical listening, as analysed in Chapter 1 in relation to *Celia's Song*, is a 'pro-active and more socially aware

kind of listening' because it involves 'listening as much to what is not said as to what is said'.<sup>65</sup> It emerges differently in *The Break* and is suggested through Tommy's engagement with the Métis women.

### **Ethical Listening and Dimensions of Empathy**

In an interview with Métis scholar Aubrey Jean Hanson, Vermette emphasised the role of empathy as a tool for fostering learning and relationship-building. Settlers, Vermette argues, have 'never been taught to be empathetic toward Indigenous people' but may begin to 'develop empathy' by paying attention to their stories.<sup>66</sup> Vermette's intervention is in continuum with a reading tradition that values how Indigenous writings can enable 'settler readers to relate to Indigenous peoples on an emotional level', as Métis scholar Jo-Ann Episkenew contends, and for the 'potential to create a groundswell of support for social-justice initiatives to improve the lot of Indigenous people'.<sup>67</sup> Literature plays an active role in re-orienting public knowledge because, as Hannah Arendt contends, 'each time we talk about things that can be experienced only in privacy or intimacy, we bring them out into a sphere where they will assume a kind of reality which, their intensity notwithstanding, they never could have had before'.<sup>68</sup> Imaginative works like *The Break* offer a window into domestic lives and family environments, conveying a sense of intimacy with experiences that are otherwise hidden from, or overlooked in, the public sphere. Vermette summarises that empathy allows readers to understand how they may be connected and implicated in stories, 'whether it's because we're all human, or whether it's because we live in this place called Canada'. But, crucially, she also emphasises that 'as much as we want to empathize [...] we can't fully understand everyone else's experience. We have

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<sup>65</sup> Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 171, 172.

<sup>66</sup> Aubrey Jean Hanson, "I realized that I could write what I see": A Conversation with Katherena Vermette', *Literatures, Communities, and Learning: Conversations with Indigenous Writers* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2020), 59.

<sup>67</sup> Jo-Ann Episkenew, *Taking Back Our Spirits: Indigenous Literature, Public Policy, and Healing* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2009), 190-191.

<sup>68</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 50-1.

to always strive to empathize with one another'.<sup>69</sup> This is also suggested in her novel, when her character Lou ponders that 'we can never feel all of someone else's pain, even a sister's' (289). This statement problematises easy applications of empathy and suggests that self-doubt and discomfort are crucial to engage ethically with experiences of hurt, trauma, and structural oppression. I would argue, then, that ethical empathy is distinguishable from assimilative identification.<sup>70</sup> Empathy is ethical when it prompts self-reflection, awareness, and responsibility, as US settler historian Dominick LaCapra suggests in his definition of the term:

empathy, in the sense I am using the term, takes one out of oneself toward the other without eliminating or assimilating the difference or alterity of the other. [...] Neither should empathy be conflated with an incorporation of the other into one's own (narcissistic) self [...] On the contrary, it induces one to recognize one's internal alterity or difference from oneself — one's own opacities and gaps [...] It is not a facile passe-partout but an affect crucial for a possible ethical relation to the other and hence for one's responsibility or answerability.<sup>71</sup>

LaCapra addresses the risks of unethical engagement that Vermette suggests imaginatively and which have been highlighted by scholars such as Annie Coombes, Paulette Regan, Megan Boler, and Leigh Gilmore, whose views I discuss in the Introduction. I would agree with LaCapra that empathy is ethical if it 'does not substitute for sociopolitical action but is viably articulated with it'.<sup>72</sup> If one acknowledges and respects the incommensurability between listeners and speakers, empathy may be unsettling and promote self-reflection rather than comfortable feelings of camaraderie with a distant other — what LaCapra terms 'empathic unsettlement'.<sup>73</sup>

Vermette undertakes substantial thematisation of gazes and faces in *The Break*. Family resemblances are persistently emphasised, and it is explicitly stated that Cheryl, Rain, Stella, Paul, Lou, and Emily 'all look alike' (194). When Tommy meets Emily and her family and

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<sup>69</sup> Aubrey Jean Hanson, "I realized that I could write what I see", 60.

<sup>70</sup> I discuss assimilative identification through unethical empathy in the Introduction.

<sup>71</sup> Dominick LaCapra, 'History, Psychoanalysis, Critical Theory' in *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 2004), 76.

<sup>72</sup> LaCapra, 'History, Psychoanalysis, Critical Theory', 77.

<sup>73</sup> LaCapra, 'History, Psychoanalysis, Critical Theory', 81.

observes the looks they exchange, he recognises something that (he thinks) he knows (124, 125). Tommy's gaze lingers on Indigenous women suggesting his longing for connections.<sup>74</sup> Yet, his sympathetic attitude also highlights the risks of stereotyping as Tommy thinks that 'They all look the same — same long dark hair, straight and shiny, same almond eyes, almost' and that 'all those women blend into one, their faces so similar' (221). Settler scholar Cynthia Wallace suggests that Tommy reduces his mother and all Indigenous women to 'a categorical victim' by associating his mother with each victim of domestic violence he encounters (76).<sup>75</sup> Tommy holds prejudicial stereotypes *in favour of* Métis women which motivate him to believe them — what Emmalon Davis terms 'identity-prejudicial credibility excess'.<sup>76</sup> But a credibility excess may produce epistemic harms if a 'speaker's epistemic subjectivity is externally constricted by dominantly situated hearers and inquirers', as Tommy in this criminal investigation, and his zealous empathy comes across as excessive in Emily's delicate situation.<sup>77</sup> This is especially evident when Emily refuses to share her attacker's identity and her aunt Lou, a social worker, intervenes to prevent her from enduring more aggressive questioning. Lou fears that Tommy is 'too sympathetic' and that 'there is an odd excitement to his voice' (277). She allows that Tommy 'could almost be sincere, but he's laying it on so thick' (276-8). Lou also worries that if Emily is responsible for her attacker's arrest, gang members will take revenge on her and her family. She doubts the police can understand this tangible concern and asks Tommy, 'do you even know what that means. To us?' (277).<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Tommy is carefully observed by the women too, and Cheryl recognises that he is Métis because he resembles her husband's brothers (113).

<sup>75</sup> Cynthia R. Wallace, 'Attention, Representation, and Unsettling in Katherena Vermette's *The Break*, or, Teaching and (Re)Learning the Ethics of Reading', *Humanities* (Basel), 8.4 (2019), 11.

<sup>76</sup> Emmalon Davis, 'Typecasts, Tokens, and Spokespersons: A Case for Credibility Excess as Testimonial Injustice', *Hypatia*, 31.3 (2016), 487.

<sup>77</sup> Davis, 'Typecasts, Tokens, and Spokespersons', 489.

<sup>78</sup> This also suggests a hermeneutical gap. The obstacle that Emily faces in talking about her experience may be hermeneutical as well as traumatic. Her reasons for not wanting to speak out include fear and shame, but it is also possible that Emily thinks that she will not be believed if she admits that she was attacked by girls. This is supported in the text when Emily's friend Zegwan tells her mother Rita that 'girls did this', but Rita does not understand that girls attacked Emily (219).

Tommy makes the implicit assumption that he knows better than them when he tells Lou that they should ‘fight’ (278). Lou coaches him further towards a more ethical form of engagement because she shows him why the family is reluctant to trust him and that he may not yet know them at all: ‘We are fighting. This is fighting’, she says, flailing her arms to ‘take in the whole scene’, as she tries to redefine what ‘tough’ means in this context (278). Lou pushes Tommy to empathise without passing judgment and without having complete access to another person’s feelings and thoughts. Crucially, this begins a process of self-evaluation by which Tommy becomes more conscious of his authority and responsibility to the family.

By emphasising empathy as a place of connection and respectful distance, *The Break* invites a ‘testimonial reading’, in the way that Boler distils: ‘I may imagine/feel the speaker’s anguish (as my own). However I also recognize that I cannot know the other’. Testimonial reading requires self-reflection in order to ‘recognize oneself as implicated in the social forces that create the climate of obstacles the other must confront’.<sup>79</sup> Tommy begins to see ‘all these women holding each other up’ as having remarkable power (291). But his solidarity goes further when he fears that that if left unsolved, ‘the words will become numbers. Emily will become Case 002-122869, never to be opened again’ (291). To listen ethically is to do more than ‘listen through’ in the way that Fricker suggests, because, while it involves trying to make meaning from what is left unsaid, it also requires that what remains unsaid is respected as a gulf that may not be bridged. Fricker reduces ‘the virtue of hermeneutical justice’ when she states that it ‘may simply be a matter of reserving judgment’.<sup>80</sup> Vermette suggests that to engage ethically means more than that; it is to empathise and sympathise but also to be pulled back

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<sup>79</sup> Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 169, 164-165.

<sup>80</sup> The role of individual listeners is foregrounded in Fricker’s definition of the ‘virtue of testimonial justice’ as the ability to recognise and successfully remove prejudice from one’s own credibility judgments. Emmalon Davis, however, emphasises that epistemic justice, both hermeneutical and testimonial, requires an effort to improve not only one’s own ‘epistemic and ethical character’ but also, and more importantly, the ‘epistemic environments’ in which ‘marginalized knowers are all too often either conspicuously present or (in)conspicuously absent’. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 172. Davis, ‘Typecasts, Tokens, and Spokespersons’, 494.

from a desire to grasp incommensurable truths known and felt by others — to recognise oneself as implicated in power relations and to act conscientious of that.

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In *The Break*, Vermette shows that epistemic injustice is systematic: it is present institutionally and pervasively in civic culture, in what is said by Métis characters and in the ways they are heard. In particular, epistemic injustice is endemic in the police force and in the objectification of Indigenous women by the media. In a novel that risks being underread as a police procedural and thriller, Vermette examines connections between cyclical violence perpetuated against women and instances of epistemic injustice as the ‘insidious’ in the everyday.<sup>81</sup> The forms of violence and racism that affect Stella and Tommy are stealthy: that Stella is not considered a rational agent generates self-doubt, and hermeneutical marginalisation provokes an identity crisis in Tommy. Re-establishing a kinship web of reconnection with family members is crucial for both characters in order to withstand the effects of epistemic injustice. Through exploration of everyday interactions between Indigenous peoples and the police, Vermette exposes power relations as intrinsic to acts of listening to, and empathising with, others. She imagines a model for engaging ethically with testimony in which incommensurability of thoughts, feelings, and experiences is acknowledged and respected. This, in turns, affords acknowledgment of the privilege of the listener and invites reflection on listener responsibility. If my reading of Maracle’s *Celia’s Song* is suggestive of how speaking and listening ethically emerge as respectful reciprocity and incommensurability of understanding, a model develops more clearly through *The Break* as a way of engaging with testimony cognitively and affectively.

The end of the novel offers no watertight solutions, though. It evokes in readers what Tommy experiences once the case is ‘solved’: instead of ‘simplicity of finality’, Tommy feels ‘there should be more but there’s nothing, just an empty space and a long, fading echo’ (302).

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<sup>81</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, ‘Public Feelings’, *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 106:3 (2007), 464.

Emily's pain and trauma are neither 'solved' nor 'fixed'. When she begins to recover physically, the prospect of rebuilding emotionally feels more difficult, as if she is expected to be able to 'control this *healing*' (305). Something is broken, and when she says, 'I'm okay', there is 'a big empty space where the rest of her words are supposed to be' (305). The final chapter traces a trip to perform Indigenous ceremonies to restore Emily, with her family 'protective of her and angry at the world' (342). Emily's grandmother Cheryl cannot but recall her sister Rain, and how the pain of what happened to her seems 'to drift further and further away' until 'something would happen, or a dream, and it was like it had all just happened again, and she felt that jarring ache, that big space where her sister was supposed to be' (342). Violence is cyclical for this family and healing can only portend a longer journey than this one into 'the bush' in which broken women 'hol[d] each other up' and are 'stitched back together', but there is 'always a scar' (342). Healing as a tortuous journey, which emerges compellingly at the end of *The Break*, is the focus of the next chapter.

### 3

## Healing is Not Finite: Restoring Self-in-Relation in Tracey

### Lindberg's *Birdie* and Terese Marie Mailhot's *Heart Berries*

Focussing on the novel *Birdie* (2015) by Cree author Tracey Lindberg and the memoir *Heart Berries* (2018) by Nlaka'pamux writer Terese Marie Mailhot, this chapter explores how experimental, non-linear, and open-ended narratives address health and healing in ways that unsettle how trauma and violence are framed by colonialism. The notion of healing constitutes an important aspect of reconciliatory discourse but, like 'reconciliation', the term is often employed as a nebulous passe-partout, its deeper significance not always understood. Métis author and educator Jo-Ann Episkenew notes that it was only after residential school survivors started sharing stories of abuse publicly in the 1990s, threatening 'the collective esteem of the settler state', that the government was compelled to 'take action' to address Indigenous concerns about 'healing individuals, families, and communities'. The term 'healing', then, became 'central' to the discourse in which Indigenous peoples in Canada were framed.<sup>1</sup> If state-sponsored 'reconciliation' promotes healing but centres on abuses suffered in residential schools, it may convey the message that Indigenous peoples are sick when '[c]olonialism is sick', and 'most settlers deny that their society is built on a sick foundation' that requires 'a cure'.<sup>2</sup> This fallacy persists in reconciliatory discourse, with Pope Francis's latest apology to Indigenous peoples, in July 2022, advocating that governments, churches, and other institutions

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<sup>1</sup> Jo-Ann Episkenew, *Taking Back Our Spirits: Indigenous Literature, Public Policy, and Healing* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2009), 10-11.

<sup>2</sup> Episkenew, *Taking Back Our Spirits*, 11.

‘assist the survivors of the residential schools to experience healing from the traumas they suffered’.<sup>3</sup> Pope Francis’s apology falls short of recognising how persistent colonialism is or how its sickness is tolerated.<sup>4</sup> The TRC report recognises that ‘the collective journey towards national healing and reconciliation [...] will need to continue well beyond the Commission’s closing ceremony’, but a neoliberal model for healing adopted in its reconciliatory discourse and conveyed by the media puts the onus on Indigenous peoples to overcome pain and anger and replace those emotions with forgiveness.<sup>5</sup> Lindberg and Mailhot’s creative practices suggest healing and forgiveness are complex, layered concepts and experiences which cannot be reduced to linear, digestible conclusions. In *Birdie* and *Heart Berries*, healing is not premised on banishing ‘negative’ affects; the women in these texts share a Vizenorian ‘tragic wisdom’ and use anger and pain generatively to find ways towards love and healing, articulating strong refusals to forgive.<sup>6</sup>

These are debut texts by very different writers whose backgrounds inform the ways in which they approach healing. Trained in journalism and literary studies, and now a Professor in Creative Writing at Purdue University in the US, Mailhot foregrounds the importance of

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<sup>3</sup> The Canadian Press, “I am deeply sorry”: Full text of residential school apology from Pope Francis’, *CBC*, 25 July 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/pope-francis-maskwacis-apology-full-text-1.6531341> [accessed July 2022]

<sup>4</sup> Indigenous protesters have urged Pope Francis to rescind the ‘doctrine of discovery’, a papal bull issued in 1493 to justify colonisation of Indigenous lands. The Pope has failed to address this concern as well as the need to heal, on a global scale, from what Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano calls the ‘coloniality of power’ — the continued effects of racial socio-political hierarchical orders imposed through imperialism and colonialism under pretence of religious conversion, upheld historically by the Church and maintained today. Mark Gollom, ‘Why Pope Francis may be hesitant to rescind the Doctrine of Discovery’, *CBC News*, 30 July 2022, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/pope-francis-doctrine-discovery-indigenous-1.6536174> [accessed August 2022]. Aníbal Quijano, ‘Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America’, *International Sociology*, 15.2 (2000), 216.

<sup>5</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Winnipeg, MB: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), 30.

<sup>6</sup> Drawing from Nietzsche’s conceptualisation of tragic wisdom as ‘an acceptance of the historicity of the human condition’, Gerald Vizenor theorises that ‘traumatic memories are the traces of *tragic wisdom* in [...] stories. Tragic wisdom, in the native sense, is the ecstatic nature of creation and chance’. In this sense, tragic wisdom involves awareness of the traumatic past in order to create and re-imagine the present and envisage possibilities in the future. Gerald Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses: Native American Scenes of Absence and Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 19.

creating art out of individual pain. Through life-writing, she explores how to re-establish relationships with self, family, and community and to define her place as Indigenous writer: ‘maybe it was a hundred of years of work for my name to arrive here, where I can name my pain so well that people are afraid of the consequences and power’.<sup>7</sup> This is the statement that closes the penultimate chapter of *Heart Berries*, and situates it in continuity with a wealthy inheritance of resistant narratives, a body of literature produced by Indigenous women in North America which bears witness to their realities and is profoundly engaged with memory work. Mailhot’s memoir is indebted, as she highlights in the Afterword, to ‘writers before me [who] seemed to do the work of looking at being Indigenous so we could look through it’. She is particularly influenced by Native American authors N. Scott Momaday, Linda Hogan, Leslie Marmon Silko, Joy Harjo, and Elissa Washuta and celebrates their ‘experimental form, language — everything’, concluding, ‘I feel freer [...] because so much was done before’.<sup>8</sup> Mailhot is openly cognisant of the burden of representation placed on Indigenous writers and rebuffs it when leaving to readers the task of discerning ‘the state of our world in my work’.<sup>9</sup> *Heart Berries* is an experimental text in which Mailhot is less concerned with analysing social structures and more with laying bare how one lives within and through structural forms of violence, with the feeling of lived experience rendered striking and memorable by literary refinement.

For Lindberg, an Indigenous rights activist and Professor of Law at Athabasca University and the University of Ottawa, creative writing intertwines with legal scholarship. Lindberg began writing creatively while studying Canadian law, and found fiction afforded more space to explore social justice issues than more rigidly defined legal lenses.<sup>10</sup> In *Birdie*,

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<sup>7</sup> Terese Marie Mailhot, *Heart Berries: A Memoir* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2018), 119. Subsequent references are in parenthesis in this format: *HB*.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Mailhot by Joan Naviyk Kane, ‘Afterword’ to Terese Marie Mailhot, *Heart Berries*, 126.

<sup>9</sup> Mailhot and Kane, ‘Afterword’, 126.

<sup>10</sup> Sharon Monteith suggests the synergies between legal scholarship and imaginative writing and cites critical race theorist and short story writer David Dante Troutt’s contention that, ‘Fictional voices speak to us

Lindberg writes about law in a more intimate way, pursuing what are considered ‘lawful Cree ways to behave when you’re a member of a family [and] what happens when you don’t take responsibility for your relationships’.<sup>11</sup> *Birdie* is written in the tradition of Indigenous pedagogy, whereby legal protocols are contained in, and transmitted through, stories. Elements of Cree culture and law are entwined in *Pimatisewin*, loosely translated as ‘the good life’, which Lindberg represents as the tree of life, and *wahkohtowin*, the principle of treating one another, human and non-human, with respect and care. Lindberg explores situations in which *wahkohtowin* laws are broken and suggests how good relations may be rebuilt in the microcosm of the home, and more broadly by laying bare the continuum of colonial violence — the macrocosm in which such laws are repeatedly broken. Lindberg has said that the contemporaneous release of *Birdie* and the TRC recommendations was a ‘beautiful’ coincidence because *Birdie* has become ‘a part of hard, difficult and lovely discussion[s]’.<sup>12</sup> In talks and interviews, Lindberg has questioned the notion of ‘reconciliation’, as Aubrey Jean Hanson also notes when she argues that *Birdie* suggests how one might ‘read for resurgence rather than reconciliation’.<sup>13</sup> Official discourse, like that underlined by the TRC, suggests that

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differently and with more familiarity than legal reasoning and judicial pronouncement [...] fiction can substitute the law’s traditional characterization of holdings with ideas’, “‘I Second That Emotion”: A case for using imaginative sources in writing civil rights history’, *Patterns of Prejudice*, 49.5, (2015), 444.

Lindberg has spoken of how *Birdie* is truthful to Indigenous experiences that Canadian law, which she argues is entrenched in ‘White Supremacy’, glosses over. Radio Interview with Rosanna Deerchild, ‘The Darkness and Light of *Birdie* Reflects Author Tracey Lindberg’s Own Life Story’, *CBC Unreserved*, March 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/unreserved-honours-the-strength-of-indigenous-women-1.3472826/the-darkness-and-light-of-birdie-reflects-author-tracey-lindberg-s-own-life-story-1.3476140> [accessed November 2020]. Tracey Lindberg, ‘Critical Indigenous Legal Theory Part 1: The Dialogue Within’, *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 27.2 (2015), 245. See also Radio Interview with Shelagh Rogers, ‘Tracey Lindberg on Telling Indigenous Stories’, *The Next Chapter, CBC Radio*, 1 February 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thenextchapter/tracey-lindberg-tom-jackson-and-mary-dalton-1.3422758/tracey-lindberg-on-telling-indigenous-stories-1.3422766> [accessed January 2023]

<sup>11</sup> Lindberg, Radio Interview with Rosanna Deerchild.

<sup>12</sup> Tracey Lindberg interviewed by Clarissa Fortin, “‘Birdie’ soars to new heights with “bigelegance” and quiet strength”, *Rabble*, 21 January 2016, <https://rabble.ca/books/reviews/2016/01/birdie-soars-to-new-heights-bigelegance-and-quiet-strength> [accessed November 2020]

<sup>13</sup> Aubrey J. Hanson, ‘Reading for Reconciliation? Indigenous Literatures in a Post-TRC Canada’, *English Studies in Canada*, 43.2/3 (2017), 84. Lindberg has emphasised reconciliation with self and community over reconciliation with Canada: see ‘Challenging Safe Ideas: Dr. Tracey Lindberg Examines Reconciliation at VIU’s Second Annual Indigenous Speakers Series’, *Vancouver Island University*, 2 November 2016, <https://news.viu.ca/challenging-safe-ideas-dr-tracey-lindberg-examines-reconciliation-vius-second-annual-indigenous> [accessed November 2020]; Radio Interview with Shelagh Rogers, ‘Tracey Lindberg on Telling

it is possible and even useful to ‘reinscribe Indigenous expression within the norms of the settler state’.<sup>14</sup> However, creative works like *Birdie* and *Heart Berries* imagine pathways of co-existence that are grounded in Indigenous cultural and political resurgence.

*Birdie* and *Heart Berries* are kaleidoscopes of intimate stories, raw emotions, and mental turmoil. Lindberg incorporates dreams, oral histories, lists and recipes into an eclectic narrative that is part vision quest and pilgrimage, part psychological novel and travelogue. *Birdie* is comic and tragic, lyrical and crude, even surreal in its approach to social realism, and is underpinned by ceremony. It is the story of Bernice Meetoos (or ‘Birdie’), a ‘big Cree woman’ in her twenties who travels from Alberta to Gibsons, in British Columbia, where she finds a job and rents a room at a bakery owned by a white middle-aged woman named Lola. The novel traces Bernice’s spiritual journey, beginning when she takes to her bed and enters a liminal state of ‘wakesleep’ (50).<sup>15</sup> This ‘vacancy of her self’, as Lindberg describes it, lasts several weeks during which Bernice learns to ‘absent her body’ and to travel differently, in space and time (5, 8). She revisits memories from her childhood on the fringes of a reserve in Northern Alberta; life with her mother on fictional Loon Lake; the years in which she lives with her Auntie Val and attends a Christian school; a period in foster care with a white family; her experience of homelessness; and a period in a psychiatric hospital in Edmonton.<sup>16</sup> When Bernice’s Auntie Val and cousin Freda arrive in Gibsons, they join Lola in taking responsibility

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Indigenous Stories’; ‘Cree academic and novelist Tracey Lindberg on reconciliation before reconciliation’, Ideas, *CBC Radio*, 23 January 2017, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/cree-academic-and-novelist-tracey-lindberg-on-reconciliation-before-reconciliation-1.3945719> [accessed January 2023].

<sup>14</sup> Hanson, ‘Reading for Reconciliation?’, 70.

<sup>15</sup> Tracey Lindberg, *Birdie: A Novel* (Toronto, ON: Harper Collins, 2016), 8. Subsequent references are in parenthesis.

<sup>16</sup> Loon Lake is fictional, but readers learn from Val that her people are from Kelly Lake, a community in British Columbia at the border with the province of Alberta. Lindberg is a member of As’in’I’wa’chi Ni’yaw Nation or Kelly Lake Nation and, like Val in the novel, considers herself ‘the next in a long line of argumentative Cree women’ (125). Bernice’s family does not have recognised status because her people ‘have not been colonized or “Indian Acted” to death’ and have ‘no reserve, no treaty rights, no health care’ (125). Bernice’s family, then, is not legally allowed to live on the reserve in Loon Lake. The significance of the weight of the Indian Act and the realities of non-registered First Nations to reconciliation is raised by Lindberg in ‘Reconciliation Before Reconciliation with Dr. Tracey Lindberg’, *CBC Ideas*, 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/player/play/860712515911> [accessed November 2020]

for Bernice. Safe in their care, she is able to travel to the deepest recesses of trauma and surfaces repeated sexual assaults in childhood, and how she murders one of the predators: her uncle Larry. Mailhot's memoir *Heart Berries* is organised somewhat similarly according to clusters of feelings and memories as they relate to her experiences as a Nlaka'pamux (or Thompson River Salish) woman. It is at once a therapy journal, a letter to a lover, a memorial for her parents, and a testimony for her children in the form of a spiritual and existential meditation. It is presented as a series of poetically saturated, reflective essays that trace Mailhot's upbringing on the Seabird Island reserve in British Columbia; her first marriage as a teenager; the loss of custody of her first born on the day she gives birth to her second; a move to Texas and tumultuous relationship with her second husband, Casey; hospitalisation in a psychiatric ward; and the birth of a third son. The memoir's ending is troubled by the climactic realisation that her father has sexually abused her. As vignettes of Mailhot's life, these meditations on mental health and difficult emotional states shape and drive the narrative as a stream of consciousness propelled by affect.

Mailhot and Lindberg espouse nonlinear narrative forms that incorporate elements of Salish and Cree storytelling. *Heart Berries* begins as an interior monologue and, despite the appearance of the second-person address in the second chapter, it never completely takes the form of an epistolary text even though it is couched as a letter. Traditional stories are interspersed with no visual break to separate them from the rest of the text. Such is the case for the story of the first medicine man, and familial memories told in the language of legend and myth: 'She met a serpent in prison who was my father [...] The legend is that he was banished from the house after many transgressions, and that we all waited by the door with weapons [...] even me, a baby then' (36-7). Stream of consciousness is employed differently in *Birdie*, where focalisation is primarily through Bernice but occasionally shifts to the other women characters. Lindberg constructs Bernice's story as a series of layers so that each chapter is preceded by

*pawatamowin*, a dream, and followed by *acimowin*, an oral story. Each *pawatamowin* works as poetry, vision, or symbol to build personal and culturally felt knowledge and establish connections before they are brought into cognisance for Bernice, whereas in *acimowina* at the end of each chapter, a storyteller records Bernice's lessons in short narrations that combine to recreate the impression of orature. In this way, *Birdie* contains three layers of the same story, told in spirals, with each purposeful repetition adding new meanings and inviting readers to engage in the process of making story meaning. If *Birdie* works as a spiral, each of its turns — *pawatamowin*, prose, *acimowin* — may be read individually, but it is only by reading them in relation to each other that readers can appreciate a deeper understanding. Cree-Métis-Salteaux curator and writer Lindsay Nixon has advanced the concept of Indigenous Relational Aesthetics (IRA) to describe 'relational ways of making art encoded within Indigenous epistemologies'.<sup>17</sup> Drawing on Nixon's relational aesthetics, Lindberg and Mailhot may be identified as Indigenous relational artists who question 'the confines of settler materialities — such as space-time, language, and written law' in nonlinear narratives in which the 'waking life' coexists with 'dream visions'.<sup>18</sup> Uninterested in a chronological structure, Mailhot builds her text around affects: depression ('Indian Sick'), anger ('Your Black Eye and My Birth'), absence ('I Know I'll Go'), and loss ('The Leaving Deficit'), with pain the main affective thread. Lindberg's shifting verb tenses in *Birdie* reflect Bernice moving across time and space, with the titles of chapters often indicating states of being and stages of a journey ('At Home', 'Where She Is', 'Nowhere'). Subtitles in Cree often suggest embodied affects. For example, the subtitle for 'Who She Is' is '*nayahcikewiyiniw*: a person who bears things on her/his back'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Lindsay Nixon, 'Toward an Indigenous Relational Aesthetics: Making Native Love, Still', *In Good Relation: History, Gender, and Kinship in Indigenous Feminisms*, Sarah Nickel and Amanda Fehr eds., (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020), 196.

