

ANGLICA

An International Journal of English Studies

25/1 2016

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The Transformative Power of Words: Subverting Traumatic Experiences in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and Lee Maracle's "Goodbye Snauq"

Abstract

In the past few decades Native Canadian literature has gained a large and wide audience and has been described as a new and exciting field by critics. While Native-authored texts cannot be reduced to protest writing any longer, the collective trauma, caused by oppression, cultural alienation, deterritorialization as well as persisting inequalities and racism, remains an important theme. Tomson Highway's debut novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and Lee Maracle's short story "Goodbye Snauq" both effectively communicate and subvert traumatic experiences. By using a plethora of strategies, these two narratives demonstrate that literature can function as a suitable space for the symbolic transformation and healing of pain and suffering.

"To speak is to create more than words, more than sounds retelling the world; it is to realise the potential for transformation of the world" (Armstrong 1998, 183).

In the wake of the current Canadian prime minister's promise to radically renew the government's relationship with Indigenous peoples and his aspiration to achieve national reconciliation, the question of how healing and transformation of trauma can be achieved has gained renewed interest. This new era in Canada's politics was initiated by Justin Trudeau's plan to increase financial support for the infrastructure in Native communities and for the investigation into the tragedy of thousands of missing and murdered women and girls and his pledge to generally pursue a new kind of cooperation with Indigenous peoples characterized by "partnership and friendship" (Trudeau, "Statement on the Release of the Final Report of the TRC").

In light of this political shift it is all the more important to discuss new developments in the field of Indigenous literature and acknowledge its potential to create a space for the healing and transformation of trauma. In the past, published

narratives by Canadian Indigenous writers used to be largely political as political events, such as the proposal of the so called *White Paper* in the late 1960s and the Oka crisis in the 1990s, ignited a downright upsurge of Native writing and interest in Native issues. In the last few decades, however, Native-authored texts can no longer be reduced to protest writing alone (Eigenbrod), as writers from different cultural backgrounds are creating a new aesthetics by challenging Western standards and by incorporating culture-specific imagery and values into their texts. Indeed, Aboriginal writing has been gaining widespread attention in Canada and internationally in the past few decades and is now described as an innovative and exciting new field by critics. Part of this fascination stems from the fact that Native literature, while being relatively new, is deeply rooted in traditions. Contemporary Indigenous literature reflects the many different realities of First Nations, Métis and Inuit today and recognizes the dualistic nature of their living conditions between the Euro-Canadian culture and their distinct traditional cultures. Critic Eva Gruber argues that gradually “Aboriginal writing has reached mainstream publishing” (426) and E. F. Dyke writes that “aboriginal literature is now established in Canada” (63).

While contemporary Aboriginal writing is highly diverse and can in no way be reduced to mere protest writing alone, the issues of persisting inequalities and the healing from historical trauma remain important topics in Native-authored texts. Native writers, such as Thomson Highway and Lee Maracle, thematize traumata which have affected generations of Native people from different cultural backgrounds and which have been responsible for many challenging social, psychological and physical conditions today. While a substantial body of critical literature on Native-authored narratives has emerged in the past few decades, this article offers new insights as it juxtaposes two trauma narratives which feature two different forms of trauma and closely examines innovative and creative discursive strategies and patterns which mediate, subvert and even symbolically transform painful experiences. I argue that the textual strategies discussed in this article employ subversive mimicry to counter personal and collective traumata but also transcend this concept in order to offer a more profound response to traumatic experience.

1. The Transformative Power of Words

Discussing psychological issues in Native-authored narratives, however, poses many challenges as approaching this issue as a cultural outsider is highly problematic and might even be emblematic of the persisting political and academic power hierarchy. Approaching psychological aspects is especially controversial as this issue echoes the historical depiction of Native people – first as savage because of their supposedly ‘primitive’ belief systems, and later as sick due to the numerous problems the residential school system caused in Native communities (McKegney 2007, 147). Furthermore, while Western psychologists and counsellors are now aware of

the importance of Native healing techniques, Western theories still dominate and counselling programs lack Native psychologists.

Likewise, the application of a postcolonial approach to Indigenous literature is problematic. While Native American literature “performs ideological work that parallels that of postcolonial fiction elsewhere” (Krupart 74), the term ‘postcolonial’ suggests that colonial activities are located in the historical past and hence it is inadequate as long as Aboriginal peoples do not hold equal status. As Diana Brydon points out, Canada is still “a settler state that has not addressed the full implications of its invader status.” Even if the ongoing effects of colonialism are taken into consideration, postcolonial studies still rely on “larger disciplinary paradigms that have constructed norms of excellence and aesthetic value based on ethnocentric understandings of the universal, the true and the good” (62). The influential American-Canadian Native writer Thomas King also strongly opposes the term ‘postcolonial literature’ as it suggests a linear and progressive development from precolonial to postcolonial literature, in which colonization per definition occupies a central position. Furthermore, this term insinuates that “Native writing is largely a construct of oppression” (12), while in fact Native traditions have survived colonization and play an important role in so-called postcolonial narratives.