<sup>18</sup> Nixon, 'Toward an Indigenous Relational Aesthetics', 202.

<sup>19</sup> Whereas Lindberg offers a glossary for Cree words, in *Heart Berries* passages in Halkomelem are left untranslated. This choice suggests that Mailhot is not concerned with addressing specific ideal readers, while Lindberg is careful that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples can access Cree understandings. This is reinforced by Lindberg who specifically gestures to non-Indigenous Canadians and the potential of her novel to

From the beginning of the novel, then, Bernice bears weight, whether emotional freight localised in her back and the way that she carries herself, or weight in the sense of responsibilities and obligations.

In my reading, these narratives are particularly revealing when read through Eve Sedgwick's reparative lenses and Ann Cvetkovich's definition of public feelings, as a combined approach to writing about trauma that can shift the focus from pathological trauma, 'that which is newsworthy and sensational', to the role feelings have in 'the everyday and the insidious rather than the catastrophic'.<sup>20</sup> These interventions in affect studies are useful when considered alongside Indigenous theories on health and healing and what Karlee Fellner (Cree-Métis) describes as Indigenous approaches that 'honour trauma wisdom, giftedness, survivance, and the past-present-future self-in-relation to the natural and spirit worlds'.<sup>21</sup> If TRC events are sites of paranoid practice that anticipate and ward off negative affect 'in order to claim ownership over truth', as I argue in the Introduction, the risk is that trauma is pathologised and Indigenous peoples locked into victimhood.<sup>22</sup> It is my contention that Lindberg and Mailhot resist putting tragedy as 'the locus' of the tale in order to suggest that healing is not premised on owning truth, or on forgiveness as the banishing of negative affect, but on openness to a plenitude of affects that persist beyond.<sup>23</sup> In my reading, these are reparative texts in which 'repair' is not designed to solve or fix because pain should not be

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awaken public opinion to the lived issues of colonial violence when she states in interview that she hopes her book may teach Canadians to think of Indigenous peoples as 'relatives' because '[y]ou don't let your relatives get murdered or go missing'. Lindberg quoted in Emily M. Keeler, 'Law of the Land: Tracey Lindberg's Debut Novel, *Birdie*, Puts Cree Poetics in the Spotlight', *The National Post*, 15 June 2015, <https://nationalpost.com/entertainment/books/law-of-the-land-tracy-lindbergs-debut-novel-birdie-puts-cree-poetics-in-the-spotlight> [accessed November 2020]

<sup>20</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, 'Public Feelings', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 106:3 (2007), 464.

<sup>21</sup> Karlee D. Fellner, 'Iskotew and Crow: (Re)igniting Narratives of Indigenous Survivance and Honouring Trauma Wisdom in The Classroom', *Knowing the Past, Facing the Future: Indigenous Education in Canada*, Sheila Carr-Stewart ed., (Vancouver, BC: Purich Books, 2019), 156.

<sup>22</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay is About You', *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 145, and Heather Love, 'TRUTH AND CONSEQUENCES: ON PARANOID READING AND REPARATIVE READING', *Criticism*, 52 (2010), 237.

<sup>23</sup> Terese Marie Mailhot, 'Decolonizing My Story as An Indigenous Woman', *Huffpost Canada*, June 2017, <https://bit.ly/2KqZufk> [accessed November 2020]

‘framed like a problem with a solution’ but apprehended as ‘a process’ towards ‘understanding’ (HB, 28, 38). Emphasis is placed instead on regenerating Indigenous laws and notions of health and well-being, such as the Cree perspective on healing that is rooted in the ‘the good life’ (*pimatisewin*), where living with purpose means acting ‘in good relation’, with care and respect towards others and the Earth (*wahkohtowin*).<sup>24</sup> If health and healing are situated in a ‘social and cultural frame rather than a medical one’, as Cvetkovich argues in the context of public feelings, illness emerges as an affective and relational — and understandable — response to colonialism.

### **Decolonising Mental Health**

In *Birdie* and *Heart Berries*, questions of health are addressed in the context of colonial and intergenerational trauma, with healing represented from Cree and Interior Salish perspectives. A holistic philosophy of interconnectedness, balance, and harmony challenges dominant frameworks, such as the biomedical paradigm that interprets health in diametrical opposition to diseases and locates deficits at the level of the individual. Settler anthropologist Naomi Andelson suggests that health is equated to ‘absence of disease’ when conceptualised via a paradigm that ‘arises out of a biomedical orientation to the body’ which ‘ultimately limits our understanding of what health means in its broader social setting’.<sup>25</sup> Focussing on mental and emotional distress, another settler, sociologist Heidi Rimke, contends that ‘psychocentrism’, defined as ‘the view that human problems are due to a biologically-based flaw or deficit in the bodies and/or minds of individual subjects’, serves neoliberal capitalism because it is a form of social injustice ‘where individual reformation rather than social and economic justice is

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<sup>24</sup> This concept informs different Indigenous groups. See the good life, *mino bimaadiziwin*, in Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Anishinaabe) *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Recreation, Resurgence and A New Emergence* (Winnipeg, MB: ARP Books, 2011), 13, 17, and the good life or good mind/heart in Maracle (Stó:lō) *My Conversations with Canadians* (Toronto, ON: Book Thug, 2017), 130.

<sup>25</sup> Naomi Andelson, ‘Health Beliefs and The Politics of Cree Wellbeing’, *Health*, 2.1 (1998), 6.

promoted'.<sup>26</sup> In their texts, Lindberg and Mailhot situate health beyond medicalised or even socially-determined perspectives. Their protagonists are hospitalised and labelled in ways that narrowly define their experiences as deficit and pathology. Mailhot is diagnosed with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, an eating disorder, and bipolar II, and labels of diagnosis are imposed in the form of pejorative adjectives such as '[o]bese', 'agitated', and 'delirious' in Bernice's medical records (*HB*, 43; *Birdie* 121, 125). Neither identifies with these labels and both resist them. Mailhot reflects that it feels 'polarizing to be told there was a diagnosis for the behaviors I felt justified in having' (70). Crucially, she orients mental and emotional distress to a spiritual and genealogical framework: 'I knew some part of my disease was spiritual or inherited' (70).

In *Determinants of Indigenous People's Health in Canada: Beyond the Social* (2015), Margo Greenwood (Cree), Sarah de Leeuw (settler), and Nicole Marie Lindsay (settler) observe that while a social framework may move beyond a predominantly biomedical paradigm, it may nevertheless 'exclude or marginalize other types of determinants not typically considered to fall under the category of "social"', including cultural, spiritual, environmental, geographic, political, economic, historical, genealogical, narrative, and structural determinants of health. If colonialism is 'the broadest and most fundamental determinant of Indigenous health and well-being' impacting communities through myriad and pre-determined factors, a humanities-informed approach to health is revealing of how 'song, ceremony, story, land, and poetry' contribute to making Indigenous people well.<sup>27</sup> A holistic understanding of health rooted in tribe-specific practices contrasts markedly with Eurocentric and colonial constructions in which physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of being are

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<sup>26</sup> Heidi Rimke, 'Introduction — Mental and Emotional Distress as a Social Justice Issue: Beyond Psychocentrism', *Studies in Social Justice*, 10.1 (2016), 5.

<sup>27</sup> Margo Greenwood, Sarah De Leeuw, and Nicole Marie Lindsay, 'Introduction to the Second Edition: Rethinking (Once Again) Determinants of Indigenous People's Health', *Determinants of Indigenous Peoples' Health: Beyond the Social*, Margo Greenwood, Sarah De Leeuw, and Nicole Marie Lindsay eds., Second ed., (Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars, 2018), xxii, xix.

disconnected from one another and from other factors. Health equates to ‘balance’ from Indigenous perspectives because, as one Coast Salish woman encapsulates, ‘it’s not just health of the body but it’s health of everything around us’.<sup>28</sup> From this perspective, illness is a disruption of harmony in relationships with others and the land, and healing a ‘quest for balance and restoration of harmony’ that needs to be continuously negotiated.<sup>29</sup>

Lindberg and Mailhot expose the arbitrariness, and the potential harm, of Eurocentric paradigms that narrowly define trauma. Mailhot considers how illness relates to and deviates from Indigenous traditions and medicine:

The spirits used to possess people. We called it ‘Indian sick’, and it was the first illness to be accounted for. It begins with want, with taking, and ends with a silence that hurts and makes us beg [...]

What I feel struck with is something smaller, in a less impressive world [...] I woke up as the bones of my ancestors locked in government storage. My illness has carried me into white buildings, into the doctor’s office and the therapist’s — with nothing to say, other than I need my grandmother’s eyes on me, smiling at my misguided heart. Imagine their faces when I say that? (17-8)

In my reading, Mailhot’s analysis is ‘postcolonial’ because it brings attention to the ‘radical rupture’ in history and consciousness created by the colonial encounter.<sup>30</sup> Mailhot’s illness is described in basic terms, *want*, *silence*, *hurt*, and readers may likely think of depression, not least because of references to suicide, associated with depression as a medical condition. But Mailhot does not present it as such. What in medical terms is labelled ‘depression’ is an

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<sup>28</sup> Evelyn R. Labun and Julia Emblen, ‘Health as Balance for the Sto:lo Coast Salish’, *Journal of Transcultural Nursing*, 18.3 (2007), 211. For ‘health as balance’ see also Michael A. Hart, ‘Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin (the good life): An Aboriginal Approach to Social Work Practice’, *Native Social Work Journal*, 2.1 (1999), 95; Andelson, ‘Health Beliefs and The Politics of Cree Wellbeing’, 13; Dionne Gesink, Lana Whiskeyjack, and Tim Guimond, ‘Perspectives on Restoring Health Shared by Cree Women, Alberta, Canada’, *Health Promotion International*, 34.3 (2019), 455; Shirley Tagalik, ‘Inuit Knowledge Systems, Elders, and Determinants of Health: Harmony, Balance, and the Role of Holistic Thinking’, *Determinants of Indigenous Peoples’ Health*, Greenwood, de Leeuw, and Lindsay eds., 98.

<sup>29</sup> Anne Poonwassie and Ann Charter, ‘An Aboriginal Worldview of Helping: Empowering Approaches’, *Canadian Journal of Counselling*, 35.1 (2001), 66. Hart writes that healing is not sought only when ‘an illness or a problem is present’ but is ‘practiced daily throughout our lives’, ‘Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin’, 95.

<sup>30</sup> Audra Simpson and Andrea Smith eds., *Theorizing Native Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 14.

affective response to colonialism.<sup>31</sup> Medical labels and bio-psychiatric approaches may exacerbate ‘symptoms’ and serve neoliberal imperatives to make life calculable by reducing lived experiences to ordered and predictable formulas, pathologising what cannot be ordered.<sup>32</sup> Mailhot feels trapped by the ‘white buildings’ of Western medicine. What she feels is untranslatable to doctors and therapists. A familial bond has been damaged; she needs to feel her grandmother’s eyes on her.

In these texts, healing is less about eradicating diseases and more about restoring harmonious connections and forging wisdom. In *Birdie*, Bernice reflects on the medical labels attached to her and the extent to which she may find herself reflected in them. She makes a conscious decision to leave behind ‘the crazy’ when she enters sleepingwake, refuting external impositions of what may be normal in favour of self-determination (205). Bernice recalls that when she was a child walking towards the Catholic school, she could ‘hear the grandmothers whispering to her’ and used to think ‘she was crazy, hearing voices’. She knows now that this is ‘regular and normal’ (76). Such feelings and experiences stay remarkably close to contemporary scholarship in Indigenous psychotherapy, with Karlee Fellner (Cree-Métis) asserting that ‘symptoms’ and ‘behaviours’ that children experience at school ‘may be understood as conversations that are coming from past or future generations, from a younger or older self, or from vicarious or collective influences anywhere within an individual’s web of relations’.<sup>33</sup> Fellner expresses no doubt that many children who struggle in school are

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<sup>31</sup> For more on depression as a socio-cultural response see Ann Cvetkovich *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 1; China Mills, *Decolonizing Global Mental Health: the Psychiatrization of the Majority World* (London: Routledge, 2014), 132.

<sup>32</sup> Fellner argues that ‘one-dimensional labels’ deny a person’s ‘wholeness as a complex being-in-relation’, ‘Iskotew and Crow’, 153. Athabaskan scholar Dian Million criticises neoliberal approaches to healing, stressing the relationship between neoliberal capitalism and colonialism in *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013), 30. In the context of global mental health advocacy, British scholar China Mills similarly argues that if ‘the distress caused by a neoliberal rationale of reforms and inequality is mediated through a bio-psychiatric lens’ which supersedes Indigenous healing systems, it opens up ‘interventions that are individual and often pharmaceutical’ and therefore also ‘part of the same neoliberal rationality as that which may have caused distress initially’, *Decolonizing Global Mental Health*, 50.

<sup>33</sup> Fellner, ‘Iskotew and Crow’, 157-8.

‘experiencing their ancestors speaking through them bringing the message that the classroom is a dangerous place and doing their best to prevent their descendants from losing who they are’.<sup>34</sup> Lindberg suggests this intergenerational conversation imaginatively in *Birdie*. When the nuns notice that Bernice carries a medicine bag to school, they summon her to the principal’s office to hand it over. Bernice hears her grandmothers harking back to their experiences in residential schools: ‘[t]hey used to cut our hair’, they whisper in Cree, ‘[r]emember when they beat us for speaking our language’ (79). Lindberg establishes that contemporary Catholic schools are dangerous places of assimilation and a legacy of the residential school system. Urged to act, Bernice salvages her medicine bag and escapes. If her grandmothers’ voices enable Bernice to attend Christ Academy without assimilating, it is because they sing above the Catholic prayers and ‘all the Jesus and fear’, teaching Bernice ‘to pray in her own way’ (80). Ancestors are crucial to the notion of healing in *Heart Berries*, too, when Mailhot writes that the only way to heal ‘Indian sick’ is by drawing on ‘the knowledge that something instinctual would carry us back’: that her ancestors are watching is ‘vital’ (18). In the hospital, writing engenders a process of healing by remembering her grandmother and retracing key moments in her parents’ lives, while paying attention to future generations, her children.

Spatial relationality and the healing power of the land are also foregrounded in Lindberg’s and Mailhot’s texts. A descendant of the ‘river people’ (Nlaka’pamux or Thompson River Salish), Mailhot uses water metaphors — ‘I’m a river widened by misery’ — and when she leaves her territories for Texas, recalls her aunt intuiting that ‘being in the desert’ is the reason why she is ill and that she should ‘[g]o to the river’ (9, 70). Whereas Mailhot moves away from Salish territories, Bernice is pulled closer towards a sacred tree in British Columbia. A caption at the beginning of the novel traces ‘Bernice’s Journey’ across six places, with crossed-out words in the first and last entries, ‘~~Home~~ Loon Lake’ and ‘~~Lola’s~~ Home’, revealing

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<sup>34</sup> Fellner, ‘Iskotew and Crow’, 159.

from the outset that Bernice is on a quest for connection, and that her notion of home and family differs from how both terms are limited by the dominant paradigm of the nuclear family. Kinship ties include non-human beings such as the tree of life, *Pimatisewin*, whose health condition is made to mirror Bernice's, as Lindberg establishes indubitable connections between the land and women subjected to forms of colonial violence (169, 247). When Bernice emerges from the liminal state of wakesleep and returns to her body, she performs a ceremony and makes an offering of food to *Pimatisewin* which is described as beginning the healing of them both. *Pimatisewin* is one of four sacred trees, another of which is in Alberta, Bernice's family's territory (255).<sup>35</sup> The trees are metonyms for the land and their sickness equates to a broken relationship between peoples and the environment. The tree's symbology promotes healing in Cree beliefs and informs how relationships are re-oriented through Cree philosophy.

### **Spiritual Health, Food, and Care in *Birdie***

Indigenous metaphysics play a crucial role in Indigenous understandings of health and healing. When animals, plants, stones, ecosystems, celestial bodies, and ancestral spirits are understood as sentient, agential, and aware, humans are constituted in more complex ontological ways than biology.<sup>36</sup> Spiritual beliefs intertwine with legal tenets, as Lindberg expounded in her Master's thesis, where she drilled down into how 'it is difficult for many people, western people in particular, to accept that there can be a completely balanced, respectful and functional governmental and legal system that is linked to spirituality'. On that occasion, Lindberg argued that there is 'no English language correlate for the intersection between Creator, teaching

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<sup>35</sup> Four is a sacred number for the Cree People who call themselves 'nehiyawak' which translates as 'people of the four directions' or 'four-part persons'. In the novel, the last chapter repeats patterns of fours in the dream and in the ceremony: 'on the fourth day of her moons, / on the fourth day of feeding the Tree, / on the fourth day of dreaming / she dreams of feasts / feasts and feasts and feasts' (242). The ceremony lasts four days and the food is brought and offered to the tree by four women — Bernice, Val, Freda, and Lola.

<sup>36</sup> Kim TallBear, 'Beyond the Life/Not-Life Binary: A Feminist-Indigenous Reading of Cryopreservation, Interspecies Thinking, and The New Materialisms', *Cryopolitics: Frozen Life in a Melting World*, Joanna Radin and Emma Kowal eds., (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 187.

understandings, values, laws, authorities, obligation, government of the people (who are of the Creator) and sovereignty plus'.<sup>37</sup> If the health of individuals is dependent on the health of the environment and the quality of relationships, the sacred tree in Lindberg's novel represents this core value which, together with *miyo-wichihowin*, or 'having good relations', grounds life and health in collectivity and relationality.<sup>38</sup> In *Birdie* the process of healing is initiated when Bernice chooses the liminal state of wakesleep. While she 'would not try this' at her childhood home and '[w]ould never have done so in Edmonton', she thinks that Gibsons is 'just safe. Enough' to embark on the process of 'becoming. Something. Else' (5, 6). Bernice needs the shelter of Lola's bakery and the care of women who generate a protective 'resistance' that allows her to 'travel back and forth (Now and Then) without much pain' (157). Bernice's healing is co-dependent and co-constitutive with that of the sacred tree because it is only by feeding *Pimatisewin* that Bernice feels energy return, 'as if she has eaten the food herself' (250). Marlene Brant Castellano (Mohawk) describes 'spiritual health' as love that is 'expressed and sustained in relationships with family and friends', with 'the land that supports our feet', and 'spread abroad in service to the community', and this is how it is represented in *Birdie*.<sup>39</sup>

In *Birdie*, food figures as medicine as it does in Cree practices and knowledge, where 'land, food, and health are key components of *pimatisiwin*, from the Cree root word *pimatisi* "to be alive"', and Cree Elders stress connections 'made and strengthened' through ceremonies.<sup>40</sup> The healing ceremony at the end of the novel coalesces in this synergy. Bernice

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<sup>37</sup> Tracey Lindberg, 'Critical Indigenous Legal Theory' (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2007), 52.

<sup>38</sup> Cree scholars Diana Steinhauer and James Lamouche describe 'nehiyawak' (Cree) as 'following miyo-pimâtsiwin (the good path) toward miyo-mahcihowin (good health), a path that can and must be shared by all', 'miyo-pimâtsiwin, "A Good Path": Indigenous Knowledges, Languages, and Traditions in Education and Health', *Determinants of Indigenous Peoples' Health*, Greenwood, de Leeuw, and Lindsay eds., 91.

<sup>39</sup> Marlene Brant Castellano, 'The Spiritual Dimension of Holistic Health', *Determinants of Indigenous Peoples' Health*, Greenwood, de Leeuw, and Lindsay eds., 55.

<sup>40</sup> Priscilla Settee, 'Pimatisiwin: Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Our Time Has Come' (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2007), 7. Diana Steinhauer and James Lamouche, 'miyo-pimâtsiwin, "A Good Path"', 87.

and her ‘womenfamily’ cook for the tree using eclectic ingredients gathered throughout the novel, the importance of each communicated to Bernice in her dreamstate (245). These are constituted of foods that are part of a traditionally Cree diet — muskeg, pemmican, oolichan grease, moose intestines, and deer brain — and imports from other countries, such as cumin, lemon, lavender, aniseed, and masala powder. Writing about food and health among the Whampagoostui Cree of Northern Quebec typically highlights Cree food as a ‘fundamental and necessary basis for “being alive well”’ and ‘symbolically and nutritionally stronger than non-Cree food’.<sup>41</sup> In *Birdie*, though, Lindberg redefines and updates tradition, showing it is as adaptive, with Cree food combined with non-Cree cuisine in a ceremony that has spiritual significance for Bernice in the present. ‘Non-traditional’ foods are imbued with a sense of the sacred, as epitomised in the celebrity figure of the Frugal Gourmet Chef, in a television show available on CBC North, who appears to Bernice in dreams and becomes a guiding figure shrouded by holiness. In one dream, for example, he sits on the floor and begins to drum, like a shaman, surrounded by pots and pans comparable to ceremonial paraphernalia (239). In this way, Lindberg imbues contemporary popular culture with distinctively Indigenous mores and extends them. It is the Chef who suggests that *Pimatisewin* needs food medicine; not only traditionally Cree medicine, but *tiramisù*, an Italian dessert which is part of the repertoire of food from which Bernice draws (3). This blend of popular and sacred, new and ancient, disrupts essentialising assumptions about Indigeneity and tradition, in how Bernice experiences the cultures that shape her.<sup>42</sup> This is exemplified in the healing ceremony in the final chapter, when Bernice, Val, Freda, and Lola feed the tree with traditionally Indigenous food, ‘the sacred’, and

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<sup>41</sup> For example, Andelson, ‘Health Beliefs and The Politics of Cree Wellbeing’, 13.

<sup>42</sup> In this way, Lindberg participates in a critique of modernity, a topic that I discuss further in my reading of Norma Dunning’s short stories in the next chapter. The Indigenous women in this thesis challenge spurious dichotomies and represent tradition as innovative rather than stagnant, bringing to the foreground what Walter Mignolo underlines in his study on the coloniality of power, that ‘the distinction between modernity/tradition is part of the larger strategy of the denial of coevalness, the creation and reproduction of colonial and imperial differences, and, more generally, of building and maintaining the colonial matrix of power’, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 174.

what Lindberg describes as more ‘exotic’ food because its origins are elsewhere (247). Their ceremony suggests a wider collective healing because the tree ‘was waiting to be fed’ and ‘to have nations unite in one place’ (247). In this novel, healing takes place at the level of community and requires genuine participation, respect, and care from a much wider Canadian community.

The inclusion of Lola in Bernice’s family and her participation in the healing ceremony is significant if, as Lindberg suggested in an interview, ‘Lola is metaphorically Canada’.<sup>43</sup> At the beginning of the novel, Lola is described as typical: Bernice had ‘run into Lolas before in her life. Sure her name was different and sometimes she was even a he, but it was the same person. Lolas were almost always fascinated because they had never met an Indian before’ (9). As Lola spends more time with Bernice, Val, and Freda, she begins to un-learn stereotypes she has imbibed and to see Indigenous women as an ‘Indian version of herself’ (124, 115). Lola relates to Bernice more profoundly in the knowledge that she too is a ‘survivor’ of domestic violence (113). Lola undergoes a process in which she addresses the ‘cruelty’ of her white friends’ and their racist behaviours and ‘deplores the mirror image in herself’, and when she discovers she is reflected differently in Bernice’s gaze, ‘[i]t moves her. A different woman. A different Lola’ (112). If Lola is made representative of ‘Canada’, her character suggests positive potential for transformation and healthy relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The model of care that Lindberg suggests through Lola is different from the one outlined by the TRC which stakes reconciliation in Canada’s reputation as ‘a prosperous, just, and inclusive democracy within [the] global world’ and remains tied to notions of democratic progress and nationalistic pride.<sup>44</sup> As Kait Pinder argues, the model of transformative care suggested by Lola’s character is not ‘something that belongs to Lola as

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<sup>43</sup> Tracey Lindberg in Cathy Alex, ‘Canada Reads: 5 Lessons from *Birdie* Author Tracey Lindberg in Thunder Bay’, *CBC*, 13 March 2016, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/thunder-bay/canada-reads-birdie-thunder-bay-lessons-1.3487977> [accessed November 2020]

<sup>44</sup> TRC, *Honouring the Truth*, 7.

compassion belongs to the nation in the colonial model, but a gift that is created through and exists only in relation'.<sup>45</sup> Like Judy and Steve in *Celia's Song*, Lola chooses to stay in solidarity with the Indigenous women, even though she does not often understand the full meaning behind their ceremonies and healing practices. For example, she expresses disbelief that Bernice may have come to Gibsons because she 'heard a tree call her', and at the healing ceremony 'doesn't quite understand the offering, and the feast even less' (236). Nevertheless, Lola 'sparkles with richness from being a part of it all' (250). Lola does not understand Indigenous ways but occasionally speaks Cree as a 'gift' and gesture of love towards Bernice, which is surprising for both 'because Lola does not speak Cree' (55). Similarly, when Freda hears Lola sing a song which in 'no earthly way' has she ever heard, she is less surprised that 'Lola knows a pow wow song *by heart*' and more that 'Lola doesn't know that she knows it' (132). Like the Frugal Gourmet Chef, Lola (a pastry chef herself), appears in Bernice's dreams, 'stirring a pot over a fire near the base of Pimatisewin', whispering that '*there is no more food for the tree*' and that '*the old tree is a Kohkom [grandmother] tree*' (28). Finally, the Epilogue reveals that Lola has visited the sacred tree prior to meeting Bernice and her family (255). Lindberg's characterisation of Lola as 'a little bit of a bigot' who is 'as bad as you might think' but also 'has a really big heart' and is 'loving' and 'good', disrupts binary and essentialised depictions of colonisers and colonised (9).<sup>46</sup> Indigenous relationality emerges as a possible pathway for healthy relationships in *Birdie*, not least through Lola, as does the idea that settlers may not need to understand in order to begin to practise it. According to Lindsay Nixon, '[e]thical love is a pedagogy of relationality taught to Indigenous peoples by their kin' and 'activated' through 'attentiveness to kinship responsibilities'.<sup>47</sup> If Lindberg employs what Nixon calls 'Relational' and 'Love Aesthetics' to depict a model for more ethical relationships,

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<sup>45</sup> Kait Pinder, 'Action, Feeling, Form: The Aesthetics of Care in Tracey Lindberg's *Birdie*', *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 44.1 (2019), 227-8.

<sup>46</sup> Alex, 'Canada Reads: 5 Lessons from *Birdie* Author Tracey Lindberg in Thunder Bay'.

<sup>47</sup> Nixon, 'Toward an Indigenous Relational Aesthetics', 195.

this is imaginatively epitomised by the tree.<sup>48</sup> Beyond the symbology of the tree, love in its various facets figures prominently in both *Birdie* and *Heart Berries* as ‘deep caring’ and being ‘in good relation’. But neither author presents it simplistically; there are angry insinuations and painful refusals to forgive in both texts.

### **Love and the Refusal to Forgive**

In her search of home and family, Bernice is seeking love. This is suggested in the title because ‘Birdie’ is the name that Bernice associates with feeling happy and loved. As a child, Bernice ‘found herself difficult to love’ and ‘had always believed that her mom could not love her’ (61). Her family would call her ‘Birdie’ when she was ‘good’, so the term of endearment becomes a way for Bernice ‘to try on a persona — one which was able to try happiness, could feel happiness’ (144-5). ‘Birdie’ is not only associated with tenderness but also with her ‘birdself’, an empowered sense of self that Bernice learns to embrace as she navigates the ‘changeworld’ while in ‘wakesleep’ (138, 155). Like her grandmother, Bernice is a shapeshifter experiencing ‘*kweskatisowin*’ or ‘change of life’ which ‘takes root in spirit first and body next’ (67, 168). In her sleep, she becomes ‘owl’ and flies ‘back and forth’ to learn lessons she has ignored or avoided in her waking life (155). She remembers when, by a river in Waterton Park, she hears the ‘spirittalk’ of the ‘stone people’ who tell her that her mother Maggie is ‘gone’ (202-3). It is only in the ‘now’ that she can receive the message; then, she did not listen because she ‘could not absorb the weight of the meaning’, convincing herself that ‘her mind was playing tricks on her’ (203). That day, Bernice remembers, ‘she knew there was no love’ but, retrospectively, she begins to understand ‘what her past has been’, and when she hears an owl whispering comforting words, she knows that she ‘is talking to herself’ (202, 205). Her birdself is a pure and loving essence that freely moves between temporal planes, safely and knowingly

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<sup>48</sup> Nixon, ‘Toward an Indigenous Relational Aesthetics’, 196.

— it is what Fellner calls a ‘past-present-future self-in-relation to the natural and spirit world’, or what Willie Ermine (Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation) describes as the ‘inner space’ and defines as ‘the universe of being within each person that is synonymous with the soul, the spirit, the self, or the being’.<sup>49</sup> Bernice’s birdself, then, may be interpreted as an expression of love and healing that resists imposition of external (settler) ontological categories. Bernice is at once within and outside of her body, human and nonhuman, present and absent, awake and asleep, here and there, now and then, dead and alive. Val, Freda, and Lola worry that Bernice looks like she is dying, ‘pale, sickly’, but, at the same time, she also looks ‘gorgeous’ and more alive ‘[l]ike her body fits her spirit’ (234). As Bernice undergoes this process, she re-establishes a sense of ‘wholeness as a complex being-in-relation’, and in the last of her dreams ‘*She dreams of going home / She dreams that she is loved*’ (242).<sup>50</sup>

‘Heart Berries’ may not be as ‘romantic’ and ‘forgettable’ a title as one reviewer has judged, because it carries a bundle of meanings that bind love to the intensity of grief.<sup>51</sup> Mailhot remembers the story of the first healer whose name ‘Heart Berry Boy or O’dimin’ means “‘strawberry” in the language’ (12). After his mother dies, amid sickness and grief for an ‘Indian world’ that is changing, O’dimin negotiates with Bear to ‘unearth’ the medicine that would heal the people in his village; it is only after O’dimin proves that he is willing to give his life to this endeavour that Bear gifts him strawberries. The healing powers of this particular fruit are emphasised by a Potawatomi biologist, Robin Wall Kimmerer, who recounts a creation story in which the generous daughter of Skywoman (the first woman, who fell from the sky) tragically dies when giving birth and is buried by her mother. In death, Skywoman’s daughter shares love: ‘Her final gifts, our most revered plants, grew from her body. The strawberry arose

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<sup>49</sup> Fellner, ‘Iskotew and Crow’, 156. Willie Ermine quoted in Michael A. Hart, ‘Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin (the good life)’, 101.

<sup>50</sup> Fellner, ‘Iskotew and Crow’, 153.

<sup>51</sup> Parul Sehgal, ‘January’s Book Club Pick: “Heart Berries” Shatters a Pattern of Silence’, *The New York Times*, 30 January 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/30/books/review-heart-berries-terese-marie-mailhot.html> [accessed August 2022]

from her heart. In Potawatomi, the strawberry is *ode min*, the heart berry'.<sup>52</sup> In creation stories love emerges as more powerful, abundant, and healing when it is shaped by loss. In *Heart Berries*, a similar connection is established between the intensities of love and pain when Mailhot writes, 'in many ways my mother taught me love was divine — like a hermitage or vision or picking from the tree of knowledge. Mother didn't like the Bible, but I appreciate it for how suffering is related to profundity' (34). If pain and love are manifestations of profundity, they are not separable in Mailhot's personal experience: 'pain expanded my heart' (118). To foreground pain does not mean to privilege tragedy. Mailhot's narrative traces personal reconciliation with pain through art, with writing an act of resistance to tragedy. In this sense, and drawing from Eve Sedgwick's conception of a reparative reading, one could read *Heart Berries*' trajectory as moving from paranoid needs — which anticipate and ward off pain — to a reparative stance centring on how one lives through pain, and how pain shapes learning and wisdom. Sedgwick argues that reparative stances often develop from paranoid needs and in *Heart Berries* Mailhot distils paranoid 'exigencies', suggesting how paranoid and reparative stances coexist as mutable positions.<sup>53</sup> It is clear in this text that pain and trauma are seen as 'inherited', as is a fear of repeating mistakes made by family members: 'I have the blood memory of my neurotic ancestors and their vices' (32). Blood memories are ancestral memories, felt knowledge from previous lives, inherited genetically.<sup>54</sup> Mailhot makes clear, though, that if she has inherited the neuroses and vices of her ancestors, she has also inherited the strength it takes to address them: '[m]y people cultivated pain' (118).

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<sup>52</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants* (London: Penguin Random House UK, 2013), 23.

<sup>53</sup> Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', 129.

<sup>54</sup> Together with 'heart knowledge', further discussed later, Leilani Holmes defines 'blood memories' as the knowledge that 'passes through generations'. This notion most suitably describes the felt knowledge portrayed in *Heart Berries*. Leilani Holmes quoted in Jo-Ann Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008), 47.

Paranoia's vocabulary of doom gives way to more hopeful reparation — restoration to self and to others — and Mailhot comes to terms with pain because she realises it is not a disease to be eradicated or an error to be fixed, but that which must be understood, with a potential for wisdom to be nurtured. A narrative of paranoid inevitability, in the way Sedgwick conceptualises a 'generational narrative', becomes a reparative narrative wherein the intensity of affect passes through generations as a gift:

Pain brought me to you, and our children have blood memories of sorrow and your joy, too. They inherited their share, to cultivate their own children, whose humanity and gentleness will remind them of you and me [...] Had I not been born and cultivated in this history, I wonder how dim and dumb my life would be. I feel fortunate with this education, and these horrors, and you (118-9).

Sedgwick writes that one of the names for the reparative process is love.<sup>55</sup> A narrative of abuse and pain in which trauma is neither denied or resolved, may be a narrative of hope, love, and survivance for Mailhot: 'Words I never knew to be — I am. More than a drunken father or monster, and more than the bright of my iris, or the hope I was given from my grandmother. I've exceeded every hope I gave to myself' (116). This is not a sudden epiphany but comes in pieces, in the alleys of writing, and accompanies another realisation, the sudden, painful memory of her father's abuse of her with which the memoir ends, leaving recovery as a possibility yet unattained.

In different ways, Mailhot and Lindberg explore how love and care are deepened by, or co-constituted with, other affects that are seemingly incompatible with Eurocentric notions of forgiveness. When Mailhot explores forgiveness and its refusal, she writes that it is 'dangerous to forgive' abusers and that some actions are 'unforgivable' (40, 82, 117, 118). She puts under scrutiny a notion of forgiveness as the dissolution of pain:

The group counsellor said that one must forgive for one's self and not for the perpetrator. This made little-to-no sense in my mind [...] In white culture, forgiveness is synonymous with letting go. In my culture, I believe we carry pain

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<sup>55</sup> Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', 128.

until we can reconcile with it through ceremony. Pain is not framed like a problem with a solution (28-9).

In my reading, the situation as described echoes the TRC's model for testimony which is underpinned by the understanding that self-exposure in the form of linear narrative is expected to be followed by the imperative to forgive. Mailhot suggests that forgiveness articulated in this way is meaningless and that before reconciliation with any perpetrator — perhaps even before reconciliation with others and the land — one needs to reconcile with affect.

Lindberg represents anger as an expression of care, and vengeance as an act of protection towards loved ones. Differently from Mailhot's destabilising sudden return of a repressed memory, in *Birdie* the memory of abuse is always lurking in Bernice's distrust of men and in sounds and images through which traumatic memories intrude. When 'Bird Bernice' visits one particular memory that she has repressed — a climactic moment corresponding to the burning of her childhood home, and death of her uncle Larry — she finds that anger is not as 'unknown to her' as she had thought, but it electrifies her (68, 177). Bernice watches her past self intervene when her uncle preys on Freda, and their family resemblance sparks the knowledge that Larry also abused his sister Maggie (Bernice's mother), which makes her 'snap' (175).<sup>56</sup> Anger marked by 'snapping' is 'the sign of the end' because 'her ability to numb herself to what the uncle did was closed' (176). 'Snap snap snap' repeated some seven times marks the stages of BirdBernice's attack on her uncle. When his excitement causes a heart attack, Bernice feels a wave of revulsion because she wants him to take responsibility for his crimes, to 'look up at her and plead with teary eyes for help, forgiveness, silence' (177). She denies him assistance and sets the house afire with him in it, enacting vengeance as a form of care and protection for Freda, compassion for herself, her mother, and even the land because Larry's actions impact *Pimatisewin*, and Bernice's medical report

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<sup>56</sup> Bernice, then, learns about 'Freda's paternity' and the 'link' between Freda and the family. This realisation is compounded by the knowledge that Freda, too, suffers sexual abuse at the hands of Larry (175).

records that she mutters ‘*Tree killer*’ when hospitalised for the burns she sustains (125). Angry or painful love, even when violence is a by-product as in this instance, may be understood through an ethics of ‘deep caring’, an expression used by Lee Maracle in a personal essay written to empower women and girls, *I Am Woman* (1988): ‘In the early years of my political activism the passion expressed itself as virulent hatred for the system which destroyed our lives, our families; today, the passion expresses itself as deep caring’.<sup>57</sup> Among many Indigenous scholars who describe politicised anger as an expression of caring, Leey’qsun (Coast Salish) scholar Rachel Flowers suggests that ‘resistance is written in both rage and love’, and contends that because of ‘profound love for one another and our land [...] we are full of rage’.<sup>58</sup> The reconciliatory discourse espoused by the TRC, though, risks suppressing anger when Glen Coulthard believes, ‘individual and collective resentment’ expressed as ‘angry and vigilant unwillingness to forgive’ is an ‘affective indication that we care deeply about ourselves, about our land and cultural communities, and about the rights and obligations we hold as First Peoples’.<sup>59</sup> Lindberg pushes these ideas imaginatively, with Larry exemplifying one way in which colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and misogyny infiltrate Indigenous communities to sever the webs of relationality that would otherwise strengthen them. Bernice’s refusal to forgive him is an act of resistance and personal resurgence that marks the ‘beginning of the end’, a rebirth that Bernice finally allows herself to remember and reconcile in her life (172).

Lindberg and Mailhot address family violence as a key determinant of health, by evoking memories of abuse that Lindberg’s character Bernice and Mailhot herself suffer at the hands of family members. This is crucial in Indigenous discussions of reconciliation, and in

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<sup>57</sup> Lee Maracle, *I am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism* (Toronto, ON: Press Gang Publishers, 1996), 3.

<sup>58</sup> Rachel Flowers, ‘Refusal to Forgive: Indigenous Women’s Love and Rage’, *Decolonization: Education, Indigeneity & Society*, 4.2 (2015), 40-1.

<sup>59</sup> Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 126.

2017 Lindberg delivered a presentation, entitled ‘(W)rec(k)-onciliation: Indigenous Lands and Peoples’ Respect, Reciprocity and Relationships’, where she approached reconciliation ‘as a measure of the health of relationships’, emphasising interconnections between health and law.<sup>60</sup> She suggested that violence within Indigenous communities needed to be addressed in reconciliatory discourse not as an Indigenous problem but a colonial phenomenon. As Cindy Holmes and Sarah Hunt have demonstrated, colonial discourse and power dynamics are replicated in ‘examinations of the issue of family violence’ with Indigenous family violence assumed to be a product of ‘inherently abnormal and defective’ Indigenous communities, rather than a specific product of ongoing oppression, the legacy of residential schools and of settler colonialism.<sup>61</sup> Home, love, health, and relationality are as interrelated in Lindberg’s novel as they are in her academic work where she emphasises the importance of building a critical framework of law and justice rooted in Indigenous consciousness. In Lindberg’s stated view, issues around reconciliation ‘are never solved in a courtroom’ or in ‘a city council room’ but ‘in our kitchens, in our living rooms [because] Art allows us into other people’s bedrooms, other people’s kitchens, other people’s homes’.<sup>62</sup> In her novel, then, when Lindberg depicts violence within Indigenous communities it is to emphasise how laws of relationality are broken, resulting in ruptures that require healing at the level of the individual and the collective. She outlines the Cree principle of *wahkohtowin* that encompasses a web of ‘reciprocal and

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<sup>60</sup> Author not attributed, ‘Challenging Safe Ideas: Dr. Tracey Lindberg Examines Reconciliation at VIU’s Second Annual Indigenous Speakers Series’, *Vancouver Island University*, 2 November 2016, <https://news.viu.ca/challenging-safe-ideas-dr-tracey-lindberg-examines-reconciliation-vius-second-annual-indigenous> [accessed November 2020]

<sup>61</sup> Cindy Holmes and Sarah Hunt, *Indigenous Communities and Family Violence: Changing the Conversation* (Prince George, BC: National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health, 2017), 11, 16. A narrative of Indigenous deficiency persists even though the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) made clear in 1996 that family violence in Indigenous communities is directly linked to ‘interventions of the state deliberately introduced to disrupt or displace’ Indigenous families, and that it is ‘fostered and sustained by a racist social environment that promulgates demeaning stereotypes of Aboriginal women and men and seeks to diminish their value as human beings and their right to be treated with dignity’. Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, *Gathering Strength*, vol. 3, Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (Ottawa: Canada Communication Group, 1996), 52, <http://data2.archives.ca/e/e448/e011188230-03.pdf>

<sup>62</sup> Lindberg quoted in Cathy Alex, ‘Canada Reads: 5 Lessons from *Birdie* Author Tracey Lindberg in Thunder Bay’.

committed' relationships and functions as an unwritten code that sets out 'the behavioural standards and obligation existing between those who have entered a relationship'.<sup>63</sup> Sorrow and pain may never truly subside, but one may re-establish relations through ceremony as Bernice does in *Birdie*, and as Mailhot does through the act of writing about her life.

### **Stories That Tell and Refuse to Tell**

*Birdie* and *Heart Berries* are resistant, reparative, and decolonising stories that are told but also elude complete retelling. Their opaque language brings to the foreground how direct, linear representation may fail, illustrating ways in which words may be insufficient when affective experience can only be delivered in gusts of lyricism and broken sentences. Mailhot rejects 'neat narratives or formulas' in her desire to craft a text that is 'sparse and interested in the blank space' in continuity with Salish traditions of telling (28, 48). In *Heart Berries*, her bursts of lyricism channel the force of affect to suggest the ineffable: 'Can you wash me like a saint? [...] Wash me in my own regard and pain, and let me dry out' (99). In poetic fragments like this, images and symbols convey feelings which cannot be represented through what Mailhot refers to as 'explicit language' or 'saying things explicitly', identifying the limits of 'sensical' representation. Explicit language turns experience into something rational and logical to enumerate 'finite parameters, realities, truths'.<sup>64</sup> On the other end of the spectrum is Mailhot's 'ritual' or poetic language, including ellipses, absence, and silence — her 'blank space'. Reflecting on writing to Casey, Mailhot realises that the 'truth' about their love is 'a detailed thing when I'd prefer it to be a symbol or a poem', in which Casey and her three sons may 'see how terrible our love was, and why we chose it' (67). A 'blank space' dominates the concluding chapter addressed to her mother Wahzinak where plain language hinders truth instead of conveying it: 'Some knowledge can only be a song or a symbol. Language fails you and me.

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<sup>63</sup> Lindberg, 'Critical Indigenous Legal Theory Part 1', 227; Lindberg, 'Critical Indigenous Legal Theory' (Dissertation), 55.

<sup>64</sup> Mailhot and Kane, 'Afterword', 137.

Some things are too large' (120). This chapter comprises a prose poem because mother and daughter crave 'something abstract from each other'.<sup>65</sup>

Lindberg's poetics also brings the insufficiency of the English language to the foreground of her novel's conceptualisation. Lindberg coins 'big words' (or 'fullwords' as Kait Pinder calls them) by joining together two or more into a single unit that may better communicate kinship ties.<sup>66</sup> 'Littlebigwomandaughter/mother', 'sistercousin', 'daughterniece', and 'bigwomansisterlittlemother' indicate relationships that are culturally significant (1, 23, 25, 61). Lindberg's concern that Indigenous family relationships find a place in written texts is underlined in her essays where she analyses how the English language 'cannot fully encompass the intricate web of relations in Indigenous families' where family extends beyond consanguinity, and kinship words also carry obligations, responsibilities, and spiritual significance.<sup>67</sup> Family is found among people who 'take care' of 'physical, emotional, and spiritual needs', in the way that Val, Freda, and Lola take care of Bernice.<sup>68</sup> Lindberg's word bundles convey the multifaceted relationships in this Cree family by bending English and its formal rules to express *nêhiyawî-itâpisiniwin* (Cree sensibility) and *nêhiyawî-mâmitonêyihcikan* (Cree consciousness). A translator of stories from Cree-Michif, Maria Campbell stresses weighing words, 'What is the story? Is there a song in the bundle, a ceremony, a protocol?'<sup>69</sup> Campbell captures how word bundles involve responsibilities that a

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<sup>65</sup> Mailhot and Kane, 'Afterword', 137.

<sup>66</sup> Pinder, 'Action, Feeling, Form', 233. In interview, Lindberg admits that although some people have called these 'compound words', she does not 'think of them that way' but as words that are 'big enough' to 'encompass' the author's feelings and thoughts. Lindberg quoted in Alex, 'Canada Reads: 5 Lessons from *Birdie* Author Tracey Lindberg in Thunder Bay'.

<sup>67</sup> Tracey Lindberg, 'Not My Sister: What Feminists Can Learn About Sisterhood from Indigenous Women', *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law*, 16.2 (2004), 343. Lindberg clarifies that she can relate with a 'total stranger at a subway stop' as kin because she sees in that person signs of colonial oppression that she understands. Not everybody, however, is family, and the title of the article points to the fact that settler women and Indigenous women are not 'sisters' because 'biology is not family' and they do not share the same experiences, 'Not My Sister', 348.

<sup>68</sup> Lindberg, 'Not My Sister', 348.

<sup>69</sup> Susan Gingell, 'One Small Medicine': An Interview with Maria Campbell', *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 83, (2004), 200.

translator must recognise because they contain histories, meanings, and relationships.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Louise Halfe's poetry, with which I opened this thesis, contains 'relational word bundles' as the 'English-language equivalent' of Cree 'holophrases' which, like Cree subheadings in *Birdie*, are 'units of utterance' that result when 'lexical and grammatical morphemes' are joined in a single word.<sup>71</sup> Lindberg's word bundles, like Halfe's in Mareike Neuhaus' reading, 'enable the passing on of Cree traditions on Cree terms'.<sup>72</sup> Intuitive and affective intelligence is contained in such word bundles as felt knowledge of relationality, a concept that underpins many Indigenous traditions.<sup>73</sup> In my reading, 'quietspeak' and 'thoughtwords' used to describe Bernice and Val's ability to hear each other's thoughts, talk or even yell with 'mouths closed and eyes flashing', resonate with this notion (107, 118). These and other capacious words such as 'thinkingfeeling' and 'thinkdreaming' forge an alternative to the binaries of mind/heart, logic/intuition, thought/emotion, and conscious/subconscious by pointing to knowledge as reciprocative (66, 98). Word bundles are single-unit poems that afford a higher degree of expressivity by breaking print and grammar rules, so that 'fearanger', 'smellmemory', and 'ragemembe[r]', express affects and concepts that in standard English require paraphrasis (61, 90, 115). Oxymorons proliferate in *Birdie* — 'delighthorror', 'sleepingwake', 'littlebig', and 'hardsoftly' — and in clauses that bring together seemingly incompatible ideas in ways that are more typical in poetry (22, 26, 181, 183). When Bernice is hospitalised, for example, a 'cognizance' is described as 'stormy harmony' and 'freedom

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<sup>70</sup> This is also informed by Tasha Beeds' insight on the significance of words in 'Rethinking Edward Ahenakew's Intellectual Legacy: Expressions of nêhiyawî-mâmitonêyihcikan (Cree Consciousness or Thinking)', *Mixed Blessings: Indigenous Encounters with Christianity in Canada*, Tolly Bradford and Chelsea Horton eds., (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2016), 119-120.

<sup>71</sup> Mareike Neuhaus, 'What's in A Frame: The Significance of Relational Word Bundles in Louise Bernice Halfe's *Blue Marrow*', *Listening Up, Writing Down, and Looking Beyond: Interfaces of the Oral, Written, and Visual*, Susan Gingell and Wendy Roy eds., (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), 222.

<sup>72</sup> Neuhaus, 'What's in A Frame', 233, 225.

<sup>73</sup> In the Hawaiian context, for example, Leilani Holmes defines 'heart knowledge' as that which is 'passed to others in the context of relationships and deep feelings of connection', as quoted in Jo-Ann Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork*, 47.

within a straightjacket' (98).<sup>74</sup> Felt knowledge is also expressed as synaesthesia when Bernice can 'smell the dark' and hear emptiness, the intermingling of her senses defying a logic of separation and fixity (47). A distinctive feature of Lindberg's narrative style is her use of punctuation and penchant for broken sentences that generate a staccato rhythm and emphatic effect: 'she led a quiet life. Read books. Thought. Seldom spoke. And. Every so often. Went under. Shifted. It was not like Now, Now being so intertwined with Then that her heartbeat seems not to be within her and her senses are alive to Then more than Now' (98). In passages such as this, the musicality in orality is suggested in short, sharp breaths that build to reach a climactic élan after the isolated conjunction 'and' alerts readers to a new, significant, piece of information that is being revealed. The intensity of the effect is accentuated by the larger and longer breath that follows with accelerated flow.

While doubt is generative in Maracle's *Celia's Song* and manifests at the level of content as well as form, as I argue in Chapter 1, in Lindberg's and Mailhot's texts doubt and opacity emerge at the level of language and sentence structure. In Lindberg's novel, doubt permeates words whenever language is seen to be insufficient to convey ineffable experiences and linguistic hesitation better communicates the indescribable. Bernice's condition is never defined in a way that fixes its meaning; it is a 'wakesleep' and a 'changeworld', a 'dreamstate', and more (50, 155, 245). Indecision emerges in and through relationality, as when Val feels thankful 'to Maggie. For Maggie. About Maggie', or in transitions between states of being, 'When Bernice awakens? Unfurls? Un-changes? Rises?' (223, 84). Linguistic doubt reveals 'the arbitrariness' of the world and of language when what Bernice experiences could be captured in any one of the words suggested, all of them, or none (84). Doubt has a generative quality in *Heart Berries*, too, when Mailhot puts under scrutiny words that stem from a

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<sup>74</sup> A similar paradox is suggested in *Heart Berries* in relation to the experience of hospitalisation, where Mailhot suggests a feeling of imprisonment but also of being at home because of the presence of other women in a similar situation: 'We mirrored each other's blank stares. It was nice to feel at home in that odd place' (24).

normatively ‘white’ system of knowledge, like ‘resilience’, ‘forgiveness’, and ‘self-esteem’, and seeks alternatives that may come closer to her Indigenous experience (7, 28, 29). For example, Mailhot writes that the ‘Indian condition’ of survival cannot be contained in a notion of ‘resilience’ that ‘seems ascribed to a human conditioning in white people’ and that, instead, the ‘Indian condition is my grandmother’, with personification as an affective choice (7). The description of her grandmother relates back to her experiences in residential school and then as a nursery teacher: ‘There are stories that she brought children to our kitchen, gave them laxatives, and then put newspaper on the ground. She squatted before them and made faces to illustrate how hard they should push. She dewormed children in this way, and she learned that in the residential school — where parasites and nuns and priests contaminated generations of our people’ (7). Mailhot’s grandmother is not presented as a victim; rather, her strength in caring for others and her humour are highlighted. Mailhot and Lindberg doubt the efficacy, and by extension the worth of the English language, using it unconventionally to resist the imposition of external categories, generating a language of affect that is reparative.

Opacity and ineffability are also conveyed through the thematic nexus of missing women and lost mothers in these texts where Indigenous women ‘decide to leave’ or ‘go missing’ (*HB* 102). The absence of a mother figure, and the re-presence that can be afforded through memories of her, constitutes a salient feature in works in which maternal figures are depicted as caring but also sometimes negligent. Like Rain in Vermette’s *The Break*, mothers are guiding, creative forces; their stories spaces through which Lindberg and Mailhot explore ancestral witnessing.<sup>75</sup> Although largely addressed to Casey, *Heart Berries* is dedicated to Mailhot’s mother Wahzinak, and in a final formal twist in the concluding chapter, the second-person shifts from a letter to Casey into an elegy for Wahzinak. In *Birdie*, too, the mother figure

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<sup>75</sup> See Peter Morin, ‘this is what happens when we perform the memory of the land’, *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action In and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin eds., (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 78.

is a 'driving force' but her presence suggested tenuously.<sup>76</sup> Before she enters her 'wakesleep', Bernice learns that her mother Maggie is 'gone' and the Prologue sets her among 'spirits' in a 'place' of 'endless celebration' (58, 1). Like Bernice who 'tries hard not to think *dead and gone*' or 'gone dead', readers suspect that Maggie may no longer be alive (58). At no point, however, do readers learn how she dies, even though the Epilogue is narrated from her perspective. By way of absence, lack of information, and elusive hints, Lindberg suggests the sense of loss and suspension that families experience when women go missing. Where Lindberg chooses to suspend Maggie in a narrative void, Mailhot opts for poignant stylistic grandiosity in a final chapter rich in biblical references whereby Wahzinak is conflated with the myth of Perpetua and compared to Eve: 'Were you corporeal manifestation of a spirit world — your leather jacket and brown body and fist — holy? [...] You were stealthier than Eve. So stealthy, there is no text of you — until now' (121). In this instance, Mailhot becomes a prophet and her text sacred; in ritual language, she positions herself in continuity: 'your pine and winter willow are in my body. As are my grandmother's olive seed and red hill earth' (123). The rhythm here is marked by rhetorical questions that brim with symbolism and suggest the solemnity of a prayer: 'What of the body, Wahzinak? What of your skin — that pine, and then the winter willow beneath [...] What of death [...] What of my body and the women who've left?' (120-3). The ceremonial tone is enhanced through refrains of praise in Halkomelem that are left untranslated.