Without neglecting the concerns raised above, the focus of this article is on healing and transformation that does not come from outside sources but is inherent in the discussed narratives. This article examines different strategies Tomson Highway and Lee Maracle use in two selected texts to define and communicate traumatic experiences and to promote paradigms for healing. It is based on the assumption that storytelling can function as a tool to symbolically re-enact trauma and to shape its representation, thereby enabling a constructive re-visitation and re-invention of the past. Native writers from different cultural backgrounds have emphasised the healing power of storytelling and stressed its potential power to transform historical trauma. This potential firstly stems from a storyteller’s power to influence, challenge and subvert the dominant discourse and secondly from their decision to provide useful insights into historical trauma and its consequences. The revitalization of Native beliefs and traditions has also proven to be a powerful tool to counteract the consequences of collective trauma and interrupt its transmission to future generations. In this respect, Native literature plays a vital role as it provides a space for writers to express Native values and traditions and use culture-specific imagery to subvert Western literary conventions. Jeannette Armstrong stresses the importance of refusing to accept the victimization of Native peoples and emphasises the urgency to redefine the strength and power of Aboriginal communities (2006). The Métis professor Jo-Ann Episkew states that storytelling is a medicine that can cure the trauma of colonialism by countering the master narrative (2). The reinvention of the master narrative initiates the healing process as Native writers generate discourse which constructs their own identities and puts them in a position which allows them to control how they are being represented. Episkew also

highlights that writing in English is empowering because it allows her to foster pan-Indian solidarity (12–13).

The transforming power of Native literature also results from its educational function as it may disperse knowledge of the long-lasting effects of colonialism on Native communities and give people concepts to talk about traumatic experiences as well as allowing them to discuss taboo subjects in a safe way (15–17). Yuen et al. also emphasises that the imagination plays a vital role when it comes to claiming agency and self-determination. The decolonisation of the mind presupposes the ability to imagine a different world characterised by healthy and strong communities. Being able to envision such a world is the first step to creating it (271–272). Jeannette Armstrong argues that Native languages are deeply connected with the land and that stories have a very profound effect on the people who listen to them. She describes the power of words as follows: “To speak is to create more than words, more than sounds retelling the world; it is to realize the potential for transformation of the world” (1998, 183).

Numerous concepts have been suggested to pinpoint this transformative power of words. Arnold Krupart, for instance, has introduced the term “anti-imperial translation” (74), which emphasises the significance of imperial translations in the history of America. Krupart states that “people indigenous to the Americas entered the European consciousness only by means of a variety of complex acts of translation” (74). The renaming of places and people that already had names by European conquerors marked the beginning of a long history of mistranslations. When Columbus conquered the New World, different worldviews met and contact zones became places where “European assumptions, desires, projections and mis-mappings” (Siemerling 59) constructed Indian-ness. These “acts of translation” usually involved the process of translating from ‘primitive languages’ to English, from spoken words to written texts, from the subjected to the dominant culture. Interpreters translated oral stories depending on their affiliation to an academic field. While the social sciences favoured texts in which the verbal expression was transmitted as authentically as possible to demonstrate the difference between the literate Western culture and the “primitive” Native culture, translations in the humanities produced texts that were supposed to be interesting by Western standards. This form of misrepresentation still occurs today. The successful Okanagan writer Jeannette Armstrong states that “mostly sanitized versions” of Aboriginal stories are published in English and that these stories would shock people if told accurately (2006).

Imperial translations are nowadays being challenged by so called “anti-imperial translations.” In contrast to imperial translations, anti-imperial translations permit cultural influence to go both ways, thereby preventing it from being a one-way street where the less powerful group is forced to adapt to the culture of the more powerful group (Krupart 79). By creating works of English literature, Native writers appropriate Western art forms while at the same time they also transform Western

genres by means of incorporating Native words and expressions, perspectives and oral narrative devices into written English texts. In this way they create a new and exciting literary aesthetics. Consequently, anti-imperial translations destabilize dominant Eurocentric standards by creating a polyvocal narrative.

The Canadian professor and author Dee Horne promotes a similar concept termed ‘subversive mimicry,’ which subsumes a plethora of options to subvert the master narrative. It is based on the observation that the process of colonization often involves strategies aimed at imposing the dominant culture on the colonized peoples to assert its supremacy. The colonized are then encouraged to imitate cultural conventions and rules to accelerate their assimilation into the dominant culture. When adhering to Western literary conventions Native writers are either accused of lacking authenticity or they are praised for their ability to compete within the dominant discourse (Horne 2).