The healing power of stories is emphasised in both texts. In *Birdie* it is conveyed by Bernice — 'I am feeling like I have a story to tell you' — and in the penultimate chapter of *Heart Berries* Mailhot writes that she can now 'name' her pain 'so well' that 'people are afraid of the consequences and power' (*Birdie* 250, *HB* 119). It would be easy to assume both women

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<sup>76</sup> When Lindberg leaves Maggie at the fringes of her novel, her stated aim is not to 'overshadow' Bernice or to 'indict' Maggie. Tracey Lindberg, 'For Book Clubs: An Author Interview', *Birdie*, 261.

are healed because they have found ways to tell their stories. However, in my reading, neither Mailhot nor Lindberg allude to the individualistic principle of a narrative cure, but to Indigenous traditions in the way Leanne Simpson illustrates: ‘once an individual has carried a particular teaching around to the point where they can easily embody that teaching, they, then, also become responsible for sharing it according to the ethics and protocols of the system’.<sup>77</sup> While this *is* a form of healing, it is not fixed, nor is it exclusive but holistic, relational, and fluid. As Dion Buffalo writes from a Plains Cree perspective, ‘[h]ealing through stories is but one aspect of synthesizing our relationship with ourselves and with the entire universe’.<sup>78</sup> By becoming storytellers, Mailhot and Bernice (and by extension Lindberg) embody a place of connection and community, laying out ways of coping and rebuilding relationships that may contribute to creating a sustainable future in the wake of a long history of hardships. If ‘damage-centred’ research ‘document[s] people’s pains and brokenness to hold those in power accountable for their oppression’, it is a site of paranoid practice that places emphasis on exposure rather than rebuilding or repairing communities.<sup>79</sup> Reparative approaches are useful because, as Sedgwick notes, ‘to practice other than paranoid forms of knowing does not, in itself, entail a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression’.<sup>80</sup> Lindberg and Mailhot foreground trauma in order to interrogate healing but reformulate these concepts in ways that differ from how they may be framed and mobilised by colonialism, imagining how hurt may be processed to harness the power of anger into deep caring for individuals, families, communities, and the land. If an ‘aesthetic of healing’ may risk being co-opted for assimilative purposes of transparency and neoliberal individualism, as Emma LaRocque (Cree-Métis) highlights, Lindberg and Mailhot articulate a more nuanced approach to healing that is alert to these risks, offering a model that is layered and open-ended, culturally-specific, and

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<sup>77</sup> Leanne Simpson quoted in Rachel Flowers, ‘Refusal to Forgive’, 43.

<sup>78</sup> Dion Buffalo quoted in Anne Poonwassie and Ann Charter, ‘An Aboriginal Worldview of Helping’, 67.

<sup>79</sup> Eve Tuck, ‘Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities’, *Harvard Educational Review*, 79.3 (2009), 409.

<sup>80</sup> Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading’, 128.

multidimensional: a model which non-Indigenous peoples can appreciate even if they may not always understand it completely.<sup>81</sup>

The way these narratives draw to a close may initially suggest a sense of completion, but if a sense of closure seems imminent, the ending of both texts is incomplete and potentially destabilising for readers. In *Heart Berries*, readers may expect the penultimate chapter to be the final one, not only because the last sentence communicates a sense of closure, but also because this chapter bears the same title as the first, and together they create a sense of circularity. However, Mailhot disrupts the expectations she creates in readers. What follows is Wahzinak's epic and a series of interrogatives, questions to which there can be no answers. The end is abrupt as Mailhot asks her mother, 'Did you foreordain heaven before you died? Was I there on your chest, or did you hold me from the door' (124). At the linguistic level, Mailhot disturbs grammatical rules about punctuation, phrase, and word order: what begins as a question, ends as statement. At the level of writing, what it contains remains unresolved and open-ended. At the level of the reading experience, the 'I' of *Heart Berries* is not as unified as may be expected at its close; it is shattered, and while hope is not precluded, there is no pretence of (ab)solution. In *Birdie*, the Epilogue offers a fragment of Maggie's supposed final journey. It pulls at the strings of story, revealing that Maggie arrives in Gibsons to visit *Pimatisewin* and tell the sacred tree her story when Bernice is hospitalised in Edmonton for burns she sustains in the house fire. This suggests, retrospectively, that some of the connections that Bernice makes on her journey to Gibsons are first triggered by Maggie, including her relationship with Lola whom Maggie notices when she visits the tree. Links are not explicated, though, and readers left with more questions: what is the connection between Lola and the tree? The Epilogue traces Maggie's journey to Eastside Vancouver where 'she knows someone like

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<sup>81</sup> Emma LaRocque, *When the Other Is Me: Native Resistance Discourse, 1850-1990* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2011), 168.

her can disappear' (256). More questions are raised when Maggie enters a bar and hears the music that haunts Bernice in her wakesleep and signifies her mother's disappearance. The narrative is interrupted by its suspended and aposiopetic ending: 'Walked in the door. And did' (256). Lack of subject and direct object takes fragmentation, grammatical rupture, and incompleteness even further towards utter unknowability, but also opens an array of possibilities for readers to imagine. The notion that healing may be completed in the act of narration is forcefully contrasted with the way both books end without closure.

Lack of closure reflects Lindberg's and Mailhot's perspectives on writing. The second and third chapters of *Heart Berries* were originally published as fiction and only later did the memory of childhood abuse at the hands of her father lead Mailhot to leave what she perceived as the safer ground of fiction to fill 'those holes left behind with memory', and attempt to 'craft truth' in memoir.<sup>82</sup> On the other hand, Lindberg has said in interview that her experiences as an Indigenous woman, legal scholar, and abuse survivor, are pieced together and mixed into fiction like 'little snippets of a quilt', so that *Birdie* represents 'everything that Bernice was going through' but also 'some of the changes' that were taking place in her own life. Nevertheless, while she expected writing to be therapeutic, she did not feel relief or find a release. Writing may not automatically 'free' or heal authors by operating therapeutically and cathartically, but, Lindberg suggests, 'it starts the process and little tiny healings'.<sup>83</sup> Mailhot concedes similarly that '[n]othing is ever communicated fully [...] it's not healing unless you keep moving — you're never done'.<sup>84</sup> Fragmentation is closer to experience, then, than absolutist claims to reality, and that is how healing may be understood in these texts.

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<sup>82</sup> Mailhot and Kane, 'Afterword', 127, 128.

<sup>83</sup> Lindberg, Radio Interview with Rosanna Deerchild.

<sup>84</sup> Mailhot and Kane, 'Afterword', in *Heart Berries*, 133.

The narratives that coalesce in this chapter explore disastrous effects on the health and well-being of individuals and communities. Fellner emphasises that the ‘overarching colonial deficit narrative’ is ‘reinforced’ in stories of pain that fetishise and commodify Indigenous peoples’ experiences in the ‘dominant discourse, including public stereotypes and media’ which portray Indigenous peoples and communities ‘in terms of deficits, disparities, and dysfunction’.<sup>85</sup> In the previous chapter, I begin to analyse the ‘overarching colonial deficit narrative’ to show how epistemic injustice affects Indigenous communities when they are not believed and pathologised. Deficiency also dominates as a paradigm against which the authors conceptualise health in this chapter because in *Birdie* and *Heart Berries* the balance shifts from pathologised trauma towards Indigenous approaches to health that interpret illnesses as imbalances and disharmonies, with healing a journey that is always in flux and love emerging as deep caring for ‘past-present-future self-in-relation to the natural and spirit worlds’.<sup>86</sup> These narratives foreground relationality as a path towards healing grounded in the resurgence of Indigenous traditions and philosophies, with English bent to convey a sense of Indigenous consciousness. Lindberg and Mailhot re-orient ‘forgiveness’ for how it may risk invalidating Indigenous resistance, with manifestations of love represented as refusals to forgive. Ultimately, language and form emphasise ineffability, unknowability, and incompleteness in what I read as a literary critique of the terms and terminology of forgiveness and individualistic healing, and of tidy conclusions. If healing equates to cultural affirmation and Indigenous resurgence, stories play a crucial role because they are spaces in which authors define their experiences in Indigenous terms, revitalising and redefining traditions as adaptive. It is an idea that I explore in more depth in the next chapter.

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<sup>85</sup> Fellner, ‘Iskotew and Crow’, 154-5.

<sup>86</sup> Fellner, ‘Iskotew and Crow’, 156.

## 4

### Perspectival Inuit Stories: Writing for Recovery and Challenging Narratives of ‘Indigenous Deficiency’

This chapter examines representations of residential schools and their legacies in contemporary Inuit writing by focussing on short stories by Norma Dunning. Born in Québec in 1959, Dunning is a Southern Inuk with ancestral ties to the village of Whale Cove, where her mother lived in the Kivalliq region. Her father was in the Canadian Army and the family travelled according to his postings. She now lives in Edmonton, where she helped found Inuit Edmontonmiut, which is dedicated to promoting Inuit culture. *Annie Muktuk and Other Stories* (2017) is her first collection of tales for which she was awarded the INDIEFAB Book of the Year Award (2017), the prestigious Danuta Gleed Literary Award (2018), and the Howard O’Hagan Award for the short story ‘Elipsee’ (2018). All sixteen stories are set in the recent past and address Inuit history between the 1940s and the 1990s, blending contemporary realities with ancestral memories passed through generations, Inuit cosmologies and beliefs. The English in which Dunning writes her stories is interrupted and enriched by Inuktitut words, most of which are included in an Inuktitut-English glossary at the end of the book. ‘Kabloona Red’ and ‘My Sisters and I’ directly engage with residential school experiences, while ‘Kakoot’ and ‘The Road Show Eskimo’ are set in different institutional contexts — a care home and a university — that fail to revise but consistently repeat strategies used in residential schools to dehumanise Indigenous peoples. Residential schools constitute a subtext in ‘Elipsee’, a healing story of love that recentres Inuit presence, rooted in place-based relationships with the land,

humans, and more-than-human beings, in creative contention with colonialism. These stories are written back to a moment of loss insofar as they are about the recovery of Inuit names, values, practices, language, and traditions. Dunning refuses to centre the damaging effects of residential schools, or of colonialism more broadly, foregrounding instead innovative and transformative ways to express Inuit culture and tradition in contemporary times.

Perspectival Indigenous stories convey truths that have otherwise been hidden, erased, misconstrued, or displaced by ‘toxic’ stories about Indigenous peoples used to justify genocide and land theft. In *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (2018), Cherokee author Daniel Heath Justice contends that the most ‘corrosive’ colonial narrative is that of ‘Indigenous deficiency’, because it locates the roots of Indigenous peoples’ struggles and losses in their ‘supposed lack of basic human decency’, rather than colonial assaults and settler violence.<sup>1</sup> According to this formulation, Indigenous peoples lack constitutional qualities in character, biology, and intellect. If deficit persists as ‘the defining trope for Indigenous peoples in the settler colonial imaginary’, issues affecting Indigenous communities — poverty, lower life expectancy, low employment and education rates, higher rates of incarceration, homelessness, substance abuse, violence, and suicide — are interpreted as evidence of innate deficiency.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Indigenous peoples’ achievements, happiness, and wellbeing are seen as resulting from successful assimilation and ‘proof of Indigenous diminishment’.<sup>3</sup> According to the narrative of deficiency, then, to be Indigenous is a problem that colonialism must fix; this is what Duncan Campbell Scott, deputy superintendent of Indian Affairs from 1913 to 1932, defined as the ‘Indian problem’. In 1920, Scott’s mission was to eliminate the ‘Indian problem’ through assimilation: ‘Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 147.

<sup>3</sup> Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 3.

not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question'.<sup>4</sup> Bev Sellars (Xat'sull) describes the pervasiveness of Indigenous deficiency in *They Called Me Number One* (2013), a memoir about her experiences in a residential school in the 1960s:

Messages I was getting from everyone around me at the Mission told me that I was inferior to White people [...] White society relayed that message to me in their words on the radio, in the actions in their everyday lives, and in their TV shows and movies. The schools and other agencies that were created to look after the Indians also relayed that message. Everything in society told me that I was not good enough because I was an Indian.<sup>5</sup>

Today, Canada condemns residential schools, but the assimilation policy that gave rise to abuses and the ideology that continues to mire Indigenous-settler relations in a colonial matrix of power are less understood by the wider Canadian public. The racist myth of Indigenous deficiency persists in the prevailing belief outlined by Paulette Regan, director of research for Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), that settler Canadians 'know what is best for Indigenous peoples'.<sup>6</sup> In *Unsettling the Settler Within* (2010), Regan scrutinises the paternalistic mindset that perpetuates 'benign' colonialism, noting that residential school policies are 'now described as a *well-intentioned* but ultimately devastating solution to what was known as the Indian problem'.<sup>7</sup> The myth of Indigenous deficiency is intricately tied to that of the 'benevolent peacemaker', which Regan identifies as the 'bedrock of settler identity', that has justified Canadians' 'misguided' and 'obsessive' quest to 'assuage colonizer guilt by solving the Indian problem'.<sup>8</sup> These are myths that continue to impact the dynamics of Indigenous-settler relations, including 'reconciliation'. The TRC exposed some of the Indigenous stories that have been repressed, hidden, or dismissed, contributing to a shift

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<sup>4</sup> Duncan Campbell Scott, testimony before the Special Committee of the House of Commons examining Indian Act amendments of 1920, quoted in E. Brian Titley, *A Narrow Vision: Duncan Campbell Scott and the Administration of Indian Affairs in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986), 50.

<sup>5</sup> Bev Sellars, *They Called Me Number One: Secrets and Survival at an Indian Residential School* (Vancouver, BC: Talon Books, 2013), 83.

<sup>6</sup> Paulette Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, 4; emphasis mine.

<sup>8</sup> Regan, *Unsettling the Settler Within*, 11.

in public discourse and collective memory. But the national reconciliatory discourse promoted by the state and circulated through media, fails to dispel the myth of Indigenous deficiency and instead reiterates it, adapting it to a neoliberal framework and further pathologising Indigenous peoples as trauma victims, as well as sensationalising narratives of suffering and loss, as I argued in Chapters 1 and 3. By relegating abuses perpetuated through residential schools to the past, state-sponsored reconciliation may conceal how an ideology of Indigenous deficiency is imbricated within settler society and continues to affect Indigenous communities. Across Canada, Indigenous peoples receive disproportionate attention from child welfare services because it is assumed that parents cannot take care of their children; they are targeted by the criminal justice system in the belief that they are violent and lack self-control; they are blamed for abuses they suffer when seeking protection in hospitals and from police, as discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. If, as Dian Million suggests, reconciliation is framed as a ‘humanitarian project’ that ‘reaffirms the people’s systemic inequality and endemic social suffering as a pathology’, and ‘a wound that is solely an outcome of past colonial policies’, it reinforces the idea that Indigenous peoples are in a state of lack and need to be saved by a benevolent settler society that grants ‘reconciliation’.<sup>9</sup> In neoliberal reconciliatory discourse, trauma is the deficit against which Indigenous experiences are ‘measured’ and ‘inevitably found wanting’.<sup>10</sup>

Inuit participation at the TRC drew attention to their unyielding presence, and a distinctive approach to ‘reconciliation’ that decidedly refused to centre losses and absences. As a result of intense lobbying by Inuit leaders who wanted to ensure that Inuit experiences were included and valued by the national commission, an Inuit sub-commission was created within Canada’s TRC in March 2010. Inuit perspectives risked being overlooked because many

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<sup>9</sup> Dian Million, *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013), 6.

<sup>10</sup> Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 3.



of oral and written Inuit storytelling that is central to IQ. Inuit literary tradition is rich in autobiographical writings, from the diary of Abraham Ulrikab written in the 1800s, the memoirs of Lydia Campbell (1894) and her great niece Elizabeth Goudie (1973), through the autobiography of Anthony Apakark Thrasher (1976). The most well-known memoirs by Inuit women are Alice Masak French's *My Name is Masak* (1976), about her time in a boarding school, and *Life Among the Qallunaat* by Mini Aodla Freeman, written in English and published in 1978. The first Inuit novel, written during the 1950s by Salomé Mitiarjuk Nappaaluk, and titled *Sanaaq* (1984; trans. 2014), contains autobiographical elements about life in Nunavik before the arrival of white missionaries. Inuit literary tradition is mostly constituted of stories which revisit the oral tradition; among them are tales told by Thomas Kusugaq to Hudson's Bay Company Post manager Alex Spalding, who transcribed them in 1979 as *Eight Inuit Myths/Inuit Unipkaaqtuat Pingasuniarvinilit*; children's books and YA novels by Kusugaq's son, Michael Arvaarluk Kusugak; Patsauq Markoosie's short novel *Harpoon of the Hunter* (trans. 1970), the first published novel by an Inuk writer; and Alooook Ipellie's *Arctic Dreams and Nightmares* (1993), the first collection of short stories by an Inuk author. Besides Dunning, more recent Inuit storytellers include Rachel A. Qitsualik-Tinsley, who has co-authored with her husband several books about Inuit culture, including the novel *Skraelings* (2015) set in the ancient Arctic, and artists, poets, and performers Tanya Tagaq, Taqralik Partridge, Renelitta Arluk, and Napatsi Folger. There is a steadily evolving publication culture. Dunning believes that creative fiction is a 'more accepted way of getting the truth out there', but that fewer Inuit authors write creatively because 'many don't get through education' and because stories are still told orally 'at the kitchen table' and passed through generations.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Dunning interviewed by Masinahikan Iskwe'wak, 'Episode 08: Norma Dunning on writing Annie Muktuk and Other Stories', *Book Women Podcast*, 2019, <https://anchor.fm/bookwomenpodcast/episodes/Episode-8-Norma-Dunning-on-Writing-Annie-Muktuk-and-Other-Stories-e520q8> [accessed January 2022] and Dunning interviewed by Zalika Reid Benta, 'TOK 2.0: In Conversation with Norma Dunning', *TOK Magazine*, *Diaspora Dialogues*, 2021, <https://soundcloud.com/tokwriting/tok-20-in-conversation-with-norma-dunning/s-SnzBR6WS5qh> [accessed January 2022]

She believes ‘the majority of those who write, write autobiographically; others take Inuit legends and rework them’.<sup>15</sup> In my reading, Dunning’s stories blur the boundaries between fiction, life-writing, and autoethnography, because they contain fictional as well as biographical elements about her family members, and adapt Inuit traditional stories to contemporary settings.

Anger is channelled imaginatively in an effort to refute negative stereotypical representations that persist.<sup>16</sup> Dunning has spoken of how she experienced the weight of expectations in academic and other largely white settings whenever she identified as Inuk and how she was subjected to personal and sometimes invasive questions about her fluency in Inuktitut, her eating habits, and her marriage. She was impelled to start writing *Annie Muktuk and Other Stories* in response to ethnographic representations of Inuit that dehumanise, commodify, and essentialise her culture, and especially Inuit women. ‘Getting mad’ when reading an anthropologist’s characterisation of Inuit women as ‘never in charge of their own sexuality’ inspired her eponymous character, Annie.<sup>17</sup> Annie appears in several stories, alongside Moses Henry who loves her, and his best friend Johnny Cochrane who feels threatened by her sexual appeal. Annie is a sardonic assemblage of misogynistic clichés: ‘She was bipolar. She liked the Arctic and the Antarctic. She played with penguins and the polar bears. Annie Mukluk liked to fuck and she did it with everyone in Igloolik and everywhere else she went. She’d fuck your father, your sister, all your brothers and finish off with your mother.

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<sup>15</sup> Dunning interviewed by Zalika Reid Benta, ‘TOK 2.0’.

<sup>16</sup> For example, an article published in 2019 on *The New York Times* titled ‘Drawn from Poverty: Art was Supposed to Save Canada’s Inuit. It Hasn’t’, has drawn criticism from Inuit and the wider public for perpetuating harmful stereotypes about Inuit and other Indigenous peoples, with journalist Francine Compton (Ojibwe), director of the Native American Journalists Association (NAJA), calling on *The New York Times* to review its in-house policies and make changes necessary to ensure ethical reporting on Indigenous communities. Kyle Muzyka, ‘New York Times article on Inuit draws backlash for reliance on stereotypes’, *CBC Unreserved*, 15 November 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/challenging-media-stereotypes-of-indigenous-people-1.5358798/new-york-times-article-on-inuit-draws-backlash-for-reliance-on-stereotypes-1.5358801> [accessed January 2023]

<sup>17</sup> Dunning quoted in Sara Frizzell, ‘“What inspired her was getting mad”: Inuk writer tells family’s stories in new collection’, *CBC News*, 15 July 2017, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/norma-dunning-inuit-stories-annie-muktuk-1.4203698> [accessed December 2021]

She swung both ways and sideways' (78). In assumptions about Indigenous deficiency, Inuit women lack dignity and morality, but Dunning has Annie use sex to assert power, and reclaim the stereotype of the promiscuous Inuit woman by turning it to her advantage. Annie is depicted as having agency over her body and the life choices she makes, defying stereotypes of Inuit women as amenable beings and disposable objects. In her stories, Dunning challenges these and other perceptions of Inuit life through profoundly human characters who navigate colonial realities in myriad ways, all distinctively Inuit. If through myopic settler perspectives Indigenous peoples appear to be holding onto a limited set of resources, the remains of what was lost, by contrast, perspectival Indigenous stories celebrate 'creative and visionary' peoples who are able to 'grow anew and create new practices, relationships, and cultural forms'.<sup>18</sup> As Dunning's characters wrestle with colonial definitions, they draw from Inuit traditional knowledge which is represented not as static or relegated to the past, but as adaptive and oriented towards the future, with Inuitness freed from homogenising impositions of authenticity.

Anger is a powerful creative force, but it would be reductive to read *Annie Muktuk and Other Stories* as merely 'writing back' to ethnographic texts or colonial violence. In interview, Dunning confides that her way to deal with anger is through writing, where she turns it into something that can be empowering for other Inuit.<sup>19</sup> Perspectival Indigenous stories, in her formulation, are written with purpose: to strengthen communities and instil 'radical hope'. Borrowing from Dominican author Junot Díaz, Kim TallBear describes 'radical hope' as an opportunity to realign 'the emotional, intellectual, and (un)ethical baseline and narrative of those who hold power', and weave stories that do not entail 'redeeming the state' but 'caring

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<sup>18</sup> Notions of authenticity are rooted in Indigenous deficiency insofar as they render 'real' Indigenous peoples as 'always Other', and a romanticised view of past glory relegates contemporary Indigenous experience to a 'reduced shadow' of 'former greatness', Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 147, 55.

<sup>19</sup> Dunning interviewed by Zalika Reid Benta, 'TOK 2.0'.

for one another as relations'.<sup>20</sup> Dunning's primary inspiration is the lives and stories of her mother, grandmothers, and grandfather, and she dedicates her stories to 'ancestors, past, present, and future'. What emerges strongly is how her characters care for one another and nurture relationships as bonds — despite colonial realities including the residential schools and their legacy.

### **Residential School Stories: 'Kabloona Red' and 'My Sisters and I'**

*Annie Muktuk and Other Stories* opens with a stream of consciousness story, 'Kabloona Red', the interior monologue of an unnamed woman who drinks red wine and smokes cigarettes while thinking back over her life as an Inuk. Dunning creates an evocative synaesthetic simile by associating drinking 'beautiful red liquid' that is 'warm and wonderful' to the feeling of 'going home'.<sup>21</sup> She returns to her past when she is alone and her white husband is away for work; 'otherwise', she thinks, 'I have to be the white wife [...] with the white picket fence, white washed and white dried' (5). A persistently colonial society determines that if she exists as anything other than his wife, it is as an 'Eskimo', a 'white word' charged with negative connotations about Inuit life, 'skid row and all', that is totalising. The woman remembers how her husband made her feel 'important' and 'white' when they fell in love and that by marrying him, she seemingly disposes of her Inuit identity which white society deems inferior and residential school teaches her to despise: 'I got a new name. I could throw out my old name and no one would ever have to know' (2). She internalises racism and is made to feel ashamed of herself because of 'that skin colour' and integrates into a system where she 'would only be his wife' (2). But when she is alone, drinking to remember and to soothe the pain of her memories, she knows she will always be an Inuk. She holds onto her identity, even when

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<sup>20</sup> Kim TallBear, 'Caretaking Relations, Not American Dreaming', *Kalfou*, 6.1, (2019), 34.

<sup>21</sup> At the time of story, the protagonist lives in the Canadian 'South' — south of the sixtieth parallel. Norma Dunning, *Annie Muktuk and Other Stories*, (Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 2017), 1. Subsequent references are in parentheses.

remembering is painful, recalling repeated sexual assaults suffered at residential school, for six long years from the age of nine. The harrowing description of abuse, and how her bleeding is mistaken for menstruation by nuns who do not believe her when she seeks help, is rendered even more striking by her tragicomic interjection: ‘the memory makes me giggle now’ (9). Out of horrific experiences at residential school, this woman develops strategies to ensure her survival and to navigate colonialism in other contexts. Simulation is one of her strategies and it is a tactic that recurs in several of Dunning’s stories. When priests rape her, she learns to ‘pretend to like’ it, so that they hurt her less (4). In school, she fakes her assimilation into a system that only values what conforms to its standards. She becomes an excellent student as ‘a prisoner’ so that she may be ‘released on good behaviour’ and feels ‘en-française-ized’ (4). The pun suggests that she is ‘enfranchised’ only when she assimilates into the dominant French-Canadian culture. While ‘enfranchisement’ is commonly used positively to recognise the full rights of citizenship, in this context it indicates a non-consensual process through which First Nations peoples lost ‘Indian status’ when, for example, they joined the army or priesthood, gained fee-simple title to a piece of land, or earned a university degree. As Métis legal scholar Chelsea Vowel contends, historically enfranchisement was a way to assimilate Indigenous peoples ‘out of legislative existence, extinguish their rights, and solidify colonial control over lands and resources’.<sup>22</sup> Inuit are not subjected to the *Indian Act*; they lack the status it purported to ascribe and did not undergo a formal process of ‘enfranchisement’ in the way First Nations did. Dunning inflects the term and parodies it to suggest a cultural rather than political connotation, drawing attention to how processes of social escalation, and improvements as perceived by settler standards, are disenfranchising. The expression ‘en-

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<sup>22</sup> Chelsea Vowel, *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis and Inuit Issues in Canada* (Winnipeg, MB: Highwater Press, 2016), 28.

française-ized', then, as conjured by Dunning, conveys how assimilation is designed to reduce Inuit identity to a distortion: 'They made a spectacle of me' (4).

After leaving residential school, the protagonist of 'Kabloona Red' is fostered by a French-Canadian family and essentialised as 'some sort of Inuit princess' (5). Although she cannot remember her Inuit family anymore, she is happy to be in a 'real' home. As an adult, she reassesses and emphasises survivance, even when couched as a secret: 'when he's not here, then you can really remember and you can have a sip of Kelowna Red and smoke all the cigs you want. After all, it's the Inuit way' (5). By framing drinking and smoking as 'the Inuit way', Dunning evokes Indigenous deficiency but also challenges it. If substance abuse marks contemporary Indigenous life, it may be that the weight of remembrance is too heavy to carry, but Dunning refuses to centre trauma in this story which ends with a note on how the protagonist now lives 'a good life'. She has a family and focuses it on activities she has always loved: 'Camped. Hunted. Fished. Went whaling and berry picking' (5). This short and powerful story emphasises how the protagonist reimagines herself as definitively Inuk, accepts that 'you never really get over things' and decides to '[m]ove on to being alive' (5). 'Kabloona Red' opens Dunning's collection and introduces key ideas that run throughout — authenticity and identity, internalised racism, abuse suffered in residential school, survival, healing, and resistance. 'My Sisters and I' closes it, bringing these issues back in full circle.

'My Sisters and I' is a story about three Inuit sisters in a residential school, how they are separated from each other, and how they finally reunite. It is divided into nineteen sections, ten of which are narrated in the first person through the internal focalisation of Angavidiak, the middle sister. This particular story is grounded in Dunning's family, specifically her maternal grandmother named Angaviadniak (a Pallirmiut woman), her mother, and her aunts. Like the three sister characters, Dunning's mother and her two sisters spent 'eight long years, without a

summer or Christmas break’, at a residential school in Winnipeg.<sup>23</sup> In her fiction, Dunning shifts the location of her family’s story from the south of the province to a residential school in Northern Manitoba and sets it in the mid-to-late 1940s, with their presence distinctive because not many Inuit students attended residential schools. Prior to the 1950s, the vast majority of residential school students were First Nations and Métis: ‘As late as 1949, only 111 Inuit students were receiving full-time schooling in the North’.<sup>24</sup> Mission-run boarding schools had operated in the North since the 1930s, but only after World War II did the federal government turn its attention to Inuit education.<sup>25</sup> In the Arctic, the residential school era endured from 1955 to 1970.