Horne clearly bases her concept of subversive mimicry on Homi Bhabha, who states that “colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (126) [original emphasis]. As used to be the case in residential schools, similarity to the dominant culture is often encouraged but denied at the same time. While residential schools educated Native children according to Western standards and conventions, they still treated them as inferior to white Canadians and taught them mainly practical skills which allowed them to just work in menial jobs. Thus similarity to and difference from the dominant discourse is often constructed at the same time. Indigenous people can never become white, they can only imitate the white culture in order to participate in the dominant discourse.

Writing in the “enemy’s language” (Armstrong 1998, 175) therefore may be problematic but it also allows authors to shape the dominant discourse. Bhabha clearly recognizes the subversive power of mimicry by stating that the “menace” (127) of mimicry lies in the return of the gaze of the Other, when “the observer becomes the observed” (129), which “alienates it [identity] from essence” (129). Distinguishing between two different forms of mimicry, colonial and subversive mimicry, Horne makes it clear that mimicry as a literary strategy can pursue different agendas. While colonial mimicry adopts literary conventions of the dominant group in order to express consensus and affiliation with it, subversive mimicry does the opposite. The power of subversive mimicry lies in the fact that an author’s strategies are not immediately apparent. Basing her argumentation on Bhabha’s concept of mimicry, Horne states that similar to anti-imperialistic translations, subversive mimicry expresses criticism by holding up a mirror to the dominant group (14). It challenges existing power relations by depicting the dominant group as the Other, (20) while asserting the colonized group’s subject position (23). Furthermore, subversive mimicry recognizes that cultural differences exist and that these differences should be articulated. In this way subversive mimicry offers “paradigms for decolonization” (24) and may even perform acts of decolonization. It is often

not immediately palpable and hence readers of texts using this strategy have to analyse it more closely in order to discern the underlying humour and irony.

One important advantage of this strategy of making a text less tangible for white readers lies in the difficulty of textual appropriation. In this context I would argue that the trickster figure, for example, enjoys so much popularity among contemporary Aboriginal writers partly because it is such an elusive concept, which Western critics struggle to pin down. Not limited by human boundaries, tricksters move through time and space and also challenge cultural categories by identifying neither as female nor male and by blurring other well-established dichotomies (127–129). By transgressing social boundaries and resisting classification the trickster fulfils an important function in Native narratives: Not fully understood by non-Native critics and therefore not deemed as dangerous, the trickster undermines the dominant discourse and deconstructs it (Horne 131). Contemporary trickster studies foreground the constructedness of the pan-Indian trickster archetype as this concept was (and often still is) based on the assumption that there is one identifiable figure occurring in Indigenous folklore around the globe that can be observed and studied (Basso 5).

The trickster gained considerable importance after the success of Highway's play *The Rez Sisters*, in which the trickster figure Nanabush plays a central role. Together with Daniel David Moses and Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, Highway has taught workshops on the trickster and eventually created the Committee to Re-establish the Trickster, which should help re-appropriate the trickster as a cross-cultural and mainly urban archetype (Fee 62). In Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998), for instance, one of the trickster's many incarnations is a two-spirit person who symbolically baptizes Gabriel in a gay bar. The trickster in this scene serves the purpose of expressing criticism against heterosexual norms (13). Consequently, the trickster figure has arguably been re-appropriated by some Native writers to serve specific functions and needs and in particular to use its force and ambiguity to express subversive mimicry.

Subversive mimicry is achieved by numerous strategies varying in degrees of subtlety. One prominent characteristic of Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, for instance, is the fact that the novel is interspersed with Cree words and phrases. Most remarkably, some names and proper nouns are not glossed in the back of the book but left untranslated. This "troubles the sense of familiarity" and "creates a linguistic boundary between Cree people and the rest of the world" (Van Essen 106). Highway, for instance, uses the precolonial name for "The Pas" ("Oopaskooyak"), thereby "reversing colonial appropriation and possession and reasserting Cree cultural memory by recalling the names that have been erased by the colonizing language(s)" (106). Some of the proper names are also highly humorous but as they are not glossed non-Cree speakers or speakers of another dialect are excluded from the jokes. The Wuchusk Oochisk River (*Kiss* 60), for instance, translates as "muskrat anus" (107) humorously evoking the story of

Weesageechak and the Weetigo (*Kiss* 118). Even if most words are translated, the Cree words and expressions disrupt the flow of reading and make non-Aboriginal readers aware of their limited knowledge of the Cree culture and language. In this way, Highway, despite writing mostly in English, inspires resistance to the dominant culture. Through the incorporation of Native words and phrases this form of subversive mimicry is apparent to Native and non-Native readers alike, but the subtle nuances of it are only visible to a group of cultural or intellectual insiders and put everyone else in the position of outsiders.