‘My Sisters and I’ offers a glimpse into an Inuit socialisation process known as *inunnguiniq* or ‘the making of a capable human being’, a clash with Western education models that is described as ‘caring for children in ways that will build their cultural strengths and sense of belonging and personal direction’.<sup>26</sup> A constituent of IQ, *inunnguiniq* is tailored to the specific needs, strengths, and inclinations of each child; it starts with childrearing and is considered crucial to the sustainment of IQ and the flourishing of Inuit culture. The story opens on a typical day in a camp where the sisters live with their three mothers and their father and illustrates *inunnguiniq* through the perspective of Angavidiak: ‘I understand the times of work and play [...] the sky and all it holds. The moon, the stars and what they mean to each other. I know what it is like to be hungry and to be full and to work on hides to make clothes’ (152). According to *inunnguiniq*, a person’s abilities and dispositions can be identified through ‘life

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<sup>23</sup> Norma Dunning, ‘Reflections of a Disk-Less Inuk on Canada’s Eskimo Identification System’, *Études Inuit*, 36.2 (2012), 211.

<sup>24</sup> Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (Winnipeg, MB: Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), 67.

<sup>25</sup> Norma Dunning, ‘An Inuit Based Policy Development Process’, *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, Vol. 64.1, (2018), 8.

<sup>26</sup> Shirley Tagalik, ‘Inunnguiniq: Caring for Children the Inuit Way’, *National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health*, 2000, <https://www.nccah-ccnsa.ca/docs/health/FS-InunnguiniqCaringInuitWay-Tagalik-EN.pdf> [accessed January 2022]. Tagalik is a community educator working to develop school curricula that are rooted in IQ.

habits' which 'predict the way one lives and lead one to being able to live "a long life"'. In 'My Sisters and I' these are natural inclinations and become bound up with sororal love.<sup>27</sup> Puhuliak, the elder sister, likes to sleep; in contrast, Hikwa, the youngest, 'loves to move at all times' and is endowed with 'special powers' because she can 'see and understand what others can't' (153). Angavidiak calls on her sisters to witness the return of the geese from their winter home which is described as '[a] homecoming of people who have been lost from one another', anticipating themes of separation and reunion that animate the story (152). Dunning creates a sudden break, though, when Angavidiak wakes up and realises that she has been dreaming. She is shocked into the bleak reality that the sisters are no longer at home but in a residential school: 'We have all been given strange names. Names that make no sense. Names that make me feel different [...] Puhuliak is now called Suzanne. Hikwa is Margarite. I am Therese. Once we were, Puhuliak, Hikwa and Angavidiak. Now we are these other girls' (154). The cultural shock is so visceral that Angavidiak worries, 'I don't know who I am anymore' (154). Inuit names and naming practices ensure *inunnguiniq* continuity, as when a child is given the name of a deceased relative to 'carry on the abilities and characteristics of the namesake'.<sup>28</sup> The stripping of names was one of the first ways in which residential schools broke children's 'relational identity'.<sup>29</sup> These sisters are forced to adapt to the new habits and identities. For example, Puhuliak's mild temperament and placid disposition, suggested by the observation that 'sleep is her friend', emerges in residential school through Suzanne's compliance with rules and a hopeful attitude: she tells her sisters, 'if we are good we will leave' (153, 155).<sup>30</sup> Hikwa's restlessness and vitality are expressed in Margarite's rebellious challenges to the school

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<sup>27</sup> Tagalik, 'Inunnguiniq: Caring for Children'.

<sup>28</sup> Shirley Tagalik, 'Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit: The role of Indigenous knowledge in supporting wellness in Inuit communities in Nunavut', *National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health*, 2010, <https://www.ccnsa-nccah.ca/docs/health/FS-InuitQaujimajatuqangitWellnessNunavut-Tagalik-EN.pdf> [accessed December 2021]

<sup>29</sup> Frederic Laugrand, and J. G. Oosten, *Inuit Shamanism and Christianity: Transitions and Transformations in the Twentieth Century* (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 126.

<sup>30</sup> Following Dunning's use, I refer to the sisters by their Christian names to reflect the identities they assume when they are at school and by their Inuit names when their Inuit identity is expressed.

authorities. She mocks nuns and priests, ‘calls them names we would never speak out loud at home’, and when they lift her from her desk by pulling her hair, she refuses to cry. Instead, her ‘red face sings our throat songs from home while they curse her for breaking their white taboo’ (157). In solitary confinement, Margarite sings throat songs so that she will ‘see’ their mothers and father and recounts what they say to her sisters. She secretly tells Inuit stories and these build Therese’s spirit: ‘she makes me remember what we were and tells me what we will be’ (156). Therese is torn between the contrasting influences of Suzanne who tells her to respect the priests and nuns and Margarite who ‘laughs at their stories’ (157). Because she is the middle sister, according to Inuit cultural norms Therese must listen to both and, while Suzanne may seem ‘oldest and wisest’, Margarite’s special powers connect her to a more intuitive kind of wisdom (157, 156).

Among markers of colonial oppression in residential school are incomprehensible rules and the use of force to ensure children abide by them. The three sisters are subjected to physical, emotional, psychological, and ideological abuse: ‘Everything here hurts. We have to live our days the way they want us to’ (154). Therese refuses to be ruled by a ‘a round black dial’ that regulates her activities as if the clock were her ‘avasirngulik’ or elder, when ‘at home the sky told us what to do and when’ (155). Residential school breaks the Inuit conception of time as embodied in circadian rhythms that are inseparable from the movements of the Earth. For Therese, clocks and bells, sleeping in beds, staying indoors, and talking in a foreign language cannot and do not make sense. What is hardest is being disallowed from talking with her sisters in their language, with corporal punishment the consequence if they do.<sup>31</sup> Therese and Margarite attempt to escape and return home and, as punishment, are tortured by Father LePage. Margarite’s tongue is ‘clamped between two pieces of wood’ so that she may learn

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<sup>31</sup> Inuit, Métis, and First Nations former students have all testified to corporal abuse at the hands of residential school staff in response to perceived misconduct, including attempts to resist sexual abuse and to escape. See for example, Valerie Michaelson and Joan E. Durrant, *Decolonizing Discipline: Children, Corporal Punishment, Christian Theologies, and Reconciliation* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020), 1.

‘the power of silence’ (162). A prospective shaman representative of Indigenous knowledges that the colonial powers of the school will not tolerate, she is silenced by a priest who pretends to teach her a lesson. But Father LePage is silenced, in turn, by Therese who spits into his mouth as he threatens to torture her too (163). Infuriated, he knocks Margarite unconscious and proceeds to use the wooden clamp on Therese so that they may never ‘dare to speak again’ in either Inuktitut or French (163).<sup>32</sup>

Physical abuse as a method of discipline may be positioned in the past in this story but Dunning’s critique is relevant to current discussion of educational reform. The sixth call for reconciliation in the TRC report is for the government to remove Section 43 of Canada’s criminal code, which allows parents and teachers in loco parentis to use corporal punishment to correct behaviour ‘if the force does not exceed what is reasonable under the circumstance’.<sup>33</sup> This law has been used to justify the assault of children in schools and homes for over a century. Bill S-206, introduced in 2013 by Senator Céline Hervieux-Payette and subsequently sponsored by Senator Murray Sinclair, the Chief Commissioner for Canada’s TRC, would amend the law but it has still not been passed. The use of force in education and discipline generates a system of reward and punishment that is fuelled by fear which community educator Shirley Tagalik summarises as ‘a very raw legacy of colonization’.<sup>34</sup> Indigenous methods of education focus on self-discipline on the basis of civil courtesy: ‘first and foremost, *inunnguiniq* is about being in respectful relationship’.<sup>35</sup> The ramifications of physical violence are psychological and emotional for children of all backgrounds, but one can imagine how

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<sup>32</sup> The residential school staff speak French because in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ‘French was the language of instruction at the Roman Catholic boarding schools in the Northwest Territories’, Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, *Canada’s Residential Schools: The Inuit and Northern Experience, The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, vol. 2, (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 23.

<sup>33</sup> Criminal Code, Correction of child by force, Justice Laws Website, Government of Canada, <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-46/section-43.html> [accessed January 2022]

<sup>34</sup> Shirley Tagalik, ‘Inunnguiniq: Inuit Perspectives on raising a Human Being’, *Decolonizing Discipline: Children, Corporal Punishment, Christian Theologies, and Reconciliation*, Valerie Michaelson, and Joan E. Durrant eds., (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020), 147.

<sup>35</sup> Tagalik, ‘Inunnguiniq: Inuit Perspectives’, 140.

destabilising this will be for children in whose cultures physical violence is far from ordinary or considered acceptable. In traditional Inuit society, individuals who act violently are ‘admonished and counselled to change their behaviour’.<sup>36</sup> In their testimonies, former residential school students emphasise that they suffered a cultural and epistemological shock because they had never experienced domestic violence and could not understand why they were being abused by teachers who would be expected to behave in ways that would accord them respect.<sup>37</sup> Settler scholars Valerie Michelson and Joan Durrant point out in *Decolonizing Discipline* (2020) that ‘colonial theologies that use Christian doctrine and biblical texts to justify violence’ continue to rationalise corporal punishment against children.<sup>38</sup> In Dunning’s story, Father LePage uses Christian theological books and the Greco-Roman tradition as a way to rationalise his ‘spiritual’ duty (164). When he tortures Therese and Margarite, he sublimates the horror of his actions: ‘I’ve created twins. My own Helen and Clytemnestra! Twin animals learning the power of silence’, justifying his abuse of power with ethnic slurs that perpetuate racist stereotypes: ‘you can only teach an animal through force’ (164).

Dunning points out how Indigenous truths have been historically neglected. A comparison between a report written from the priest’s perspective and Therese’s description of a typical day in school reveals that the same events are interpreted in completely different ways.

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<sup>36</sup> Tagalik, ‘Inunnguiniq: Inuit Perspectives’, 144. Laura Briggs examines a US history of removal of Indigenous, Black, Latinx children, and children of the poor, from slavery to modern day, in *Taking Children: A History of American Terror* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020)

<sup>37</sup> For example, Evelyn Lariviere, former student at Pine Creek Residential school and Assiniboia Residential school, emphasises, ‘I didn’t see any violence in our house. Until I went to school’. Roy Dick, former student at Lower Post Residential School, attests that nobody ever abused him before he went to residential school, because his family and culture raised him to ‘respect people, others, the land’ but those teachings were ‘taken all away from us in school’. Violence was often experienced unexpectedly and without explanations. Kappo Philomene, former student at St Francis Xavier Residential School in Sturgeon Lake, attest that ‘to this day’ she still does not know why a nun suddenly slapped her in the face during choir practice; she could ‘never figure out why’ she was abused ‘because there was never any explanation’. Where Are the Children, *The Legacy of Hope Foundation*, <https://legacyofhope.ca/wherearethechildren/stories/> [accessed August 2021] In her memoir, Sellars distinguishes between a first cultural shock and the normalisation of prolonged suffering from daily abuse: ‘I had never been beaten before and was traumatised the first few times the leather hit my skin, but that became our morning ritual and, in time, it became less of a shock’, *They Called Me Number One*, 33.

<sup>38</sup> Michaelson and Durrant, *Decolonizing Discipline*, 6, 3.

In both accounts, education is mechanical and ruled by the clock but, in Father LePage's report, this is rigour that is productive and beneficial:

The children have every moment of their day occupied. They are up at six in the morning and breakfast is over by seven. They attend mass from seven to eight and are in their desks by quarter past eight. Classes are until half past eleven and lunch extends to half past twelve. Thirty minutes of playtime [...] and the children are in class again by one o'clock. School ends at half past three and each student is assigned various chores. (165)

This routine is dull and depressing but, for the priest, the result is that the children 'have more understanding of life since they have been under my care than their parents could ever provide' (165). In Therese's account, though, short, repetitive sentences suggest the meaninglessness of a rigid education in which children are reduced to automatons repeating the same incomprehensible gestures:

[a bell] shouts to us before the sun is awake. It is our boss too [...] We gather into one line [...] We go to the place where the water is in white bowls. One bowl for our faces. One bowl for everything else. We line up again and go to the chair place. We stand behind our chairs. The oldest long robe tells us to put our hands together [...] Then we say "Amen," and sit in our hard chairs. We wait until everyone has the grey thick slop put into their dish and pick up our metal sticks. We chew and swallow at the same time. The old robe claps her hands. We stand behind our chairs. Again we bend our heads [...] We walk like stick gees to the classroom and sit again in hard chairs for the rest of the day (159).<sup>39</sup>

Therese lacks cultural markers to interpret the nuns' presence besides the visual cue of their clothing; they are as apathetic as the 'long robe[s]' they wear. Use of metonymy underlines her teachers' emotional detachment and emphasises cultural gaps. Through Therese, readers are made to reflect on claims made by residential school apologists in defence of these institutions, including settlers at the TRC who protested that discussion of residential schools 'overlooked both the positive intent with which many staff members approached their work, and the positive accomplishments of the school system'.<sup>40</sup> As Dunning emphasises in this story, what is considered 'positive' is culturally specific and focus on staff members negates their pupils.

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<sup>39</sup> Bev Sellars also describes students in residential school as 'little robots programmed to do everything on cue', *They Called Me Number One*, 45.

<sup>40</sup> TRC, *Honouring the Truth*, 218.

Father LePage is easily identifiable as the villain in this story, but Dunning depicts even compassionate characters, like Sister Mary Rose and Bishop LaFlamme, as guilty of perpetuating colonial violence. After the sisters escape and are returned to the school, Sister Mary Rose whispers soft words into Therese's ears while washing her face, which generates a sense of safety. Therese longs for human connection and the comfort offered by the nun's words elicits trust. She would seem to give the child tools to help her face hardship, specifically a mantra, 'Don't be afraid', that Therese believes are 'Words I will tell myself for the rest of my life' (162). But in this exchange, Sister Mary Rose is preparing Therese to be brought before Father LePage who is already torturing her sister and, when Therese looks to Sister Mary Rose for help, she sees only 'fear covering her face' (163). Similarly to Stella in *The Break*, though in a different context, Sister Mary Rose is frozen by fear and unable to intervene. Stella is not part of the group that attacks Emily and could not have foreseen that she would witness the attack, but Sister Mary Rose participates knowingly in torture. Later in the story, she is depicted more definitively as a timorous victim of Father LePage, whose outbursts of anger make her physically sick, but she is not without blame; she is an accomplice to abuse as a witness to violence who chooses repeatedly not to intervene. To herself, she justifies the use of torture to ensure 'discipline' and 'order' (169).

Dunning adds greater nuance through the character of Bishop LaFlamme, who is horrified by the way Father LePage treats Margarite and decides to take her to Winnipeg with him, to keep her safe. The characterisation of Bishop LaFlamme and of his relationship with Margarite is complex, and positive intentions hide selfish interests. He swears he 'will give to this child a life of security and understanding', and promises her, 'your life I will improve' (170). He is stricken by conscience because when the Canadian government offers his church funds to run schools 'it could have been something of beauty'. Now, he expresses guilt: 'But look at what we have done' (170). Bishop LaFlamme accepts accountability for the

wrongdoings of an institution he represents, and by saving Margarite from Father LePage attempts an act of reparation, but his desire to help Margarite is also motivated by selfish hopes: ‘you will make me young again and give me a reason for living. I will give you a life that will make our Lord proud’ (171). Margarite is just one child, and she comprises LaFlamme’s personal project of redemption from the evil that the residential schools represent, his intentions rooted in a supposedly benign form of colonialism. In my reading, the bishop’s failure to radically transform the oppressive nature of his relationship with Margarite, in a different and fictional context, imaginatively conveys what Glen Coulthard describes as the ‘inability’ of political reconciliation to ‘transform the structure of dispossession that continues to frame Indigenous people’s relationship with the state’.<sup>41</sup> If the bishop’s acts of recognition, reparation, and redemption are motivated by egoistic needs, Canada’s reconciliatory politics are a means to ensure continuity: Indigenous peoples’ rights are only upheld if they do not threaten the stability of the status quo.<sup>42</sup> In the story, the bishop wishes to improve Margarite’s life, but never once does he consider reuniting her with her Inuit family, or asking her what kind of life she wishes to live. His standards for a good life are based on Euro-Canadian values and, Daniel Heath Justice has argued, stories of Indigenous deficiency, ‘even when told with the best of motivations’, inevitably ‘poison both the speaker and the listener’.<sup>43</sup> Margarite confronts the bishop with this truth when she tells him, ‘at least you grew up with your own mother. I do not have that same privilege’ (186).

Margarite’s academic achievements defy racist assumptions that Inuit people are not fit for scholastic endeavours. Margarite is not only ‘the best student at her school’ but also the

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<sup>41</sup> Glen Sean Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 120.

<sup>42</sup> Regarding the right to self-governance, for instance, Coulthard clarifies that ‘[i]nstead of proceeding with negotiations based on the principle of Indigenous self-determination, Canada’s policy framework is grounded in the assumption that Aboriginal rights are subordinately positioned within the ultimate sovereign authority of the Crown’. Therefore, the right of self-governance, like all Indigenous rights in Canada, is ‘not absolute’. Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 123, 124.

<sup>43</sup> Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 2.

‘best athlete with the highest average in French in the province of Manitoba’. Like the Inuk woman in ‘Kabloona Red’, she is becoming ‘famous’ (178). Dunning devoted her doctoral thesis to studying the academic careers of Inuit, examining the reasons for high school dropout rates among Inuit students now. A few months after she published this collection of short stories, Dunning suggested that the fact that Inuit have ‘the lowest level of educational attainment within Canada’ demonstrates that ‘education policies in existence in Nunavut today are not adequate’ because they do not yet reflect Inuit value systems.<sup>44</sup> Dunning traced the failures of the education system in Nunavut back to the period she depicts in ‘My Sisters and I’. She explained that one of the reasons the government did not take an interest in funding residential schools in the North before the 1950s was that Inuit ‘were not seen as in need of formal Western education by governmental authorities’; it was assumed ‘they would just be fur-trappers’.<sup>45</sup> Inuit knowledge was dismissed by colonisers and risks being dismissed today if Western education is based on the same racist bias. Margarite thrives in school, but Therese knows that achievements do not equate to happiness: ‘If I could see the way Hikwa can, I would see that her life is not perfect. She is an Eskimo in a white school’ (178, 179).

After the bishop’s intervention with Margarite, Father LePage devises a new plan to punish Suzanne and Therese. They are forced to perform manual labour by cutting wood for the residential school’s maintenance and heating. Despite the priest’s malevolent intentions, the girls enjoy spending time outdoors, ‘where we belong. Where we feel free’ (174). In this context, Dunning introduces another, more positive, white character, a young man named Joshua who works with them. Through their encounter, Therese begins to recalibrate her expectations: ‘I had hoped I would never know another white guy until Joshua came into our lives’ (177). Joshua is the only white character who does not pretend to know what is best for

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<sup>44</sup> Dunning, ‘An Inuit Based Policy Development Process’, 9, 10.

<sup>45</sup> Dunning, ‘An Inuit Based Policy Development Process’, 8.

the sisters, even though ‘he asks all kinds of questions’ and does not understand the answers he receives. In their interactions with Joshua, the sisters act according to Inuit ways, negotiating language and ways of understanding so that when Joshua asks about their age, for example, the question makes no sense to Therese because, as Suzanne explains to him, ‘we don’t mark our time in months and year numbers like you do. We count seasons. But not anymore’. Therese fears Suzanne may have said too much — ‘she isn’t supposed to compare us with the whites’ — but Joshua proves not to be a threat and Therese feels safer because, somehow, ‘he reminds [her] of home’ (175, 178). The process of making meaning is crucial to *inunnguiniq* and Suzanne and Therese practise it with Joshua: ‘We were taught that we never ask a stranger questions [...] we were taught that they speak and we listen [...] We know that the right words will come and we will get our answers in a different way. There are many ways to find the answers. Watching is best’ (176). Joshua does not know how to interpret what is left unspoken when, for example, he sings and the sisters suddenly turn sad. The song is a ballad by Jimmy Dorset entitled ‘My Sister and I’ (1941), which tells of two siblings who leave a war zone by boat to begin a new life abroad. The lyrics strike a chord for Therese and Suzanne because they too have been forced to leave their homes. Lines about ‘fear and the sky’ and ‘night time and crying’ resonate with their experience in the school (180). Suzanne explains ‘It’s the song’, but the sisters do not share with Joshua what lies behind their tears because that is ‘how it is supposed to be with the white people. Only tell part of the truth. Never the whole truth’ (181). This is an important reminder too for settlers who wish to know more about residential schools because, with ‘reconciliation’, inquisitiveness has replaced a century and a half of secrecy. Through this story, Dunning suggests that if non-Indigenous people wish to learn more about residential schools, they must be willing to work with knowledge that is shared freely. This involves accepting that not everything may be made available, and that the right to express oneself hesitantly and partially be respected. Joshua accepts what the sisters share on their

terms, like a throat song that Dunning describes as the ‘sounds’ the sisters are ‘born to sing’ which ‘only the earth’ can understand (182). If the throat song reconnects them with their roots, the song ‘My Sister and I’ is reclaimed by the sisters as their own: ‘Joshua’s song has become our song. It has become our anthem [...] Sometimes we change the words, trying to make each other laugh’ (188). By adapting the name of the song as the title of her story, then, Dunning centres reclamation, epitomised in a song that is reimagined to tell an Inuit story.

Dunning foregrounds an indissoluble bond that is rooted in three sisters’ Inuit identity, trust, and love: ‘whatever is inside of each of us, our ways will never leave us. We were taught to always know what is ahead, behind, and beside us as we walk about our days [...] We are Inuk. They can’t take that from us’ (179). Three different residential school experiences are (re-)imagined through three different sisters and the story ends when Margarite returns to the school equipped with a plan to free Suzanne and Therese. Their reunion as Puhuliak, Angavidiak, and Hikwa is punctuated with Inuktitut words that are not included in the glossary of *Annie Muktuk and Other Stories*. In this way, Dunning determinedly creates a space in the text for Inuit readers to share in this joyous moment; other readers are invited to enter this narrative space as guests, and partially, from a distance that is marked in the language.

### **Institutional Colonialism: ‘Kakoot’ and ‘The Road Show Eskimo’**

The last residential school to close in 1997 was Kivalliq Hall in Rankin Inlet, Nunavut, but the same system of assimilation has been carried forward in new forms through settler structures that are protected by the state.<sup>46</sup> In *Split Tooth* (2018), a debut book written by an internationally acclaimed Inuk throat singer, experimental musician Tanya Tagaq, there are traces of residential schools persisting in day schools, depicted as unsafe places which Inuit children are forced to attend: ‘School is scary and awkward; I guess it’s supposed to be. Sitting still for that

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<sup>46</sup> Kivalliq Hall only became an IRSSA-recognised school in 2019, which is why earlier accounts describe the last school closing in 1996.

long is impossible [...] Who made this system? It feels like a slow torture [...] we yearn for movement. Listening to the wind howl in screaming freedom, we all feel muted'.<sup>47</sup> The narrator's reflection on day schools in the late 1970s resonates with Therese's view of residential school as a place of incomprehensible rules in the 1940s setting of 'My Sisters and I'. Peaks of brutal violence mark residential school experience, but the underlying psychological and emotional pain deriving from an *impossibility of being* goes unnoticed as carried through into modern schooling.<sup>48</sup> Like Rob Nixon's 'slow violence' and Laurent Berlant's 'slow death,' discussed in the Introduction, the 'slow torture' suggested by Tagaq occurs 'gradually and out of sight' and is marked by 'the slowly passing of the every day'.<sup>49</sup>

Tagaq makes the link between residential and day schools clear as a continuing narrative of Indigenous deficiency when describing how the protagonist feels during an Innuinaktun language lesson: 'I feel *deficient* in this class. My mother never speaks to me in Inuktitut anymore. Residential schools have beaten the Inuktitut out of this town *in the name of progress, in the name of deficiency*. Everyone wanted to move forward. Move forward with God, with money, with white skin and without the shaman's way'.<sup>50</sup> If residential schools are dangerous, day schools carry their legacy, even when they make space for Indigenous epistemologies. Still another way in which violence is carried through from residential schools to modern schooling is bullying, represented by Tagaq in *Split Tooth* in a protagonist who is both victim and perpetrator. Even though she feels 'remorseful', she ponders that 'in order to maintain any standing in this hierarchical house of horrors you must get close to the Alpha by shitting on Beta'.<sup>51</sup> Former residential school students have testified to experiences of abuse at

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<sup>47</sup> Tanya Tagaq, *Split Tooth* (Toronto, ON: Penguin Canada, 2019), 39.

<sup>48</sup> This expression is also used by Anne-Marie Reynaud in 'Dealing with Difficult Emotions: Anger at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada', *Anthropologica*, 56 (2014), 374.

<sup>49</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2. Lauren Berlant, 'Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)', *Critical Inquiry*, 33.4 (2007), 754.

<sup>50</sup> Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 50; emphasis mine.

<sup>51</sup> Tagaq, *Split Tooth*, 96.

the hands of other students and the lack of protection from authorities.<sup>52</sup> Shirley Tagalik summarises how Inuit values are still being erased on a daily basis, not only through a Western curriculum that privileges non-Indigenous languages but also via health services that are delivered ‘according to a medical model, services that treat mental illness rather than provide healing, child welfare that continues to “scoop” Inuit children, justice and legal systems that are entrenched in a punitive model, and governance that is based in elected systems rather than a recognition of Inuit definitions of leadership’.<sup>53</sup> Inuit models for education, health, justice, and governance continue to be perceived as deficient by Euro-Canadian authorities.

Tagaq speaks to how settler institutions perpetuate colonial ideologies and Dunning exposes it to sustained critique. By foregrounding multiple characters’ recovery of values, practices, and traditions, Dunning celebrates, invites, and practises Inuit resurgence. The story ‘Kakoot’ emphatically recentres Inuit naming practices known as *tuq&urausiq2*. The eponymous character is an old Inuit man who is waiting in a nursing home to depart from the Land of the Living. At birth, Kakoot is given his grandfather’s name which bears the story of how the spirits chant it into the ears of his grandmother, bringing ‘the worlds together inside his spirit. His name had given him the strength and skill of those from beyond’ (60). From an Inuit perspective, a name carries life, power, and is a source of ‘social bonding, as much with the world of the humans as [...] with the world of the spirits and the world of the dead’.<sup>54</sup> A name conveys a relational identity and brings ancestors back into the community. Such naming practices ensure the survival of Inuit culture and also constitute ‘a form of knowledge transfer’.<sup>55</sup> Inuit names are genderless, and the Inuit naming system does not traditionally recognise shared family names or surnames but, Kakoot reminisces bitterly, ‘those kabloona’,

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<sup>52</sup> Bullying is an important topic in Inuk Margaret-Olemaun Pokiak-Fenton’s illustrated memoir, told to her niece Christy Jordan-Fenton and titled *Fatty Legs: A True Story* (2010).

<sup>53</sup> Tagalik, ‘Inunnguiniq: Inuit Perspectives’, 148.

<sup>54</sup> Bernard Saladin d’Anglure, ed. *Cosmology and Shamanism: Interviewing Inuit Elders*, vol. 4. (Iqaluit: Nunavut Arctic College, 2001), 9.

<sup>55</sup> Tagalik, ‘Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit’.

white men, ‘took everything away’ and ‘in return I got their white name. Not one but two. Front and back. Everything in its perfect order for their perfect lists’ (56). When Kakoot is a child, missionaries change his name to Amos, in residential school he is given a surname, and later a number: ‘W-4369 replaced “Amos Tootosis”’ (62). The tag number is a reference to the ‘Eskimo disk system’, identification through which the Canadian state exercised surveillance over the Inuit population by issuing numbers to substitute for Inuit names.<sup>56</sup> In the story, Kakoot remembers that many names were given to him by his people, and Inuit Elders explain that, ‘Some names could be chosen before birth, others at the time of birth, and still others later on if the person’s physical or mental health required a change of name’.<sup>57</sup> From generation to generation, each name carries different identities and powers dependent on ‘the acts performed by those who bore them’.<sup>58</sup> Christian names were given to Inuit because settlers were supposedly unable to pronounce, spell, or record Inuit names. If non-Inuit names were assigned to ‘avoid confusion’, they had the opposite effect, as Dunning has Kakoot explain: ‘they all gave you names. Names that no one ever got right’ (60). To call someone by their preferred name is more than a sign of respect: ‘saying your name right meant you were real, that you existed’. For Kakoot, there is ‘none of that in this white house. One white institution after another [...]’ (60). Forced assimilation persists under new guises in modern institutions like a nursing home where nurses and staff mispronounce Kakoot’s name or endow him with names of their choice. After a white nurse comments, ‘Mr. Tootosis, what a fun name’, she proceeds to call him by nicknames of her own devising — stigmatising, ageist, and racist epithets such as ‘Mr. LooseTooth’, ‘Mr. Too-Much-Moose’, and ‘Mr. Goose-Goose’ (59, 63, 64, 68). Kakoot makes the parallel clear when he thinks, ‘this nurse is worse than any teacher

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<sup>56</sup> Between 1941 and 1971, the Canadian government issued necklaces with ‘small individually numbered disks [which] were expected to be worn by every Inuk person at all times, as a “practical” means to validate Inuit status’. Dunning, ‘Reflections of a Disk-Less Inuk’, 210.