As mentioned above, subversive mimicry encompasses the incorporation of Native-specific language, art forms and concepts and the reversal of the representation of the colonized as “the Other.” In the following analysis I would like to expand on the notion of subversive mimicry by identifying strategies that undermine the master narrative. I argue that *Kiss of the Fur Queen* as well as “Goodbye Snauq” (2010) deploy subversive mimicry but also transcend this concept by offering a more profound understanding of the complexity of personal and collective trauma and by shedding light on potential moments of healing and transformation.

2. Manifestations of Trauma in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*

Tomson Highway’s debut novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, published in 1998, is a trauma narrative as much as it is a celebration of life and the victory over traumatic experiences. It embraces Western art forms while infusing them with Cree spirituality and humour. *Kiss of the Fur Queen* relates the story of two Cree brothers who are torn away from their family and their Native community Eemanipiteepitah in Manitoba to attend a Roman Catholic residential school. In this institution the brothers Champion and Ooneemeetoo Okimasis are renamed Jeremiah and Gabriel, forbidden to speak their mother tongue and raised in a strictly Catholic way. They are physically and sexually abused at the hands of the school’s principal Father Lafleur. This traumatic experience haunts them throughout their early adult years, characterized by a conflicting struggle to find and express their own distinct identities. Alienated from their own Native community but not successfully assimilated into Western culture, the brothers have to navigate between their Native roots and Western culture, which allows them to fulfil their potentials.

The novel centres on the ramifications of the collective trauma caused by the residential school system, which affected approximately 150,000 Aboriginal children from the 1890s to the last decades of the 20th century. The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, which was commissioned to conduct a six-year long investigation into the school’s horrendous conditions came up in December 2015 with a final report and 94 recommendations for improving the lives of Inuit, Métis and First Nations in Canada, which were approved by Justin Trudeau soon after being sworn in as prime minister of Canada. The commission has called the residential school policy

a cultural genocide as the school system disrupted the transmission of cultural knowledge from one generation to the next, thereby severely weakening Native communities.

The trauma caused by the residential schools encompasses cultural and social alienation, forced replacement and psychological, physical and sexual abuse. Residential schools have had a long lasting impact on Native communities producing generations of parents unable to acquire supportive and responsible parenting skills (Brave Heart, Chase, Elkins and Altschul. 2011, 287). In this respect, the trauma caused by the residential schools is collective in the sense that it has had a profound impact on the social relations of the affected communities. The American sociologist Kai Erikson defines collective trauma as “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community” (154). Jeffrey C. Alexander criticises this approach by accentuating that trauma is a “socially mediated” (8) phenomenon and “not the result of a group experiencing pain” (10). He thus emphasizes the constructedness of cultural trauma, which is integrated into a group’s sense of identity for a specific purpose.

In this regard, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* touches upon cultural trauma as defined by Alexander only at the end of the novel when it refers to the representation and dissemination of shared traumata within and outside of Native communities. Otherwise, the novel clearly centres on the two brothers’ personal identity struggles as a result of their traumatizing years at Birch Lake School.

With regard to the function of the residential school system, land appropriation was found to be an important motive underlying government policies. Residential schools were surrounded by farmland and Aboriginal children were indoctrinated to lead a sedentary life corresponding to colonial notions of private property. Sam McKegney (2013) elucidates the correlation between deterritorialization and residential schools by identifying three “amputations” which all serve the purpose of facilitating the marginalisation of Indigenous peoples. These amputations encompass “the severing of mind and body,” “the severing of male from female” and “the severing of the individual from the communal and territorial roles and responsibilities” (8). All of these three “amputations” can be observed in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, in which they account for the brothers’ severe identity struggles and their relapses into self-destructive behaviour.

To begin with, the separation of body and mind is exemplified in the relationship between Gabriel and Jeremiah, who are associated with the body and mind respectively. In many ways the two brothers embody the dichotomy of the shameful body and the imperfect mind that residential schools tried to inculcate in their Native pupils. Whereas Jeremiah’s life after residential school is marked by asceticism and self-discipline, Gabriel leads a promiscuous lifestyle freely pursuing his sexual passions. Witnessing his brother’s affair with another man, Jeremiah is so shocked that he becomes “intellect-pure, undiluted, precise” (*Kiss* 205). This separation of body and mind is also mirrored in the urban setting of the novel, in which the

sites of high culture are clearly separated from the sites of crime and prostitution, the latter being solely reserved for Indigenous people echoing Father Lafleur's depiction of hell and paradise (59). Furthermore, the harsh corporal punishment in residential schools also establishes a connection between body and shame. In view of the reduction of Aboriginal peoples to their bodies it is not surprising that Jeremiah, after graduating, aspires to become a classical pianist and rejects his Native roots. Like Gabriel he also seems to re-enact his traumatic childhood as he re-creates a sensation of corporal punishment by playing the piano until his fingers start bleeding (*Kiss* 107).

Secondly, the "severing of male from female" and the systematic derogation of femaleness pervade the whole novel. The residential school functions as a site where the Western concept of gender differences is constructed and reproduced on a daily basis. Right after their arrival at the Birch Lake school, the two brothers' sisters Josephine and Chugweesees "march [...] away to their own world" (64) and practically disappear from the narrative. Most importantly, the girls are kept in different buildings to keep them "away from the view of lusty lads who might savour their company" (63). This illustrates that women's bodies are sexualized from an early age while boys are reduced to their bodily desires. The link between femininity and sexuality is further complicated by the connection between sexuality and shame, which the teachers at Birch Lake residential school install in the children. Gendered crimes become an actual reality for both brothers when they move to the city as they witness numerous rapes and murders of women in the dark alleyways of Winnipeg. In a most disturbing scene, Gabriel walks past a gang rape without intervening or reporting it to the police (132), demonstrating the extent to which he has become insensitive to violence against women. Other instances in which historical, fictional or actual violence against women are tolerated and occasionally even glorified are numerous, illustrating how residential schools manufactured hatred towards women. Gendered violence also presents an opportunity for disempowered men to purge their anger and frustration, or as Jeremiah puts it, "[s]omehow, misogynistic violence – watching it, thinking it – was a relief" (260).

The third "amputation" caused by the residential school system, "the severing of the individual from the communal," is a consequence of the geographical, cultural and emotional dislocation of thousands of young children from numerous different cultural backgrounds. Much has already been said about the linguistic alienation the two brothers face as they have to realize that their parents lack the concepts to understand and talk about their experiences at the margin of Western society (see for instance Löschnigg in "How do you say AIDS in Cree?"). Little attention, however, has been paid to the emotional alienation between the two brothers caused by the numerous educational methods aimed at traumatising children and disrupting communal bonds. The Birch Lake residential school introduces and encourages educational games which disrupt bonds between siblings and friends. The prohibition to speak their Native tongues, promoted by a "game" in

which the boys are allowed to take away objects from other boys whenever they overhear them speak their native tongues (*Kiss* 63), further separates the children and forces them to remain silent when their words would have expressed compassion, reassurance or resistance. When Gabriel joins his brother at Birch Lake residential school he is frightened by a nun who disapprovingly touches his long hair, and his brother tries to reassure him but they are immediately reprimanded for speaking their mother tongue. In view of residential schools' aim to disrupt communal bonds, it is hardly surprising that the disturbingly brutal re-enactments of the Passion of the Christ are strongly encouraged by the priests. In the case of the two brothers, this "game" severely weakens the fraternal bond. As Gabriel is left almost naked attached to the cross while Jeremiah and the other children are going to have lunch he swears to take revenge. It is clear that this role play, which is "admired, even praised" (84) by the teachers, is a re-enactment of the trauma inflicted on the children, which allows them to revisit traumatic experiences while exerting a certain degree of power and control. It is also the result of educational methods aimed at desensitising the children and shutting off empathy by means of the public display of violence. One of the most traumatizing realisations for Jeremiah is the fact that he is not able to protect his brother, which he still regrets as an adult (*Kiss* 301). As he is witnessing the rape of his brother by Father Lafleur, "some chamber deep inside his mind slam[s] permanently shut." He is unwilling to integrate the abuse into his consciousness as he tries to convince himself that the rape "had happened to nobody" and that "[h]e had not seen what he was seeing" (80). It is obvious that in the novel the residential school experience produces two disconnected individuals alienated from their community and culture but not successfully integrated into the Western culture. In fact, Gabriel and Jeremiah live at the margin of Western culture, and it is only due to their reconnection with their Native roots that they manage to confront their traumatic pasts.

3. Resisting Traumatic Experiences

The process of healing in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is complex and encompasses numerous moments of resistance. The concept of subversive mimicry plays a vital role with regard to the communication of resistance on the extratextual as well as intratextual level of communication. By writing a novel Highway appropriates an intrinsically Western genre, but he uses it on his own terms and for his own purposes. The prominence of the ambivalent trickster figure, for instance, marks his narrative as distinctly Native, a strategy that does not only win him praise from several Native communities. Humour and irony are also essential in the novel despite its tragic content. The highly disturbing scene in which Gabriel is raped by father Lafleur, for instance, is accompanied by the soft tones of the song "Love me Tender," illustrating the importance of humour in exceptional circumstances.

Indeed, humour is an essential part of Cree culture because it allows people to talk about taboo subjects and utter criticism in a non-confrontational manner as the line between what is said and what is meant by a humorous utterance is often blurred (Fagan 4).