<sup>57</sup> Saladin d’Anglure, ed. *Cosmology and Shamanism*, 9.

<sup>58</sup> Saladin d’Anglure, ed. *Cosmology and Shamanism*, 9.

I ever had a[t] school’ and suggests that the nursing home may be an even harsher place: ‘maybe being called by his disc number hadn’t been so bad after all. Ah, she’d get that one wrong too’ (68). Dunning’s critique takes the form of a mocking portrayal of a nurse who carries through the same dehumanising behaviour that underpinned the authority of the residential school system.

Dunning’s celebration of Inuit names and naming practices is an activist retort to Canada’s historical repression of Inuit names with the ‘Eskimo disk system’. Dunning emphasises how it separates Kakoot from his cultural identity, and the ‘leather tag around his neck’ is both belittling and numbing: ‘[h]e stopped feeling that it was there’ (62).<sup>59</sup> Inuit were ‘tagged’, allotted a number, ‘the only purpose being state control’.<sup>60</sup> A narrative of Indigenous deficiency, then, has been a spurious justification of cruel policies that impede Indigenous self-determination, as Tagalik summarises:

Inuit who had lived successfully and independently on the land suddenly had every aspect of their lives taken over by new authorities. They were unable to hunt because all their tools and weapons were removed at the time of forced relocation. Their dogs were shot. Their children were removed to schools, where they were repeatedly told that their parents were incompetent. The start of formal education marked a change in the respect shown to parents by their children [...] They were told where to work, what to eat, what not to hunt, how to keep clean.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> In an academic article Dunning published in 2021, she emphasises the intergenerational impact of this system. She tells the story of when she applied to become beneficiary of Nunavut and was asked to provide a disk number as proof of Inuit ancestry, ‘Reflections of a Disk-Less Inuk’, 211.

<sup>60</sup> Dunning, ‘Reflections of a Disk-Less Inuk’, 210. While First Nations and Métis students were assigned numbers in lieu of names in residential schools, the disk system operated more systematically. Ed Marten (Cree), for example, a former student of Holy Angels Residential School in Alberta, remembers: ‘We were numbered [...] I wasn’t Edward. I was number fifty-six. For about 3 or 4 years I was fifty-six. Then I went to thirty-four and then I went to twenty, and when I was in Senior Boys I was number ten. I still remember those numbers. That was the only name I had’. Ed Marten, *Where Are the Children*, *The Legacy of Hope Foundation*, <https://legacyofhope.ca/wherearethechildren/stories/marten/> [accessed August 2021]

In her 2013 memoir tellingly titled *They Called Me Number One*, Xat’sull chief Bev Sellars describes the impacts of residential schools on three generations: ‘soon after we arrived at residential school [...] we were given a number that would become our identity [...] I became Number 1 on the girls’ side. Ninety or more years after she left St. Joseph’s Mission, my grandmother still remembered her number — 27 — and — 28 — the number assigned to her sister Annie. My mom remembers her number was 71. Thankfully, our numbers were not tattooed on our skin’. Inuit did not have numbers tattooed on their skin either, but the disk system left an indelible mark. Sellars, *They Called Me Number One*, 32.

<sup>61</sup> Tagalik, ‘Inunnguiniq: Inuit Perspectives’, 147.

Inuit were forced to comply with the disk system in order to access housing, food, medical care, social assistance, child welfare, and other government benefits. Dunning condemns a system which ‘the Government of Canada has never apologised for or spoken about publicly’.<sup>62</sup> In 1970, when it was finally abandoned, the government launched a new programme, known as Project Surname, to assign surnames to all Inuit within a year. Single and genderless names were substituted by first and last gendered names: ‘Again, the Inuit were being forced to absorb a governmental practice that did not recognise or respect their cultural norms’.<sup>63</sup>

A nursing home is yet another white institution through which the government exerts control in Dunning’s stories. Kakoot states regretfully and simply, ‘the government put me here [...] I have no idea where any of my children are anymore’ (71). Dunning layers this story with the many ways in which a nursing home that functions in this way can become the epitome of oppression, a contemporary colonial space so horrifying that residential school fades in comparison; a place of mechanical gestures, repetitiveness, abuse, and captivity. It is described with heavy irony as a ‘progressive place’, but elderly people are ‘handled’ like ‘traffic light[s]’: allocated to the red pod, ‘if they considered you functional’, and the green if ‘you were becoming dysfunctional’, and finally the yellow pod, ‘where you were taken to die’ (55, 56). ‘Warehousing’ the elderly in this way contrasts with how Elders would ‘wander away on an ice floe’ (59). What emerges from this story is ‘residentialness’; forced institutionalisation characterises Kakoot’s remaining years. Kakoot distinguishes the red pod ‘where they wanted you to stay for as long as possible’, from the green pod ‘where you wanted to stay for as long as possible’ (56). Yet, the green is described as the most humiliating stage because it is where ‘you began to fall apart’ and the staff there use a hose as an instrument of torture, ‘beating back your self-made liquids and splatting your skin until it began to peel’ (56). In my reading, the

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<sup>62</sup> Dunning, ‘Reflections of a Disk-Less Inuk’, 221.

<sup>63</sup> Dunning, ‘Reflections of a Disk-Less Inuk’, 222.

nursing home is a metaphor for how colonised subjects are rendered unable to survive in a colonial society without depending on it. Resistance is exemplified through Kakoot's struggle for agency over the form his death will take: 'Kakoot, Amos Tootoosis, W-4369 had lived through it all but had decided he would never die here, not this way' (63).

Dunning imbues contemporary realities with Inuit cosmologies and beliefs. In this story, a bleak nursing home is contrasted with the vivacity of an Inuit cohort that moves fluidly between planes of existence: spirit hunters, drummers and dancers, four-legged women spirits, Caribou Spirit, and Sedna, the sea woman. A spiritual being, Sedna is known by various names across Inuit territory. In different versions of a creation story, humankind originates from Sedna's marriage with a dog, and sea mammals from Sedna's fingers after they are cut off by her father: 'As the parts that were chopped off fell into the water, they became the sea-mammals. There were seals, and then square-flippers, and then beluga. When the woman sank, she became a dweller of the sea floor'.<sup>64</sup> Because she has no fingers, she is unable to comb her hair, so sea mammals get trapped in its tangles and are unable to surface, and humans cannot hunt them. Traditionally, in times of food scarcity, shamans would perform a spiritual journey to the bottom of the sea (*Nakkaaniq*) to restore balance by freeing them. Dunning offers a nuanced characterisation insofar as Sedna's hair does not get tangled as a result of evil intentions or a whim (although she is capable of evil), but indicates an imbalance, a crisis that the people need to see through.<sup>65</sup> Like the sea which can be both nourishing and unmerciful, in 'Kakoot' Sedna is as terrifying and cunning as she is loving and nurturing. She forces Caribou spirit to comb through her hair to soothe her pain or she will 'make the people suffer', but she

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<sup>64</sup> Alexina Kublu quoted in Jarich Oosten and Frederic Laugrand eds., *Introduction: Interviewing Inuit Elders*, vol. 1, (Iqaluit: Nunavut Arctic College, 1999), 159.

<sup>65</sup> This is not the case in Tanya Tagaq's version of the story as narrated in *Split Tooth*: 'Sedna began to enjoy keeping all the sea creatures away from the humans by tucking them into her now miles-long hair. She liked to watch the humans starve' (87). Settler scholar Keavy Martin also describes Sedna as 'the vengeful spirit of the ocean-bottom who traps the sea-mammals in her free-floating hair', *Stories in a New Skin: Approaches to Inuit Literature* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2012), 52.

worries for them because ‘they have lost enough already. Even their names are no longer their own’ (61). Sedna’s tale is reinterpreted as a story of survivance and love: ‘I take care of my people and that is my purpose’ (68). It is Sedna who assumes responsibility to make sure Kakoot’s name lives on ‘within two days of his death’ by sending out spirits to sing his name into the ears of a pregnant woman so that she may name her child after him. For Kakoot not to die a prisoner, the help of another human is required – Wade, a young white man, who in the hierarchy of the nursing home is an outcast: ‘I’m a janitor and touching a patient is considered cross-contamination of the worst kind’ (64). Wade is the only positive white character in the story, and, like Joshua in ‘My Sisters and I’, a member of the working class. Wade and Joshua may be less formally educated than clergy, teachers, nurses, and doctors, but they relate to other people in more humane and ethical ways. While the nursing staff mocks Kakoot, Wade respects him; he does not know how to say his name, and instead of twisting or distorting it, he simply calls him ‘Mr. Amos’ (65).<sup>66</sup> Wade helps Kakoot according to Sedna’s plans. When he steps into the Land of the Dead, a baby is born and named ‘Kakoot’. The story closes on tradition being carried forward and, with it, new hopes and possibilities.

Across Dunning’s short story collection, the act of naming is explored, not least in the ‘The Road Show Eskimo’ which focuses on another elderly character, an Inuk woman who has spent most of her life touring and performing for white audiences as the apparent author of a book written by her white ex-husband. She remains nameless and is referred to only as The Road Show Eskimo or The Amauti, the latter a piece of Inuit traditional clothing that she wears

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<sup>66</sup> Wade and Kakoot are positive characters, but they also hold prejudices. Kakoot thinks that women are ‘sent from heavens to give you pleasure, warmth, and someone to eat a meal with’ (61). Wade conflates Inuit and ‘Indians’ much to Kakoot’s dismay (70). Inuit and First Nations are two legally, politically, and culturally distinct Indigenous groups with a strained historic relationship, and Dunning conveys Inuit distrust towards First Nations in this and other stories. All characters in the story are racialised. One of the nurses is a black man who calls Kakoot ‘Skeemo’, a variation of Eskimo. The way he is characterised through Kakoot’s internal focalisation with insistence on his ‘huge, dark hands’, ‘big square black hands’, and ‘black bear claws’ may be interpreted as anti-black (59, 68, 73). This does not mean, however, that Dunning invites anti-blackness and racism, but it suggests that she is less concerned with teaching political correctness, which is often expected from Indigenous authors, and more with representing racial prejudice as ubiquitous. This portrayal may be closer to realities than readers might expect in a book written by an Inuit author.

during her shows when the colonial gaze reduces her to a spectacle and a costume. This story exemplifies resistance in another institutional context that suggests the long legacy of colonial education: the protagonist's last show in front of a university crowd, during which she finally tells her truth and exposes her ex-husband's lie, thereby reclaiming her identity and power.

Her former husband, referred to as Blue Eyes, is also a former marine biologist who commodifies her life and culture to further his faltering career by appealing to a white appetite for 'Otherness'. 'The Book', as depicted by Dunning, is written in capital letters, and is a materialisation of the wrongs done to Indigenous peoples by researchers. It invokes a long and extensive tradition of colonial writing that objectifies Black and Indigenous bodies and justifies oppression and cultural appropriation.<sup>67</sup> The Book has 'died away' but 'some white professors' have decided to republish it and ask for photographic evidence that could verify her story and for Blue Eyes to 'confirm' the information contained within (43). The protagonist suffers their overwhelming inquisitiveness as multiple layers of epistemic injustice because the professors, unaware that The Book is a fraud, do not trust her authority. Blue Eyes has nervously orchestrated her performance at the university in an attempt to ensure that his intellectual authority will be maintained: 'he didn't want her to mess up in front of the university crowd' (43). According to enduring myths of Indigenous deficiency and benign colonialism, Blue Eyes is convinced that he has improved her life by writing a book that has made her famous, and he presses upon her, 'today is the biggest day of your life'. She will be performing before 'all the dignitaries from Ottawa, and from the university' (46).

The institution of academia is represented as a vampiric entourage of spectators who consume Inuit stories.<sup>68</sup> In the forty years since The Book's first edition, she has learnt that

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<sup>67</sup> This topic is discussed at length by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Māori, Ngāti Awa, Ngāti Porou iwi) who contends that 'research' is 'probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary', *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 1.

<sup>68</sup> 'The Road Show Eskimo', while fictional and imagined, contains truths that are consistent with Dunning's experiences as an Inuk woman working in academia: 'I am not treated as an Other until I walk onto the

‘one thing that white people wanted to see was tradition’ (35). Therefore, she masks herself behind a stereotypical image of an Inuk woman locked in time and space. She wears earrings with little ‘dangling ulus’, women’s knives, and draws traditional beauty lines over her face, but she has not even visited the North for six decades (39). As the academic audience devours her image and words, they are convinced that they know her life and culture. Anything she says is interpreted as wise, and re-oriented into Christian discourse, ‘like a verse from the psalms’ (36). She is packaged for white consumption as spiritual, mystical, holy — Other — but when she applies orange lipstick to make ‘her brown wrinkled skin stand out’ she does so negligently, on purpose, to create a sense of frailty upon which the colonial gaze can linger with staged compassion (38). She hears one woman in the audience whisper, ‘Poor Eskimo’ (50). Throughout her performances, she is instructed by Blue Eyes who sits in the audience and directs her so that she may give ‘the proper answer’, whether speaking in Inuktitut, glancing coyly and smiling, or having a coughing fit. When she may not know how to respond — or choose to — she is instructed to say, ‘I don’t know everything’, and to confess that she has not been educated as her questioners have, so that they may feel intellectually superior to her and reassured (42). If the act of looking entails agency over those who are made into objects to be seen, the Inuk woman in this story reverses the colonial gaze. She has spent her life on stage ‘watching those white mouths saying, “ooo” and “aaahhh”’ (37). But Dunning also has her reclaim herself by making the audience into her prey: ‘It was like snaring a rabbit [...] Place the round wire on the path of the rabbit. White person follows rabbit path [...] Repeat the question asked by white man. Say something funny. White man is trapped in the auditorium’ (37). She has fun ‘fooling the whites’ whom she purposefully misleads (40). Simulation, or survival by *fooling the whites*, is represented in other of Dunning’s stories, where Kakoot learns

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University of Alberta campus. It is only in this academic space that I am truly subjected to power differentials’. Dunning, ‘An Inuit Based Policy Development Process’, 3.

to ‘always smile’ and ‘nod’ with white people, and ‘as soon as they [are] gone, go back to who you really are’ (63). He knows that white people believe ‘northern heathen savages’ are ‘passive, accommodating and child-like’, and that paternalistic behaviours are justifications for settler-colonial interests because ‘not one of them gave a good god damn’ (63). The blunt racism experienced by Kakoot is more subtle in ‘The Road Show Eskimo’, where white behaviour is plated with fake political correctness.

On the day of the event, the auditorium is a site of condescending pleasantries. Dunning sets the scene with a single sentence, ‘All the politically correct smiling had begun’ (47). The same ‘staring’ and ‘wonder’ feature as in every road show; then, the Inuk performer is greeted by a woman, the director of the show, who offers her a piece of raw caribou meat, a seemingly thoughtful gift, ‘to see if she would put it into her mouth’. Sarcastically, the Inuk woman thinks to ‘play the authenticity card’ and performs an ‘old trick’ learnt in residential school where she would be forced to eat cod liver oil pills. But, when she puts the ‘raw, crimson flesh’ under her tongue and pretends to swallow, the show director is horrified, gasps and leaves the room, her white sensibility offended (47, 48). Whereas the nuns in residential school approve of a gesture of assimilation, the show director searches for proof of Inuitness and is disgusted. Dunning makes clear that her protagonist is a heroine by simulating assimilation and authenticity in two different institutional contexts. When she interrupts her performance to reveal to the audience that ‘the book is a big lie’, she really takes the stage. Blue Eyes attempts to salvage the situation by silencing and pathologising her, telling the audience that she suffers from dementia, but the ending suggests the possibility of more respectful interactions when the academics ask for her real story (54).<sup>69</sup> She finally feels as though ‘a big weight has been lifted’ and that it is ‘the best

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<sup>69</sup> ‘The Road Show Eskimo’ may be partly inspired by Dunning’s collaboration with Mini Aodla Freeman, whose book *Life Among the Qallunaat* was republished thirty years after its first issue, with Dunning as one of the editors. In interview with her, Freeman talks about her first book publication, her speaking tour across communities, and a negative experience with a reviewer ‘who said really bad things’ about her book and ‘something about eating raw food’. While these details may have inspired Dunning, her imagined story should not be conflated with Freeman’s real-life experiences. Freeman’s book is her own and it was not written by her

day' (54). In 'The Road Show Eskimo', then, as in 'Kakoot', Dunning suggests how the same colonial logic is perpetuated from residential schools into and through more 'progressive' institutions, but these are also hopeful stories of resistance, Inuit survivance, and the flourishing of IQ, that imaginatively convey a potential for change. In my reading, this is rendered particularly memorable in another story, entitled 'Elipsee'.

### **To seek something new and find what is old: 'Elipsee'**

'Elipsee' traces a healing journey of reconnection with Inuit ways of being. It is focalised through Jo, whose wife Elipsee is diagnosed with breast cancer. In the hope of 'one last sure cure', they follow the advice of an angakkug, a shaman, who instructs them to spend one summer month out in the Arctic travelling towards the Nueltin Lake, in the Kivalliq region of Nunavut at the border with Manitoba (9). The residential school experience surfaces again as a subtext evoked through memories and redolent of the ways in which the 'logic' of Indigenous deficiency is carried through a contemporary Inuit community. For example, unsolicited visits from a white nurse are patronising and imply that Inuit authorities like the angakkug are incompetent and useless. Jo sighs that they 'still think we don't know what's what and how to take care of ourselves' (8). Jo challenges the narrative of Indigenous deficiency but is less aware of the ways in which he has internalised it. He thinks that he and Elipsee are 'better' than other people in their community who drink 'white shit booze'; instead, they smoke 'tons and tons of weed' which can purportedly also numb Elipsee's pain (7, 8). Dunning conjures the idea that Inuit lack self-control to show how it obscures the ways in which substance abuse is a result of a pernicious system that denies the possibility to be Indigenous on Indigenous

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husband. However, it underwent heavy editing when published in 1978. The new editors — Dunning, Julie Rak, and Keavy Martin — discuss this in the Afterword to the second edition: 'As we compared her original typescript to the published version of *Life Among the Qallunaat*, it was apparent that — as the author had warned us — substantial portions of the original text [...] had been cut out or significantly altered' and 'phrases had been added that were not written by Aodla Freeman at all', Keavy Martin, Julie Rak, and Norma Dunning, 'Afterword' to Mini Aodla Freeman, *Life Among The Qallunaat* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2015), 270.

terms. Ingrained cultural prejudice and internalised hierarchies are suggested whenever Jo privileges his family over ‘the rest’ because he ‘made sure that there was not one ounce of white’ in the children, and that ‘with all the proper government documents’ they could trace their Inuit roots to the 1920s (7). If Jo buys into colonial notions of racial purity and blood quantum, he also succeeds in maintaining Inuit epistemologies and refuses to be frozen in time, stating proudly, ‘We’re modern Eskimos’. Despite government records, though, his relationship with Elipsee is uppermost: Jo knows ‘who and what and why’ he is when she says his name (9).

In ‘Elipsee’, Dunning depicts healing as ‘a journey, not a destination’; the Inuit statement of reconciliation closes on this belief.<sup>70</sup> For Dunning, healing involves recovery of Inuit knowledge, practices, and language, and reconnection with the land. At the beginning of their journey North, Jo feels uncomfortable living outdoors and sleeping in a tent but receives a visit from the grandfather spirits of Arloo and Ayarnanee who ask him to remember his ‘real’ Inuit name, Adgekart, and suggest that to find Adgekart within himself, he should also ‘stop smoking that white man’s green shit’ (18, 19). Jo struggles with the visitation and their expectations but when he continues to have visions, he is compelled to trust and follow, burn the weed, and begin to find a form of self-healing (20). If the journey is prefigured by Elipsee’s illness, Jo features strongly and initially feeling disconnected from ‘the old ways, the old life’, he acknowledges that ‘it’s time to find it and understand it’ (23, 22). Here, Dunning’s use of an ambiguous subject and object pronoun suggests a plurality of interconnected meanings including restoration of balance and a reinforced sense of identity. As he walks along the ‘treeless Northern desert’, Jo feels that ‘for the first time I am walking on ground that can only be called one word. Home’ (25). Dunning tucks into the story that Elipsee has ‘always known more’ about their culture and she is initially suspicious that ‘of all people’, the ancestors should

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<sup>70</sup> Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, *Inuit Statement of Reconciliation*, 2015. See Appendix B.

visit Jo, but she supports him because healing is only rendered possible through joint commitment: ‘It is as if we have silently made a pact’ (23, 27). In my reading, this exchange offers an example of *aajiiqatigiiniq*, an Inuit understanding of reconciliation as the restoration of relationships which ‘bring people back into harmony by recognizing the strengths and supports that the collective can exert in order to foster and sustain healing and a return to following the cultural norms.’<sup>71</sup>

Jo and Elipsee rely on each other to search for the kind of healing that is rooted in a revitalisation of Inuit practices. They recover a sense of playfulness, making love, playing tundra bowling, and making rock statues. Jo does not know many Inuktitut words, but as he spends more time on the land, he begins to recall words he heard as a child and is puzzled: ‘I don’t know why I can understand out here but not in town’ (27). If Tagalik is right when assessing that ‘loss of language occurs rapidly with loss of context’, Jo regains his ancestral language by reconnecting with the land.<sup>72</sup> Inuit perceive hunting as ‘the foundation of their existence’ but Jo is not a hunter.<sup>73</sup> To his surprise, though, he succeeds at his very first attempt. In Dunning’s story, knowing is connected to experience, and experience imprints DNA, so that knowledge may be passed through generations. From North American Indigenous perspectives, this is known as ‘blood memory,’ but often theorised from Western perspectives as epigenetics. In her PhD dissertation, Dunning examined how the notion of blood memory is crucial to her creative work and affords reconnection to a place she has never visited.<sup>74</sup> She shares a sense of displacement that she figures differently for her characters in this story, but blood memory affords them some certainty that this knowledge is *theirs*, that it flows through their veins and that they embody it. Literacy of the land is suggested by one of the grandfather

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<sup>71</sup> Shirley Tagalik, ‘Inuit Qaujimaqatigiiniq’.

<sup>72</sup> Tagalik, ‘Inuit Qaujimaqatigiiniq’.

<sup>73</sup> Laugrand and Oosten, *Inuit Shamanism and Christianity*, 103.

<sup>74</sup> Norma Jean Mary Dunning, ‘*Akia* (the other side) of *Ilinniarsvik* (school) and the Inuit post-secondary student’ (Education and Research Archive, 2019), 75, [https://era.library.ualberta.ca/items/41e1597f-ea93-4940-8a2d-07121fede085/view/a13755db-3cef-4707-82fa-d6c6eb63f963/Dunning\\_Norma\\_J\\_201909\\_PhD.pdf](https://era.library.ualberta.ca/items/41e1597f-ea93-4940-8a2d-07121fede085/view/a13755db-3cef-4707-82fa-d6c6eb63f963/Dunning_Norma_J_201909_PhD.pdf)

spirits: ‘I am not a magic man, a shaman or the angakkug. I am only a man who lived the life of an Inuk. I didn’t go to a white man’s school but I know a little about reading and counting. I know how to read the sky. I know how to read the land. I know how to read the birds’ (31). To know the land is to know life and its cycles, so the grandfathers understand that Elipsee is dying and they soothe her spirit with gentle words of wisdom when they tell her to ‘Stop the struggle’ (31). Dunning infuses this tender, painful moment with humour: Jo does not understand what the grandfathers say in Inuktitut, and his bemusement causes them all to burst into laughter, shedding tears of joy, sadness, and love. In this story as in others in this collection, wit and humour are key to expressing Inuit identity, and Dunning has said in interview, ‘what I know of my own Inuit people and my own ancestors’ is that ‘regardless of our situations we are able to laugh’. This is why laughter ‘come[s] forward in the story’.<sup>75</sup>

‘Elipsee’ suggests a model of Inuit resurgence in which tradition is understood as ‘profoundly contemporary’.<sup>76</sup> This principle is eloquently expressed through Jo: ‘Today we started to seek something new. Today we started to find what is old’ (24). As Jo and Elipsee retrace their ancestors in the Arctic, the expression ‘for the first time’ features repeatedly to allude to the new feelings they experience when they reconnect, and putative dichotomies separating modernity from tradition, the new from the old, are shaken (25, 27). Dunning portrays *iqqaqqaukkaringniq*, as the ‘dynamic process of knowing, applying, experiencing, evaluating and creating new knowledge grounded in a continuum of knowing and continually improving’. It is this upon which IQ relies.<sup>77</sup> As the story ends, Jo asserts a sense of continuity: ‘Every summer I take Jake Arloo Jr. and Luke Ayarnanee Jr. to see our first rock pile we called “Saimu”’ (33). Elipsee is dead but her presence felt, the journey North cyclically renewed, and

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<sup>75</sup> Frizzell, “‘What inspired her was getting mad””.

<sup>76</sup> Audra Simpson quoted in Martin, *Stories in a New Skin*, 6.

<sup>77</sup> Tagalik, ‘Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit’.

tradition passed down through the children who carry the names of the grandfathers, as well as their obligations and expectations.

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In *Annie Muktuk and Other Stories*, Norma Dunning challenges colonial narratives of Indigenous deficiency by weaving perspectival Inuit truths and reclaiming voices that colonial authorities have attempted to stifle. For many years, former residential school students could not express their truths about the schools, and some only began to speak out publicly in their old age. ‘Kabloona Red’ contends with the experiences of assimilation, and in ‘My Sisters and I’ Dunning recovers the lost voices of Inuit children in the residential school system. Elders are centred in ‘Kakoot’ and ‘The Road Show Eskimo’ and both contest dehumanising practices that sustained the residential school system. ‘Elipsee’ is a narrative of survivance and resurgence that honours wisdom forged through pain. In different historical periods and institutional contexts, then, Dunning explores cultural loss that is attributable, at least in part, to the residential school system.

A sense of loss drives characters in their battles against oblivion and erasure. If IQ is about ‘remembering, an ethical injunction that lies at the root of Inuit identity’, Dunning practises resistance through it, recovering Inuit names, values, practices, language, and traditions in fiction that makes space for new knowledge.<sup>78</sup> If survivance is ‘the continuance of stories’, as Gerald Vizenor contends, and ‘not a mere reaction’ to colonial narratives, Dunning refutes outside impositions and victimhood.<sup>79</sup> In continuum with a rich tradition of Indigenous writing, Dunning conveys imaginatively what Daniel Heath Justice stresses, that Indigenous peoples are ‘inheritors of heavy, painful legacies, but also of hope and possibility, of a responsibility to make the world better for those yet to come’.<sup>80</sup> For Dunning, writing is a gift

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<sup>78</sup> Tester and Irniq, ‘Inuit Qaujimagatuqangit’, 59.