Another form of subversive mimicry is the much discussed depiction of Catholicism as the “exotic Other” (219). The link between non-normative sexuality, violence, eroticism and Catholicism runs like a golden thread through the narrative. Highway clearly reverses the power dynamics by depicting Catholicism as misogynous, primitive and hypocritical. The object of such biased views is no longer the colonised group but are the colonisers, who are now presented as the highly sexualized exotic Other. A clear link is also established between Catholicism and the cannibalistic Weetigo, one of the most fearful creatures in Cree and Ojibway (Wendigo) cultures that may infect its victim with the same appetite for human flesh (Atwood 67). In contrast to his brother, Gabriel manages to distance himself from Western belief systems and encourages his brother to embrace his Native roots. In a heated argument with his brother, Gabriel vigorously rejects the Holy Communion as it involves the incorporation of the “essence of maleness” (*Kiss* 125), the body of Christ, in the form of the host, which arguably constitutes a form of symbolic cannibalism. This link between the cannibalistic creature and Catholicism also becomes evident when Gabriel receives a host in church and he is described as “spewing blood, his bloated gut regurgitant, his esophagus engorged with entrails” (181). Most remarkably, the Holy Communion is depicted as a violent sexual orgy in which the church goers are “screaming with hunger” and impatiently waiting to receive a host and their “tongues dart [...] as a priest, with a confidential murmur, place[s] a wafer on them” (180). In this crucial scene in which Highway makes highly effective use of subversive mimicry, the topos of the wild savage is re-projected onto dignitaries of the Catholic Church and thus the power structure is reversed. Clearly, subversive mimicry is at work here but the novel illustrates the ramifications of traumatic experience on an even deeper level.

In fact, two main realizations propel the process of healing. Firstly, the awareness that destructive trauma re-enactment can be transformed into a constructive form of repetition on a symbolic level and, secondly, the conceptualization of the cycle of abuse in terms of Native myths, which provide a more profound understanding of it. The phenomenon of trauma re-enactment, widely discussed in psychology, dates back to Sigmund Freud, who observed that survivors of abuse often “repeat the repressed material.” Since re-enactment negatively correlates with a person’s conscious memory of the traumatic event, Freud defines trauma re-enactment as the “compulsion to repeat [...] the unconscious repressed” (20). Trauma re-enactment fulfils the function of re-experiencing disturbing events in a safer context that allows the former victim to exert a more powerful role (17). This insinuates that two aspects are essential in the healing process: the integration of the event into the conscious mind and the act of gaining control of it. These two aspects

are realised in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* on both diegetic levels. As the two brothers grow older, they manage to symbolically re-enact the abuse they have experienced in residential school in thrilling theatrical performances in which Jeremiah uses the classical piano as a “pow wow drum” and as a “magical weapon [...]” (*Kiss* 267) in an attempt to create a better world.

The same form of constructive re-enactment takes place on the extradiegetic level as Highway relates his own memories of being a pupil in a residential school in this semi-autobiographical novel, which clearly resists assimilation and victimhood. Most importantly, the creative act of storytelling functions as a powerful tool to gain control of the traumatising past and to revitalize cultural aspects in a text interspersed with Cree words and vibrant with Cree mythological figures. It is a re-enactment that reverses power structures and reveals the hypocrisy and backwardness of Western society.

The ending of the book, in which the Weetigo approaches the dying Gabriel as Father Lafleur and he manages to drive the cannibalistic monster away by shouting “awus,” emblematises the “exorcism of the Weetigo” and all that it stands for (Buzny 15). However, at this point the novel also transcends subversive mimicry as it offers more than the resistance to trauma. *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, which so accurately accounts for the multiple manifestations of trauma described above, also provides a model of trauma theory steeped in Native legends and myths. By means of multiple agents well known to Cree readers, such as the Weetigo, the Son of Ayash, and the ambivalent Fur Queen, who transcends notions of good and evil, Highway approaches the topic of trauma re-enactment in terms of Native mythology by means of a multifaceted and polyvocal narrative.

The Weetigo is a very dreaded figure not primarily because it kills people but because of its ability to transform a normal human being into a cannibal. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen* the Weetigo embodies the fear and danger of destructive trauma re-enactment. The two brothers are consistently confronted with the decision either to identify with the Weetigo and continue to re-enact the abuse or to identify with the Son of Ayash, who is associated with stepping out of the cycle of abuse and creating a meaningful life by using one’s creativity in a constructive way.

The Son of Ayash stands for the transcendence of evil and the proactive creation of a better reality, while the Weetigo represents the danger of repeating abusive or self-harming behaviour. This becomes evident when Jeremiah, while teaching at the *Muskoosis Club of Ontario*, is approached by a child who indirectly tells him that he has been abused and Jeremiah immediately becomes sexually aroused. As the child leaves the room he imagines himself to be forced into some sort of violent sex orgy (*Kiss* 272). However, the short fight against the Weetigo is quickly won and he reports the incident to the headmaster. After introducing his pupils to the story of ayash oogoosisa, the son of Ayash, who is abandoned on an island and has to endure hardship and master difficult challenges before he manages to return home where he burns the world to make it a new and better place (Brightman 94–95), the small

boy asks Jeremiah what a Weetigo is and he describes it as “a monster who eats little boys” (271). The boy’s immediate response, “A Weetigo ate me,” illustrates that the mythological story of the son of Ayash provides concepts to communicate traumatic experiences and offers safe ways to address taboo subjects. In this way, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* translates traumatic experiences and the phenomenon of destructive trauma re-enactment into mythological tales which intersperse the narrative. Besides providing lucid concepts to address taboo subjects and offering an intrinsically Native perspective on trauma, *Kiss of the Fur Queen* hints at possible ways to regain the power and control to “make a new world” (*Kiss* 272). Tomson Highway’s and the two brothers’ “magical weapons” encompass their creativity and imagination and they use those skills for a constructive re-enactment which fosters the healing and transformation of their traumatic pasts.

4. Resisting Historical Trauma in “Goodbye Snaucq”

The short story “Goodbye Snaucq,” which appeared in Lee Maracle’s 2010 short story collection *First Wives Club: Coast Salish Style*, addresses the long-term effects of traumatic experiences and the power of words to influence cultural memory. The story revolves around a young teaching assistant of Squamish heritage who receives a letter from the Squamish First Nation government presumably telling her that the Squamish Nation lost its claim on False Creek, previously called Snaucq. Looking at a picture of the well-known Squamish chief Khahtsahlano the teaching assistant contemplates the history of Snaucq and engages in a fictitious conversation with the chief, who lived in this area until he and his family were expelled from it. She laments the loss of the former Native land, now misidentified as False Creek, and the ecological deterioration of this once abundant place. In one of her courses the teaching assistant questions the impact she is able to make in a “Western institution” (“GS” 22) and deplores the changes the Squamish Nation was forced to undergo. Overwhelmed by her strong emotions, she faints in front of her students and as she regains her consciousness she decides to visit False Creek to conduct a ceremony for the loss of the village with her students. At the end of the story she states that First Nations are not equal members of Canadian society yet, but that she is hopeful that the situation will approve in the future: “I am not through with Canada. I am not a partner in its construction, but neither am I its enemy. Canada has opened the door. [...] But we are a long way from being participants” (27).

In “Goodbye Snaucq” Lee Maracle accounts for the difficulty of communicating traumatic experience due to the incomprehensibility of the traumatic event, which is so overwhelming that it cannot be accurately grasped when it occurs. The story’s protagonist vividly imagines how the Squamish chief Khahtsahlano and his wife Swanamia experience the dispossession of their land. While envisioning this event, she emphasises that the expulsion is truly “incomprehensible,” impossible”

and that there is “no way to understand” (17) it as they lack a “reference post” (17) for the loss of a village. The fact that the teaching assistant so intensively recreates the tragic fate of her ancestors illustrates that the text alludes to historical trauma. Historical trauma as a psychological concept, which has been first observed in descendants of Holocaust victims, suggests that descendants of traumatized people may suffer from manifestations of trauma responses even if they have never experienced a traumatic event in their whole lives. The Native American scholar Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart, who is an expert on historical trauma, defines it as “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences” (Brave Heart 2003, 7). In an interview with Craig Lambert, the American scholar Sousan Abadian, an expert on collective trauma, argues that the social problems that Native people suffer from today are rooted in the historical trauma that Aboriginal peoples experienced. She argues that the current social challenges are “the symptoms of trauma” and that if just the symptoms but never the underlying causes are tackled other problems will surface (Abadian, online). Historical trauma often manifests itself in the complete identification with ancestors and in transposition, which means that “one lives simultaneously in the past and the present with the ancestral suffering as the main organising principal in one’s life” (Brave Heart 2000, 247).