<sup>79</sup> Gerald Vizenor, ‘Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice’, *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*, Gerald Vizenor ed., (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>80</sup> Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 111.

to future generations.<sup>81</sup> Remembering is articulated as an expression of ‘decolonial love’ and ‘radical hope’, phrases borrowed from Junot Díaz and reinterpreted from Indigenous perspectives by scholars like Kim TallBear and Leanne Simpson.<sup>82</sup> Díaz describes decolonial love as a possibility of loving ‘one’s broken-by-the-coloniality-of-power self in another broken-by-the-coloniality-of-power person’.<sup>83</sup> In my reading, Dunning’s stories map to this aim and to the *Inuit Statement of Reconciliation* (2015): to hope and to love radically is to nurture bonds and self-determine in contemporary times despite the legacies of colonialism and residential schools, and to tell ‘others about [the] journey’.<sup>84</sup> If love is the ‘heart of decolonization’, it supports a flourishing of Indigenous presence through acts of deep care.<sup>85</sup> Love is sometimes difficult and often messy in Dunning’s stories, but always fiercely defined beyond colonial conditioning and Indigenous deficit. Her stories celebrate Inuit brilliance and express contemporary Inuit identities, culture, and tradition in innovative ways.

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<sup>81</sup> Dunning interviewed by Zalika Reid Benta, ‘TOK 2.0’.

<sup>82</sup> Kim TallBear, ‘Caretaking Relations, Not American Dreaming’, 34. Leanne Simpson, *Islands of Decolonial Love* (Winnipeg, MB: ARP Books, 2015).

<sup>83</sup> Paula M.L Moya, ‘The Search For Decolonial Love: An Interview with Junot Díaz’, *Boston Review*, 26 June 2012, <https://bostonreview.net/articles/paula-ml-moya-decolonial-love-interview-junot-diaz/> [accessed April 2022]

<sup>84</sup> Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, *Inuit Statement of Reconciliation*, 2015. See Appendix B.

<sup>85</sup> Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, 111.

## A Postscript

There is and will be no end to the need or the desire to tell stories that forge connections, interrogate how the past shapes the present, and inspire ways of thinking. Change is imagined and enacted through stories. As Lee Maracle instils in readers of *Celia's Song*, every story carries a teaching, and 'even the waves of the sea tell a story that deserves to be read', but the stories that 'really need to be told', she stressed, are those that 'shake the very soul of you'.<sup>1</sup> In her fiction and throughout her life, Maracle wrote in the belief that stories have transformative and generative power. In an essay she wrote for *Me Tomorrow: Indigenous Views On The Future* (2021), Maracle confided, 'I do not fear death, because I can return'.<sup>2</sup> The essence of this statement resides in Stó:lō spiritual beliefs, but her presence is also felt in stories by other Indigenous women writers she has inspired. When Maracle died on 11 November 2021, accolades in her honour written by fellow writers described her as a woman who refused to 'ask permission of the establishment' and her voice as 'uncompromising' and 'thunderous'.<sup>3</sup> She forged new paths for Indigenous writers, as Waubgeshig Rice (Anishinaabe) attests: 'Today there is a wave of revolutionary Indigenous literature because of the splash Lee Maracle created decades ago'.<sup>4</sup> The Margaret Laurence Lecture Maracle delivered in 2020 is cited as testament to her tenacity, passion, and perseverance in addressing the racism, misogyny, and tokenism of a colonial establishment that 'puts Indigenous women last' but which had finally,

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Maracle, *Celia's Song* (Toronto, ON: Cormorant Books, 2017), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Lee Maracle, 'We Appear to Have Fallen on Dark Times', *Me Tomorrow: Indigenous Views on the Future*, Drew Hayden Taylor ed., (Madeira Park, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 2021), 203.

<sup>3</sup> Drew Hayden Taylor, 'Inspiring and uncompromising: Lee Maracle could raise you up or eviscerate you', *The Globe and Mail*, 17 November 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-inspiring-and-uncompromising-lee-maracle-could-raise-you-up-or/> [accessed January 2023]

Michelle Porter, 'Lee Maracle: A Thunderous River', *The Independent*, 7 December 2021, <https://theindependent.ca/news/arts/lee-maracle-a-thunderous-river/> [accessed January 2023]

<sup>4</sup> Waubgeshig Rice quoted in 'Lee Maracle, a leading voice in Indigenous literature, dies at 71', *Two Row Times*, 17 November 2021, <https://tworowtimes.com/uncategorized/lee-maracle-a-leading-voice-in-indigenous-literature-dies-at-71/> [accessed January 2023]

and belatedly, invited her to speak: ‘Although I’m grateful for an opportunity to speak, I am still aware of how irrelevant you have made us in order to believe in your “pursuit of religious freedom” raison d’être that masks colonialism’.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, Maracle admitted, ‘I’m not a big fan of Margaret Laurence’ whose *The Diviners* (1974) she was forced to read in school. Laurence’s insistence on framing a Métis man as a ‘dirty half-breed’ in *The Diviners* was a ‘call’ for Maracle to respond directly to stigmatised representations of Indigenous peoples in *I Am Woman* (1988).<sup>6</sup> Maracle raised her voice above colonial noise, tirelessly, and this may be why *The New York Times* obituary described her as ‘combative’, a term that risks reinforcing negative stereotypes about unapologetically assertive Indigenous women.<sup>7</sup> Maracle foregrounded the importance of coming to voice as an act of resistance, resurgence, and deep caring: ‘I write because I cannot fall silent into a backwash of Canadiana after having produced 15,000 years of story. I write because I want our youth to know that we have value, we have knowledge, and we have a place in this world’.<sup>8</sup> She championed the rights of Indigenous women and 2SLGBTQ+ writers, mentoring many who have acknowledged her role as formative or crucial. Katherena Vermette stated unequivocally, ‘I would not be where I am without her’; Joshua Whitehead (Oji-Cree) tweeted, ‘I will never forget her raising me up, literally and metaphorically, into a space where I had a voice, where I could be [as] queer as I [...] pleased and that never took away from my Indigeneity (in fact they were symbiotic)’.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Writers Trust of Canada, *Indigenous author Lee Maracle delivers the 2020 Margaret Laurence Lecture*, YouTube, 1 July 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfaHb\\_Fsggo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfaHb_Fsggo)

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Laurence, *The Diviners* (Toronto, ON: McClelland and Stewart, 1993). Lee Maracle, *I am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism* (Toronto, ON: Press Gang Publishers, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> Alex Traub, ‘Lee Maracle, Combative Indigenous Author, Dies at 71’, *The New York Times*, 14 November 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/14/books/lee-maracle-dead.html> [accessed January 2023]

<sup>8</sup> Lee Maracle, ‘Scent of Burning Cedar’, *The Walrus*, 21 June 2018, <https://thewalrus.ca/scent-of-burning-cedar/> [accessed January 2023]. Her closing remarks at the Margaret Laurence Lecture echo these sentiments: ‘Voice is power. Voice wants an ear to listen. Voice wants a human to care. Voice wants a body to respond. But even should no one hear; even should no one listen; even should no one respond, expressing oneself is power’. Writers Trust of Canada, *Indigenous author Lee Maracle delivers the 2020 Margaret Laurence Lecture*.

<sup>9</sup> Katherena Vermette quoted in Marsha Lederman, ‘Indigenous author and poet Lee Maracle remembered as trailblazing writer and teacher’, *The Globe and Mail*, 11 November 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books/article-indigenous-author-and-poet-lee-maracle-remembered-as-trailblazing/> [accessed January 2023]

Maracle is remembered for her generosity and wisdom, her buoyant laughter, and sense of responsibility towards her community: as Métis author Michelle Porter summarises, ‘we all stand higher because she established the ground — or the riverbed — on which we are all releasing our stories’.<sup>10</sup>

Maracle stressed the role of women as story keepers, citing Marilyn Dumont, Leanne Simpson, Louise Halfe, Jeannette Armstrong, Maria Campbell, Cherie Dimaline, Terese Marie Mailhot, and Katherena Vermette among writers who have ‘articulated our condition and the cultural road out’.<sup>11</sup> The literary works I selected and analysed for this study challenge simplistic and often formal and official solutions to systemic problems, not least the idea of ‘reconciliation’, and refuse to be prescriptive about relationships. Rather, they forge parallel and different paths towards understanding reciprocity and forms of engagement that are rooted in a respect for complexities and opacities. If in Tracey Lindberg’s *Birdie* friendship is suggested as a potential model for social transformation, in *Celia’s Song* Maracle problematises it as a fragile model for relationality if it remains stagnant, because relationships require continual negotiation. In *The Break*, on the other hand, Vermette suggests that the cultural gap between Indigenous and settler characters may be too wide to bridge, even in romantic relationships, and particularly when settlers seem unaware that such a gap even exists. Mailhot’s *Heart Berries* is a many-sided exploration of the self-in-relation, while Norma Dunning’s *Annie Muktuk and Other Stories* suggests a model for solidarity that is rooted in the celebration of Indigenous sovereignty and the resurgence of Inuit ways of living. White settlers may learn how to enter ‘irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality’ as ‘guests’ and ‘speak nearby’ Indigenous friends, as in many of the stories I have analysed, but friendship and love may not be sufficient because Indigenous-settler relationships are not the nexus of texts in which

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Joshua Whitehead, (tweet) @JWhitehead204, 11 November 2021, <https://twitter.com/JWhitehead204/status/1458830103010545675>

<sup>10</sup> Porter, ‘Lee Maracle: A Thunderous River’.

<sup>11</sup> Writers Trust of Canada, *Indigenous author Lee Maracle delivers the 2020 Margaret Laurence Lecture*.

Indigenous women authors address relationality; Indigenous community is at the heart of experiences, kinship ties, and decolonial love.<sup>12</sup>

The writers I foreground in this thesis have written — and continue to write — stories that span time and space, challenging linguistic, intellectual, and ontological limitations, and articulate a wider ‘tension’ between ‘the people’ and ‘the state, the medical profession, the education system, the social workers, or all of the foregoing at the same time’.<sup>13</sup> In *The Strangers* (2021), winner of the Atwood Gibson Writers Trust Fiction Prize, Vermette returns to Phoenix, already a complex character in *The Break* and the perpetrator of a terrible crime, to trace her family history. *The Strangers* follows three generations of Métis women from the perspectives of Phoenix, her sister Cedar-Sage, her mother Elsie, and her grandmother Margaret to explore the long-term effects of systemic racism in state institutions, including juvenile detention centres, the courts, and social services, and the ongoing removal of children from Indigenous homes by child welfare services. *The Strangers* begins when Phoenix is incarcerated and pregnant, dehumanised by nurses as effectively as she has been by guards. She experiences prolonged pain due to the birth being overdue but receives no assistance: ‘no one made a move to help her’.<sup>14</sup> After her son Sparrow is born, his forced removal follows soon after. Forced adoption, family separation, and the child welfare crisis converge too in Lisa Bird-Wilson’s (Cree-Métis) debut novel *Probably Ruby* (2020), a multigenerational narrative focussed on a Métis woman who has been adopted by a white family and seeks to reconnect with her Indigenous roots. Norma Dunning represents forced separation, the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and police negligence as intertwined in ‘Tainna (The

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<sup>12</sup> David Garneau, ‘Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation: Art, Curation, and Healing’, *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action in and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin eds., (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 26, 35. Trinh Minh-ha quoted in Nancy N. Chen, ‘Speaking Nearby: A Conversation with Trinh Minh-ha’, *Visual Anthropology Review*, 8.1 (1992), 87.

<sup>13</sup> Maracle argues that this is typical of Indigenous storytelling and that ‘when these tensions converge, Canadians get confused’, ‘Scent of Burning Cedar’.

<sup>14</sup> Katherena Vermette, *The Strangers* (Toronto, ON: Hamish Hamilton Canada, 2021), 8.

Unseen Ones)', a short story that lends its title to Dunning's latest collection, winner of the 2021 Governor General's Literary Award.<sup>15</sup> Dunning's character Bunny is a homeless Inuk teenage girl who has left the North with her mother and moved to Edmonton in search of a better life, but is forced into prostitution in order to survive. Pregnant, she takes shelter at 'the Hope Mission' until the birth of her son after which the staff decide she is unable to take care of him and inform social services that they should be separated. Bunny roams frozen lands towards the North Saskatchewan River determined to cross and find her son, guided by Kivalgo and Riita, two of the 'unseen ones' — ancestral spirits who guide her through life and finally accompany her to 'one of the lands' when, exhausted and heartbroken, Bunny freezes to death.<sup>16</sup> Her body is found by Billy Townsend, a retired soldier who, in spite of police disinterest, is determined to find out about her: if the dead bodies he has seen in combat were 'casualties of their messed-up countries', this woman is 'an Indigenous casualty of Canada, but no one care[s]'.<sup>17</sup> In a 2022 personal essay, Mailhot reflects on the sense of empowerment she achieved by writing and publishing *Heart Berries*, how its success has led to her carving a path out of poverty, and her hope that put in the service of community, the money she has earned may help save lives. After hearing about Shawnee Inyallie, an Indigenous woman who is missing, Mailhot offers a reward for information, driven by the belief that the 'problem' is that 'people think we have no value'.<sup>18</sup> When the police are 'mostly unhelpful', she is confirmed in the belief that 'even when you put value on us — they don't care. We may not be invisible anymore, but they still want us to disappear'. Mailhot condemns the apathy she witnesses over

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<sup>15</sup> *Tainna: The Unseen Ones, Short Stories* (2021) centres the lives of contemporary Inuit characters south of the sixtieth parallel, exploring themes of homelessness, gendered violence, displacement, and alienation, but also community connection and spirituality. Norma Dunning, *Tainna: The Unseen Ones, Short Stories*, (Madeira Park, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 2021), VLeBooks.

<sup>16</sup> Dunning, *Tainna*, 63-71 of 72.

<sup>17</sup> The expression 'unseen ones', whilst it explicitly refers to the ancestral spirits that guide Bunny, also hints to how Indigenous women are rendered invisible.

<sup>18</sup> Terese Marie Mailhot, 'What Book Royalties Can't Buy', *Literary Hub*, 16 March 2022, <https://lithub.com/terese-marie-mailhot-on-what-book-royalties-cant-buy/> [accessed January 2023]

the disappearance of Shawnee, and when her body is found in a river, her death raises the suspicion of family members, but not the police. Increased visibility of Indigenous stories does not automatically correspond to a change in public perception or politics, as Maracle made clear: ‘I’m invited into your space in an honouring way, despite the continued murder of Indigenous women, some of whom are my relations’.<sup>19</sup> But stories do have a power insofar as they have healing qualities, suggesting how readers may learn to listen to testimony as story, and for how they instil a sense of responsibility and community. I do not believe that stories can be a ‘substitute for other forms of knowing about history, culture, policy and local activism’ — a belief against which Leigh Gilmore warns when examining how stories are mobilised for the purpose of education — but I believe that they work with, from, and alongside activist ideas.<sup>20</sup> Trauma continues to feature heavily in stories that harness the wisdom of pain to forge pathways towards personal, collective, and ecological healing, as in Michelle Porter’s memoir *Scratching River* (2022), for example.<sup>21</sup> An emerging author of intergenerational Métis stories such as *A Grandmother Begins the Story* (2023), in *Scratching River* Porter tells a personal story in a ‘traditional Métis way’.<sup>22</sup> The memoir centres the life story of Porter’s older brother Brendon, diagnosed as autistic and schizophrenic — labels that cannot begin to contain him or the complexity of his experience. Porter braids her voice with the voices of close and distant relatives, including her mother, an ancestor named Louis Goulet, and the Red River, a meandering prairie river neighbourhood from which her family hails. Porter’s writing mimics the winding, rippling movements of river over land, as she incorporates oral histories, river morphology, stories of prairies and grasses, and news clippings about the abuse her brother suffered whilst in a group home.

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<sup>19</sup> Writers Trust of Canada, *Indigenous author Lee Maracle delivers the 2020 Margaret Laurence Lecture*.

<sup>20</sup> Leigh Gilmore, *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017), 147.

<sup>21</sup> Michelle Porter, *Scratching River* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2022).

<sup>22</sup> Michelle Porter, ‘Afterword’ to *Scratching River*, 140.

Indigenous women writers are celebrating the resurgence of Indigenous cultures as expression of joyous futurities, as Dunning does in ‘Future We In-U-Wee’ (2021) in creative contention with colonial assumptions that relegate Inuit ways of being to the past. Anger is channelled into radical hope in Dunning’s reflection on how non-Inuit pronunciations of the word ‘Inuit’ act as reminder that ‘our own absence as people in Canada is never articulated properly’.<sup>23</sup> Dunning conjures the word ‘In-U-Wee’ as an expression of survivance and reclamation, an imagined word of ‘fun and hope’ and ‘excitement at the unknown positive possibilities that lie inside of Inuit future generations’. Her poem addresses realities of oppression when Inuit are ‘Canada’s biggest afterthought’, ‘Forgotten ones’ who ‘can still go hungry in 2020’ and may not ‘dare to have a future’. Dunning tackles internalised racism among Inuit living south of the sixtieth parallel, how ‘white people harvest your Inherent Knowledge’ and northern Inuit ‘look down their small noses at you’. But the poem closes on an exultation of hope, love, and acceptance for all self-determined Inuit, beyond the confines of colonially constituted notions of identity and relationality, beyond borders or the points of a compass: ‘What if Future We In-U-Wee were people without gravity/ Nose-diving into love with one another/ [...] What if Inuit Nunangat, our homeland, was here and everywhere?’<sup>24</sup> In her essay in the same collection, Maracle echoes these sentiments of radical hope for future generations who care deeply for one other: ‘We are building allegiances, relationships and new sensibilities across national, racial and colour lines. If we do this with vigour, we will turn the tide and change the way we do business here on this island. We will create a new world’.<sup>25</sup> Ensuring accountability and through it establishing equitable as well as sustainable relationships for peoples, the land, animals, and future generations is beyond the political goals of ‘reconciliation’ if it is limited by state-sponsored commissions to being seen to redeem a

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<sup>23</sup> Norma Dunning, ‘Future We In-U-Wee’, *Me Tomorrow: Indigenous Views on the Future*, Drew Hayden Taylor ed. (Madeira Park, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, 2021), 26-29 of 99, VLeBooks.

<sup>24</sup> Norma Dunning, ‘Future We In-U-Wee’.

<sup>25</sup> Lee Maracle, ‘We Appear to Have Fallen on Dark Times’, 204.

settler colonial state. If solidarity is possible, it is at least partly enabled by Story: stories that spiral, moving readers inside and out of an imaginary circle, at the centre of which resides the 'unknown' that may only be reached by dancing through story.<sup>26</sup> The Indigenous women's writing studied in this thesis coalesces as an invitation to listen and as a call to action; it works to mend and nurture relationships of deep caring in Indigenous peoples and allies if they do not shy away from opacities but push against colonial ideas that still aim to settle relationships via a conciliatory solution rather than renewing them through continuous negotiation.

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<sup>26</sup> Lee Maracle, 'Scent Of Burning Cedar'.

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# **Appendix A**

# Spin the Tale Inside: Opacity and Respectful Distance in Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song*

VALENTINA DE RISO

**S**ET IN THE LATE 1980s, *Celia's Song* (2014) by Lee Maracle (Stó:lō) is a story of Indigenous resurgence in the Nuu'chalth and Stó:lō territories on the North Pacific coast of Canada. Maracle imagines what it might mean for Indigenous peoples, settlers, and beings on the land to co-exist more equitably, by foregrounding modes of speaking and understanding which afford space for respectful distance. For Maracle, it would seem that lack or incompleteness of understanding is not an obstacle to respectful relationships but constitutive of them and set against absolutist notions of achieving total understanding that risk recreating the colonial violence of assimilation. In claiming that understanding can be appropriative, I draw from postcolonial scholar Édouard Glissant's theory of opacity. Glissant's argument develops from etymological analysis of the French *comprendre* which, like the English "comprehend," is formed from Latin roots *con-* (with) and *prendre* (to take, to grasp) and contains an almost aggressively appropriative propriety (191, 192). To accept, live with, and cooperate with others, one does not need to understand them on all levels to afford them respect; opaque understanding leaves space for unintelligibility and impenetrability. This is a model of understanding that may be understood as "standing-with" in respectful reciprocity and irreducible incommensurability.

Glissant suggests that the instrumentalization of speech creates finite parameters for expressing and conceptualizing human experience, which is irreducibly disordered and non-linear, by turning it into something easily accessible and intelligible. Inherent to this discursive model is the notion of transparency, a process of understanding that involves measuring what is said, comparing it to one's own system of knowledge, and reducing it to an absolute (Glissant 190). Dialogue may be built instead by a more respectful "speaking nearby," an idea I draw from Trinh

T. Minh-ha's notion of a form of speaking that "reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it" (qtd. in Chen 87). This way of speaking, where "closures are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition" (87), resists fixed meanings and may defy listeners' expectations. The problem I pose in this essay through a close reading of Maracle's novel is how to imagine and assay a model of speaking truths that avoids the risk of decontextualizing Indigenous knowledges or de-politicizing Indigenous texts when employing postcolonial conceptual frameworks and terminology in settler-colonial contexts. Postcolonial theories are often met with hostility by scholars of Indigenous studies because of these risks.<sup>1</sup> In an essay titled "The 'Post-colonial' Imagination" (1992), Maracle rejects the term *post-colonial* and suggests the need for a space to "imagine something beyond the colonial condition" (*Memory* 111). Indigenous scholars working with postcolonial paradigms invite this criticism. Glen Coulthard (Dene), Robert Warrior (Osage), and Jodi Byrd (Chickasaw) are among critics who theorize Indigeneity and decolonization with recourse to postcolonial theories. In the introduction to *ARIEL's* 2020 special issue on "tensions" and "interrelationships" between Indigenous and postcolonial studies, Deanna Reder (Métis) and Sophie McCall (settler) assert that "the language and theoretical frameworks for conceiving and mobilizing comparative studies have changed" precisely because "Indigenous and racialized scholars and writers have pushed to change them and to challenge the power relationships underpinning these disciplines" (10). Postcolonial frames of interpretation may be useful to emphasize interconnections between decolonization and anti-colonial resistance across the globe. Glissant's approach as a French-Caribbean philosopher and Minh-ha's as a Vietnamese filmmaker working in different contexts, including Africa, foreground spaces for respectful distance, ambivalence, indirectness, poetic language, and non-reductive understanding. This approach resonates with Indigenous views and is suggested by Maracle through story.

The story she tells also distinguishes its modes of telling from models for Indigenous-settler relations like "reconciliation," which, since the establishment of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), has become a dominant paradigm through which the state negotiates relationships with Indigenous peoples. From 2007 through 2015, the TRC investigated the lasting impacts of the Indian Residential School system on Indigenous families; its final report includes ninety-

four calls for acts of “reconciliation” to promote peaceful and respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The TRC provided a forum in which to testify to colonial injustices, re-orienting the frame of public discourse and collective memory. However, national discourses of “reconciliation” have been criticized for the instrumentalization of speech in several contexts, including models for testimony. Settler anthropologist Ronald Niezen observes that specific “preferred narratives” and templates for testimony were encouraged by the TRC (68). A particular notion of healing employed in this discourse of reconciliation locks Indigenous peoples into a paradigm of trauma and becomes part of a master narrative in which “negative” affects such as pain and anger are expected to be overcome through narration and replaced by forgiveness.<sup>2</sup> As Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō), Peter Morin (Tahltan), and Anne-Marie Reynaud (settler) all emphasize, Indigenous peoples at TRC events have often refused to abide by this narrative and employed highly varied forms of testimony. But, if “reconciliation” is framed as a state-determined biopolitical “humanitarian project,” as Dian Million (Athabaskan) contends, it becomes a neoliberal tool that “reaffirms the people’s systemic inequality and endemic social suffering as a pathology, a wound that is solely an outcome of past colonial policies” (6).<sup>3</sup> This model of witnessing is neoliberal. The “contemporary subject” is constituted as “the site of healing or of overcoming trauma” (Ahmed and Stacey 4). *Celia’s Song* suggests that truth, testimony, and healing cannot be reduced to absolutist claims or tidy conclusions.

Instead, Maracle explores the intrinsic opacity in acts of telling through “spider storytelling,” a narrative technique in which temporal and storied layers are used to challenge conceptions of linearity. Different notions of truth emerge when the limits of the known are exposed and incommensurable realities acknowledged. For Maracle, opacity is key because, she emphasizes, colonizing empires granted themselves the rights to “define, delineate, and demarcate,” to “speculate” on “what is in the mind, body, heart, and spirit of others” and “arbitrarily determine the nature of their relations with all others, often without due consideration to those others” (*Memory* 230). Colonialism cannot tolerate opacity, nor can a settler state if it aims to settle issues to ensure its continuity, rather than negotiating differences and ambiguities through constant renewal of relationships. Opacity informs treaty relations as a model of relationality that respects the unknown and unassimilable, in opposition to liberal frameworks of democracy

and equality that may be used to supersede Indigenous sovereignty. By imagining a model for “speaking nearby” in *Celia’s Song*, Maracle opens up ways of understanding coexistence as mutual honouring that pays attention to the right to opacity and the right to say what is not expected, with the implication that testimony may neither be complete nor understood completely.

### Spider Telling: The Generative Potential of Doubt

*Celia’s Song* is a sequel to *Ravensong* (1993), which is set in the 1950s amidst a swine flu epidemic. In *Ravensong*, Celia James is a child and a secondary character, a seer who grows up without the guidance of her Elders and, unable to make sense of her power, gradually withdraws from her family.<sup>4</sup> Thirty years on, in *Celia’s Song*, the James family faces a different “epidemic” of “suicide and violence” (218). In her forties, and having lost her son to suicide, Celia is unable to find meaning in her life and initially accepts a diagnosis of her visions as “delusions” (6). But, when a member of Celia’s family, five-year-old Shelley, is brutalized, raped, and almost killed, Celia is compelled to ground herself in material reality and, together with family and friends, takes responsibility for Shelley’s care. The novel traces Celia’s personal resurgence and that of her community, how she learns to embrace and actively make use of her gift of vision to help Shelley and to provide guidance for her nephew Jacob, also a seer. As the villagers and allies from “white town” come together to heal Shelley and deal with the perpetrator of the crime, Amos (a victim of abuse at residential schools), they find strength in Coast Salish philosophies and beliefs, connection to the land, and healing practices that have been undermined and damaged by colonial policies. The main narrator is a trickster, Mink, who recounts the hardships of the James family and, concurrently, the vicissitudes of a double-headed sea serpent. Weaving in and out of Celia’s tale, then, is a traditional story of the double-headed serpent, an archetypal symbol of crisis and irreconcilable rationalities. Protector of a forgotten longhouse, the serpent is exhausted by waiting for humans to honour their promises and feed him with songs and ceremony. Stirring in disgust and rage over a contract breached, he rips himself off the longhouse and stirs up a terrible storm, which is witnessed by Celia in her visions. The havoc the serpent wreaks is equated to Amos’s abuse of Shelley: two moments

of crisis mimic the double exposure of the mythical and the social upon which Maracle builds in this fiction.

Temporal layering suggests the novel's historical and socio-political contexts and constitutes one way in which Maracle scrutinizes modes of telling and understanding. *Celia's Song* is an expressly non-linear narrative, drawing simultaneously on Celia's visions, described as "scattered moving pictures" with "no order" (45, 46), and on the traditional story of the serpent. In the novel, visions are narrative portals through which to tell a multigenerational story of colonial contact, largely through memories that Celia inherits from her great-great-grandmother, the "first Alice." The arrival of the European colonizers, the illnesses they brought with them and how they traded Christian names for medicines, experiences of dispossession and of residential schools, and poverty, addiction, suicides, and gendered violence criss-cross in a web of interweaving patterns of colonialism. Countering linear chronologies of time is a narrative technique employed by many Indigenous and postcolonial authors, a decolonial aesthetic strategy that decentres linear order and unsettles colonial conditionings of transparency and possibility. This emerges compellingly through the story of the serpent who moves in a dimension that is seemingly both outside of time and contemporaneous with Celia's story. Temporal markers situating the serpent are created by storytellers: for Mink, the story of the sea serpent has just begun (26), but when Celia witnesses the serpent's storm in a vision, she says "*It happened a long time ago*" (13) because, as an origin story, it takes place at "the beginning of the world" (79). This might suggest that Celia witnesses the storm after it occurs, but the serpent moves cyclically across time, not incrementally. The moment Celia witnesses the storm does *and* does not correspond to the moment of the storm because the storm "*happened even if it didn't*" (7).

Maracle's claim that "Fiction is powerful truth" (*Conversations* 82) is echoed by Mink when he confides, "*some piece of me believes that doubt is somehow the best part of being alive; I love the suspiciousness of doubt and all the angles for retelling stories that this doubt spawns*" (6, 7). Like an optical prism refracting light, doubt is an aperture onto the infinite possibilities of not-knowing, when it is acknowledged that one story is the starting point for many more. Recognizing a multiplicity of stories is crucial to rebutting settlercolonialism, wherein one story is made the sovereign rule and the colonial moment magnified so that it becomes the central authority that determines reality, and "history" becomes

the history of colonialism. In *Celia's Song*, Maracle returns to “an old story” in order to “tell it like it’s happening now so people will continue to grow and learn from it” (Maracle and Simpson). She suggests that retelling stories from different perspectives is “the heart of where transformation comes from” (qtd. in Kelly 86). In fiction, Maracle recovers “stories of implosion” that narrate how Indigenous peoples have traditionally dealt with crisis. These stories are survival mechanisms that policies of assimilation were meant to destroy. Maracle has spoken of how residential schools “separated us from those stories” and said that this is why she decided to “write from those stories” and tell about the double-headed serpent (*As It Happens*).

In *Celia's Song*, Maracle performs the role of spider, the storyteller who spins a story so that “You don’t know what her story is about until after she has spun the tale inside, twisted you in all kinds of crazed directions” (128). Indigenous storytelling evades directedness and works like “a spider web,” as Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Marmon Silko observes, “with many little threads radiating from the centre, crisscrossing one another. As with the web, the structure emerges as it is made, and you must simply listen and trust . . . that meaning will be made” (*Yellow* 48, 49). Spider storytelling emphasizes the importance of what Jo-Ann Archibald (Stó:lō) calls “story listening” and “learning to make meaning from stories” (76, 85). Stó:lō Elders stress that a “hearer isn’t meant to understand the story at all levels, immediately” because meanings “are revealed to the listener at different stages of life” (qtd. in Archibald 84, 125). The relationship that takes shape during the storytelling process, between storyteller and listeners, generates a model in which opacity is cherished. In *Memory Serves* (2015), Maracle emphasizes oratory as a model of relationality that is based on a “concatenation” between storytellers and listeners, and on stories that “activate the listener’s community-based thought process without prescribing a response” (173). Listening carefully is more important than knowing or understanding because stories do not necessarily “offer answers to problems” but “stimulat[e] thought in the listener” (170). In *Celia's Song*, Maracle recreates some of the characteristics of oral traditions she values by building levels of story through scattered memories, conversations, origin tales, dreams, and more. In this sense, Maracle’s text may be read in the rich context of Indigenous writers across North America, in particular Silko’s spider storytelling in *Ceremony* (1977). This narrative technique suggests that multiple truths may emerge from what is left

unsaid and what is said indirectly. It is an example of strategic opacity because it illustrates that “Truth can only be approached indirectly if one does not want to lose it. . . . Even when the indirect has to take refuge in the very figures of the direct, it continues to defy the closure of a direct reading” (Minh-ha qtd. in Chen 87). This ambivalence is inherent to Stó:lō oratory: words are “spoken with care” and with “poetic force, vision, and poignancy,” and listeners have the responsibility to pay careful attention to “what is said, what is not said, and what is connected to what is not said,” so that the story “will encourage us to look again, to peel back each layer and gain deeper understanding” (Maracle, *Memory* 233). When Maracle represents these processes, she uses doubt generatively to explore where storywebs may lead readers and listeners.

Maracle practises spider storytelling by questioning models of thinking and speaking, leaving a trail of questions that are not answered directly. When Celia’s nephew Jacob reflects on the realities of settler-colonialism, he asks about the loss of traditional smells in Indigenous homes and initiates a conversation that generates more questions, none of which are answered (63). Jacob’s grandmother, Momma, addresses her sense of loss in a monologue marked by the repeated question “Where is my family?” (93). Sometimes, too, Maracle suggests answers to questions that are left unasked, as when Momma says “to no one” that “We are not who we used to be” (77). Momma struggles to find answers until she cannot “bear the question anymore,” and faints under the weight of it (77). In storied layers, Maracle lays bare that there are “too many threads to this web” and “a simple answer is impossible” (139). What is left “opaque” is not obscure, “though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such,” but “that which cannot be reduced” to a fixed and absolute truth (Glissant 191). Maracle’s storytelling technique illustrates that truths cannot be contained within finite parameters for smooth comprehension because “Truth never yields itself in anything said or shown” (Minh-ha qtd. in Chen 87). A deeper appreciation of difficult truths may be reached through opacity; doubt is intrinsic to spider telling and generative in Maracle’s imagining of respectful relationships.

### Opacity in Relationality

In *Celia’s Song*, Maracle scrutinizes liberal frameworks of equality that are considered pillars of democratic progress and often perceived as commensurate with the goals of different communities. As Eve Tuck

(Unangaâ) and K. Wayne Yang (settler) posit, “an ethic of incommensurability” is crucial to developing models of relationality that recognize what is “distinct” and “sovereign” for “project(s) of decolonization in relation to human and civil rights” (28). Maracle threads ideas of social progress through conversations between characters, with the 1954 flu epidemic a watershed after which “their world changed. . . . The shift began with Rosa Parks and it turned into a movement for civil rights. It finally came to the villages as Aboriginal rights” (*Celia* 86). In 1960, the Canadian Parliament granted all registered First Nation peoples the right to vote in federal elections. In *Celia’s Song*, however, the James family discusses how the vote followed a prohibition law banning access to mountains from which to gather wood for building houses. It was this circumstance, and complaints of Indigenous chiefs, that led the government to “deman[d]” the vote in exchange for houses being built (64), suggesting that in this context voting loses its associations with freedom and participatory democracy, on which it is usually understood to be founded as a civil right. In *Celia’s Song*, the tool of democracy *par excellence* atomizes the community: “The vote was silent, ominous in its lack of community and collaboration . . . , powerful in its ability to silence the village and isolate each from the other. It was like the white men, all-powerful and silencing, except it was invisible” (64, 65). In this instance, the right to vote serves the status quo and supersedes Indigenous claims to land and autonomy. Political science professor David MacDonald warns against applying liberal frameworks of equality, multiculturalism, and civil rights to Indigenous-settler relations because they have been used “to suppress Indigenous peoples and their *sui generis* rights to self-determination, and may continue to do so in the future” (5). He observes that the “most popular ideas of reconciliation” among settlers are framed as “closing gaps, making Indigenous peoples equal with settlers, [and] working to create a shared vision of a harmonious future” (7). Dian Million similarly criticizes policies employed by the Canadian government to “stall” self-determination efforts, what she calls “adaptive inclusions” into “neoliberal multiculturalism” (158). These frameworks render commensurable the goals of Indigenous communities to those of the settler state but, in *Celia’s Song*, Maracle shows that they are incommensurable. A precolonial model of treaty relations that is based on principles of non-interference and constant renewal is recovered in the novel as a potentially more ethical framework for rela-

tionships between Indigenous peoples and settlers, as well as between humans, nonhumans, and the land.

To understand how treaty relations are represented in the novel, it is necessary to consider how Maracle's blend of tradition and social critique conveys colonialism's disruptive potential but reduces its authority. In *Celia's Song*, forced relocation, the outlawing of spiritual practices, exploitation of the land, harrowing abuses, and the everyday slow violence of racist misogyny all lead to psychological and emotional traumas that accumulate over generations. The serpent feeds on this. He "lurks in the shadows behind bushes," waiting to hear "the shrieking sound of rage or desperation" that signals "a meal" (236). Maracle uses the serpent to explain Amos's murderous desires (40), Stella's addictions and neglect of her daughter Shelley (155), feelings of hate in abused boys (98) — and to foreground how colonialism dehumanizes those who act as oppressors.<sup>5</sup> Yet, I would argue that *Celia's Song* focuses less on exposing colonial trauma, abuses, and violence (which Indigenous readers already know all too well) and more on the reparative process of "reconstructing a sustainable life in their wake" (Hanson 105), with a major stimulus for transformation conveyed in Coast Salish storying. Whenever Maracle imagines moments of crisis, she communicates the need for transformation — even when the web of story is too twisted to be easily disentangled. She stresses symbolically what she has asserted in interviews: that the "history of this country is not made up of conquest," it is "thousands and thousands of years old" (qtd. in Kelly 84). The serpent originates pre-contact and exists in a system of treaty relations where stability is ensured through contract. The serpent is obligated to protect the people of the longhouse if they feed him with songs and ceremony, but colonialism disrupts this pact: the "singing" had "stopped during the prohibition laws" (*Celia* 2). The damage, then, originates in the breaching of a contract which grants "*permission to the serpent to slide from the house front and return to sea*" (2). Indigenous peoples have contracts with "all beings" on the land, Maracle writes, and "Violation of these agreements has consequences" (*Conversations* 113). In *Celia's Song*, treaty negotiations are a system of reciprocity, and Maracle suggests ways of understanding treaties outside the discourse in which they are usually contained. For settler scholar Michael Asch, treaties have come to be considered "relatively insignificant in the story of our country" because of a failure to see "the centrality of relations with Indigenous peoples to [Canada's] story" (41, 45). Asch is referring to historic trea-

ties that were signed between 1871 and 1921 and cover most of Western and Northern Canada, formal agreements between Indigenous peoples and the government of Canada. Maracle's novel is set in unceded Coast Salish territory, and the treaties she imagines include Indigenous practice that pre-dates colonial contact.<sup>6</sup> Métis legal scholar Chelsea Vowel clarifies that "inter-Indigenous treaties were highly sophisticated oral agreements between sovereign peoples" which "covered everything from trade arrangements to the settlement of conflicts, with specific consequences for their breach, and specific ways in which these treaties would be renewed" (244). Leanne Simpson (Nishnaabeg) emphasizes that these treaties involve the animal and plant nations as well humans and suggests "precolonial treaty-making practices" provide "insights into the kind of relationship" that Indigenous peoples intended to have with settlers, based on principles of sustainability, respect, renewal, and non-interference ("Looking" 36). Simpson advocates for decolonizing the Euro-Canadian view of treaties as entrenched in written record, ownership of land, and static understandings of relationships — what Garneau describes as the "government's frantic race to a post-historical space of reconciliation, rather than submission to a permanent state of negotiation, of treaty" (37). From Simpson's Nishnaabeg perspective, a treaty represents an "ongoing reciprocal and dynamic relationship to be nurtured" which, when practised "continually and in perpetuity, maintains peaceful coexistence, respect, and mutual benefit" ("Looking" 35). Continuous negotiation and renewal of reciprocity are necessary to navigate incommensurability. Maracle's claim that oratory "lead us onto a path of continuous growth and transformation" suggests how closely politics and aesthetics are linked in Indigenous storytelling traditions, where stories contain protocols for behaviours and forming relationships so that all beings enjoy a "perfect right to be as they are" (*Memory* 236). A principle of non-interference and a "survival right" (236) ensure that each being maintains a respectful distance from others. Treaties ensure that this distance is respected and treasured, and oratory reinforces "the freedom between beings" because it is about "cherishing the distance between them; it is about relationship, and as such it is about life. Oratory is comprised of the complex relations between disparate characters in their concatenation or their lack of it" (241). In *Celia's Song*, Maracle suggests a complex system of earth relations between peoples and more-than-human beings that is evoked in passages describing Jacob's retreat to the mountain and conversations

with his great-great-great-grandmother, “first Alice.” Jacob’s journey signals the beginning of a collective resurgence of his community by rebuilding the longhouse — the “traditional location for telling stories” (Archibald 71) — and revitalizing Indigenous storytelling modes for law and relationality.

### Speaking Nearby

In *Celia’s Song*, Maracle conceptualizes language as carrying “reference posts,” criteria for making meaning and implementing action that are embedded in Indigenous languages and derived from observation of the natural world.<sup>7</sup> Illustrative of Maracle’s strategic opacity in this context is a vignette about salmon: “*Their dancing is done in their ocean playground. . . . In this place of dance and play their language is born. This language has reference posts that head them up the right stream to the river the fish-women know well*” (109). This passage sets the tone for how the dynamic language of salmon may be translated into the lives of humans: as Alice’s spirit leaves her body, she ponders that language “*needs a post . . . a reference marker to remind, to tell the rememberer they are hooked to some moment*” (110). With the removal of children to residential schools and the outlawing of Indigenous practices, Alice lacks an immediate family relation to whom she may pass her knowledge. Alice has died “*but she could not really leave*” and floats betwixt “*the stars and earth,*” past and present. Jacob begins to access her ancestral teachings affectively when he “*feels something,*” which affords him space for a “*different kind of see*” (110). Maracle employs the verb “to see” as substantive, without it being nominalized via the suffix -ing. If it maintains the quality of action, it now holds the value of intuitive knowledge, brought into cognition when Jacob reaches the top of the mountain and converses with Alice. Characters in *Celia’s Song* inhabit a “langscape,” which John Borrows (Nishnaabeg) defines as “a place where physical space interacts with human observation to give meaning to the natural and human worlds” (51). In this novel, language is a system of knowledge with reference posts rooted in the land and in the stories of those who inhabit it. As the environment changes, language is adapted.

Insistence on reference posts in the novel allows for emphasis to be placed on the gaps in language that are created by changes in the environment. Cultural gaps exist not only between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples but also across generations. When Jacob lis-

tens to the women in his family discuss the epidemic and the vote, he “feels as if he does not have reference posts” to understand them (110). Jacob belongs to a younger generation, more disconnected from his Indigenous heritage, and feels that “each woman by turns shreds . . . his linguistic markers, rendering useless as slugs the words he so carefully learned at school”; the women “speak in a language that contravenes everything those marks stood for” (111). Education plays a critical role in Jacob’s epistemological and existential displacement because it forces the imposition of white reference posts as it erases Indigenous ones, leaving him feeling unable to connect to either and exposed to assimilation into the dominant system. The English the women speak, and that Jacob will learn to speak, is conceptually bent to convey Indigenous consciousness; it carries reference posts that have been created over time and is reclaimed and imbued with Coast Salish consciousness.<sup>8</sup> In *Celia’s Song*, the need to forge a new language is a concern voiced by Jacob’s grandfather Ned, who declares, “Jacob doesn’t speak our women’s language, in either his English or theirs. They talk like they are stuck back in some old yesterday and Jacob talks like he is headed for tomorrow. We have to build a bridge between yesterday and tomorrow” (73). Here, linguistic tension is less about epistemologies and more about orientations. While the women’s English may be more substantially connected to traditional Indigenous worldviews than Jacob’s, their conversations are stuck in the past: the epidemic, the prohibition laws, the false victory of the vote. It is not only Jacob’s language that Maracle probes to show its limits but also the women’s because both modes of speaking are approached with doubt.

A mode of speaking that Maracle challenges with subtlety is healing. The belief that truth-telling can have a therapeutic effect underpins dominant ideas of emotional healing and rehabilitation and is also said to be aligned with Indigenous conceptions of restorative justice. Leanne Simpson emphasizes that, in the specific instance of the Nishnaabeg legal system, Indigenous restorative processes “rely upon the abuser taking full responsibility for his/her actions in a collective setting” (*Dancing* 23). Survivors have the agency to decide restorative measures and to hold perpetrators accountable, in order to begin to repair relationships.<sup>9</sup> Celia is part of a “healing circle” where people talk about experiences of violence to begin to heal themselves. This restorative practice risks being sensationalized when co-opted by national projects for Indigenous-settler relations. TRC events, for example, are modelled upon such

traditional “circle talk” but displace the idea of restorative justice into a neoliberal master narrative of individual healing because perpetrators are absent and cannot be held accountable, testimonies are reinterpreted when they gather media attention, and speech is instrumentalized to promote a narrative where pain is overcome for the purpose of “reconciliation” (Niezen 3, 88). Healing becomes another impossible “simple answer” (*Celia* 139) if it does not leave space for unintelligibility or for differing expressive styles. Celia is aware of the fallacy of this model, which seems to have infiltrated even private and traditional practices. Celia ponders circle talk if it is “limited to disclosing hurt and trauma, or rage” (64). This feels “narrow and tiring” to her; although she knows “they need it,” she wants hurt to be “peppered between the other kinds of conversations they never seem to have anymore” (64). Celia does not reject this model entirely but understands it as insufficient if it eclipses other modes of talking and reduces multifaceted experiences to the shadow of an illness.

Maracle creates a model of reciprocity where discrepancies in language and rationalities exist in moments of convergence that are characterized by a willingness to doubt one’s ability to understand, and to accept that one cannot fully understand another person’s subjective experience. These are the moments in which characters “speak nearby” in Minh-ha’s sense, in a way that “reflects on itself” because it does not involve explicative questions or immediate answers but instead solicits a process of learning how to listen and make meaning from what is left unspoken. Jo-Ann Archibald has suggested that Stó:lō “traditional ways favour no or very little direct guidance from the storyteller,” but that “colonization, assimilation, and acculturation, predominantly through schooling, have left many people unable to engage in story listening and to make story meaning, unless directly guided” (112). In the novel, when Jacob asks a question and the women reply with a story, he “resents” not receiving a clear answer (66). Slowly, though, he comes to realize that he is less “concerned about the question” but seeks “the sound of the women’s voices” (66). Jacob learns how to listen and to negotiate meanings even when they seem to elude him. Understanding is not a rapacious act of grasping and seizing but one of generous reciprocity.

This model of reciprocity is not confined to Indigenous characters but spun outward in the tale so that speaking nearby emerges in conversations with non-Indigenous characters who are trying to surmount

barriers to understanding, like those that Steve and Judy face as white minor characters. They first appear in *Ravensong*, where Judy's "whiteness" is raised by Momma: "She's white and so she don't count" (123). In *Celia's Song*, Maracle recalibrates what may "count," drawing perhaps on her observation that a naturalization process whereby non-Indigenous people are accepted as part of an Indigenous Nation exists traditionally, but "Canada does not allow it, because if it did, that would make us nations" (*Conversations* 81). It is an Elder, Ned, who decides that Judy "has earned a place in this village" and tells her, "you are one of us to me" (71, 73). Exercising Indigenous sovereignty, albeit informally, Ned welcomes Judy as a member of the Indigenous family. In this way, and borrowing Métis scholar David Garneau's terminology, in *Celia's Song* non-Indigenous people enter "irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality" as "guests" (26, 35), in contrast to colonial models of Indigenous-settler relationships that are focused on assimilating Indigenous peoples to the settler state.

Moments of crisis in the novel foreground how cooperation and reciprocity may be reached, despite incommensurability of understanding, when doubt generates possibilities. At a moment of the highest tension, when Shelley's life is at risk, the contrast between worldviews and understandings of justice brings Judy into conflict with the Indigenous women who refuse to take Shelley to a hospital. Judy does not realize the impact this could have on Shelley, how the intervention of the child-welfare system would likely cut her off from the women who are her family. Judy cannot see that the girl needs her grandmother's "golden-throated" voice to talk her through the experience no less than she needs "glucose, a sanitary room, and surgical instruments," while Celia knows "those sterile things alone will not be enough" (137, 145). As Judy struggles to trust the possibilities of the story unfolding around her, she asks Celia's sister Stacey how she reconciles the realities she lives with the reference posts she has been taught at school. Stacey explains that she attended school "with several pounds of doubt" and that they all need to have "some grave doubts" if Shelley is to be healed (147). This assertion foregrounds the generative potential of doubt in processes of convergence and cooperation, with doubt a spark of hope and a tool of questioning and improvement.

Doubt drives Steve and Stacey to choose to stay together despite the obstacles they face in building a romantic relationship. In *Ravensong*, their relationship fails because of a "gulf" that they fear no two people

alone could “bridge” (185). As adults, they embark on a journey, negotiating each other without pretensions of permanently succeeding in bridging the gulf. When Stacey confronts Steve with the inevitable incommensurability between them, he realizes that “he will never fully understand her” and that “her loving him might be painful for her” (*Celia* 189). In my reading, this exchange is not about Steve grasping Stacey’s reality but is indicative that he is beginning to know himself and unpack his white privilege. Going “within oneself” and doubting one’s own place is an important stage in making meaning in oral traditions, as stressed by Elder Ellen White (qtd. in Archibald 135). In the context of Indigenous-settler relations, it pivots less on the need for white settlers to understand Indigenous peoples and more on understanding colonialism through white privilege. In *Celia’s Song*, then, co-existence may be a spinning tale that can only be known as it unfolds and it requires “the rest of our lives” to negotiate “the maze” of its telling (*Celia* 196). Opacity is presented as fruitful in any relationship that is continuously negotiated. In the case of Stacey and Steve, for example, “She would try, he would try, but they would not always be successful” (201). Maracle dramatizes moments in which characters’ intentions converge; they may be fleeting but they are hopeful and bear the promise of more permanent meaning. These moments are characterized by generative doubt, incommensurability of understanding, and a willingness to stand together. Steve and Judy learn how to listen but, by the end of the novel, they still question whether they hear accurately and accept that they may never understand. Steve declares, “I have no intention of leaving. I worry, though, that I am ever going to get it right” (195), and Judy echoes his words more acutely in the knowledge she has gained: “I am never going to get it right” (269).

Speaking nearby becomes *singing* nearby when Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices come together to sing: “Judy can’t get past her Prussian accent, and Steve can’t get past his lyric-less English, but it doesn’t matter” (205). Reciprocity is a wilful act of love and respect, of voices touching without melting into each other, voices that ring with individuality but forge a communal song. In *Celia’s Song*, Maracle suggests the *potential* of moments of non-reductive understanding and for successful relationships if they are rooted in reciprocal, interweaving modes of telling. In doing so, she problematizes models of relationality that are framed as unequivocal and definitive, even when they are grounded in acts of resurgence. The rebuilding of the longhouse and

the ceremony performed constitute a form of resurgence, but they do not correspond to full revitalization or to a conciliatory solution. By the end of the novel, the serpent still roams and the divide between the Indigenous community and white town may be wider than before. Resurgence and co-existence are shown to be more complex than readers might expect or imagine.

\* \* \*

In *Celia's Song*, Maracle questions established models of time, democracy, treaty relations, language, and testimony. Doubt emerges as generative because new possibilities come into view when *the suspiciousness of doubt* renders evident the limits of the known. In my reading, Maracle's novel invites readers to consider a model of relationships that is fluid, grounded in respect for another's opacity and for speaking in ways that do not fit expected models. The cornerstones of doubt and opacity, like speaking nearby and listening attentively, are relevant to how testimonial narratives of trauma and healing are encouraged in national discourses and models for Indigenous-settler relations such as "reconciliation." This model of testimony risks undermining what may be "indescribable" by "turning it into news rather than, more sublimely, *communication*," as Lauren Berlant fears (55). Maracle would seem to reject neoliberal logics by offering an instance of writing as polyphonic singing, where voices meet to *communicate* the ineffable. Maracle's characters accept incommensurability and together add intonation and variation to an infinite web of story.

*Celia's Song* is a communal song that is rooted in the land and sung for generations past, present, and future. In it, Maracle explores some of the effects of colonialism which, like the double-headed serpent, slip and slide, swallow and poison the lives of Indigenous peoples and white settlers in Canada. The novel has a regenerative quality because it recovers and conveys stimuli for self- and social transformation that are characteristic of traditional Stó:lō stories: song "*move[s] you through life. We are not lost. We are travelling in the wrong direction. Song moves us toward our humanity*" (*Celia* 213). If song is reparative, it is because it signals the ability to dream hopes and to sing them into being. Song is poetry, relation, movement, transformation. It is the felt knowledge of stories, the impression and expression of humanity and interconnectedness. *Celia's Song* is a tale spun inside, its thick webs rendering it irreducible

to any single model of understanding. It suggests ways in which story is a tool for transformation — when different models are probed for how useful or defective they may be, when voting is silencing, linear time is limiting, trauma is narrowing, and truths lie in possibilities created by doubt and imagination.

### AUTHOR'S NOTE

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### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Māori) describes postcolonialism as a “convenient invention of Western intellectuals which reinscribes their power to define the world” (14). British scholars Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman employ the term “post-colonial” as a temporal marker to signify that “the era of formal colonial control is over” (3). When they describe settler-colonial states like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand as “former white colonies” (4), they risk ignoring Indigenous peoples’ ongoing experiences of colonization in these countries. Postcolonial keywords such as “hybridity,” defined as referring to “the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization” (Ashcroft et al. 135), are also perceived as inadequate to describe a contemporary Indigenous experience and as encouraging “already-existing essentialist pronouncements that perpetuate racist stereotypes” (McCall, Reder, and Anderson 50, 51).

<sup>2</sup> Coulthard (121), Million (2, 3), and Simpson (*Dancing* 22) raise these and other issues in their criticism of the TRC.

<sup>3</sup> Million draws on and expands Foucault’s theories of biopower and links them to neoliberal capitalism and colonialism. If “reconciliation” is a biopolitical project that aims to “make life calculable” (30) and intelligible through the logic that disclosure of atrocity is healing, it neutralizes Indigenous political self-determination. Foucault’s late work on *parrhēsia* (truth-telling) and aesthetics, in his final lecture series on *The Courage of Truth* (1983-84), offers helpful insights into interconnections among aesthetics, truth, and healing through a lens of Western philosophy and study of Greek and Roman classical texts.

<sup>4</sup> The contexts in which the novels were produced, and the historical periods they depict, reflect Maracle’s concerns and the attention she pays to national debates. *Ravensong* was published when the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was investigating Indigenous-settler relations (1991-96), a process which eventually led to the establishment of the TRC. *Celia’s Song* was written while the TRC was meeting and is dedicated to “all those children who were removed from our homes and who did not survive residential school.” If *Celia’s Song* depicts the 1980s as beginning a “healing period” for Indigenous peoples in which they also co-operate with non-Indigenous friends, *Ravensong* focuses more notably on the impossibilities of cooperation during the 1950s (*As It Happens*). As a seer, Celia is connected to “a unique brand of power” (*Conversations* 16) which colonialism

attempts to erase. Whereas she gradually fades in *Ravensong*, her personal resurgence in *Celia's Song* exemplifies her resistance.

<sup>5</sup> The serpent does not spare settlers, feeding off a pig farmer that kills and mutilates a woman (41). As Laura Beard indicates, readers may associate this figure with Robert Pickton, arrested in 2002 for the murder of dozens of women, mostly Indigenous (165). The Pickton case highlighted the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit people (MMIWG2S). The TRC addressed this in its calls to action, leading to the establishment of the National Inquiry into MMIWG2S in 2016.

<sup>6</sup> British Columbia is not covered by any historic treaty, except for Vancouver Island where the Douglas Treaties were signed between 1850 and 1854 between certain Indigenous groups (not the Nuu'chalnuth) and the Crown colony of Vancouver Island. Modern treaties have been signed in British Columbia since 1975.

<sup>7</sup> For Nishnaabeg professor of Indigenous law John Borrows, for example, "legal practice starts with understanding our language and drawing analogies from the earth" (51). A connection between language and justice emerges in *Celia's Song* when Momma discusses what punishment would suit Amos: "If she could say it in her language, the word for it would lead her to name the kind of death she should make sure he gets" (149).

<sup>8</sup> Maracle bends the grammatical elements of the English language so that it can more adequately express Stó:lō experiences. The expression "a different kind of see" is one example. Another is the use of the intransitive verb "to dance" in the transitive form, "dance someone" (234, 251); the verb breaks free from its fixed form in order to suggest a ceremonial practice.

<sup>9</sup> An example of restorative justice is represented through Amos's dancing ceremony, when he takes full responsibility for his actions. His release, albeit through death, is witnessed by Shelley's family.

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# **Appendix B**