The reflector figure in “Goodbye Snauq” clearly draws on memory located outside the realm of her own experience. She “remember[s]” (“GS” 20) False Creek as a paradisiacal place densely populated with “cams, sturgeon, oolichan, sockeye, and spring salmon” (21), even though the ecological abundance of Snauq radically abated after the arrival of Europeans. By asking herself the question whether she should “remember Snauq as a Squamish, Musqueam, Tsleil Waututh supermarket” (25) and stating that her people “will remember” (26) Snauq as an unpolluted pre-colonial place she evokes collective memories of the Squamish Nation. In this narrative the evocation of collective memory effectively communicates the pain and suffering of the protagonist and accounts for her motifs to enact a commemoration ceremony. The pain of the historical trauma is so intense that it affects her emotionally as well physically. While ruminating on the loss of the Native village the teaching assistant’s “office closes in on [her]. The walls crawl towards [her], slow and easy, crowd [her]” (19). “The white fluorescent bulbs” in her office make it seem “eerie” (13) and “the dry perfect room temperature insults, and the very space mocks” (22). Her “eyes bulge, [her] muscles pulse, [her] saliva trickles out the side of her mouth” (22).

The pain of the colonization of Snauq is also conveyed by conjuring up an idyllic vision of pre-contact False Creek, which evokes images of the Garden of Eden and the expulsions from paradise. I agree with Eva Daria-Beautell, who notes that what “Goodbye Snauq” centres on is “the absence of place, both material (Snauq, the place does no longer exist) and symbolic (the name, Snauq is no longer)” (147),

and I would like to add that Lee Maracle uses this re-appropriation of a “non-place” as a strategy to communicate the pain and suffering of the protagonist in a more persuasive way. Considering that the communication of pain always requires an act of persuasion (Hron 48), Lee Maracle makes the loss of the city tangible to the reader by conjuring up a paradisiac place while at the same time negating its existence. Snauq is described as a place abundant with “the biggest trees in the world,” “clams, sturgeons, oolichan, sockeye, and spring salmon,” “grouse, deer, and elk” and “stanchions of fir, spruce, cedar and the gardens of Snauq” (“GS” 26). It is a place where “[m]en from Squamish, Musqueam, and T’sleil Waututh join the men at Snauq to hunt and trap ducks, geese, grouse, deer and elk [...]” Most curiously, by providing such a detailed description of the pre-colonial Snauq in the present tense and by naming numerous aspects of the place, the story itself functions as a ceremony commemorating the Native village.

Given that memory and in particular cultural memory is socially constructed and thus dependent on social, cultural and political factors, which means that it is often retrospectively evaluated and manipulated to meet current interests (Nünning et al. 11–12), the power of publishing a counter memory becomes evident. Considering that not only the content of memory is constructed but also when and how events are remembered (Zerubavel 4–5), both Lee Maracle (on the extradiegetic level) and the young teaching assistant (on the intratextual level of communication) make an attempt at anchoring Snauq, which belongs to the forgotten history of Vancouver, in the cultural memory of her readers/students. Even if the protagonist does not seem to be fully convinced that she can accept the transformation of this place, she clearly discovers how to follow Khahtsahlano’s advice to “[f]ind freedom in the context you inherit” (“GS” 11). This freedom encompasses the power to influence how her students remember Snauq. On the extradiegetic level the text functions as a ceremony that tries to anchor a collective Native memory of Snauq in the Canadian consciousness.

Conclusion: Transformative Narratives

What emerges from this analysis is that *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and “Goodbye Snauq” deploy an array of strategies to subvert collective and intergenerational traumata. It could be illustrated that the two narratives communicate and counter traumatic experiences in different ways. While *Kiss of the Fur Queen* demonstrates how the protagonists’ separation from their Native traditions and community, the loss of their bodily integrity and the forced assimilation into a patriarchal society shapes their lives, “Goodbye Snauq” addresses the long-lasting effects of historical trauma. In addition to numerous acts of subversive mimicry, the two narratives develop a deeper understanding of the complexity of traumatic experience, thereby offering models for transcending it.

Kiss of the Fur Queen stresses the importance of transforming destructive trauma re-enactment into a form of constructive repetition and elucidates the cycle of abuse in terms of Cree mythological figures. It provides a profound insight into how personal traumata seep into communities and rupture interpersonal relationships and communal bonds. The linguistic and cultural alienation which the two protagonists experience as a result of the residential school experience is ironically rendered in a narrative profoundly infused with Native spirituality and imagery resisting trauma and its consequences. The elusive character of the scandalous trickster figure, the untranslated proper nouns hinting at Native myths and the shockingly humorous way of depicting pain and suffering make *Kiss of the Fur Queen* a deeply destabilizing narrative holding up a mirror to the dominant culture but defying full understanding for cultural out-groups. The narrative provides intrinsically Native concepts to talk about and conceptualize painful experiences and their effects on individual lives and explains via the extensive use of metaphors how the transformation of traumatic experiences can be achieved.

“Goodbye Snauc,” a more recent narrative published more than ten years after *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, explores the impact of collective trauma on future generations, drawing attention to the uncomfortable truth that manifestations of trauma symptoms can occur in descendants of trauma victims. The protagonist manages to ease historical trauma by performing a mnemonic act to demonstrate the significance of her counter-memories in order to shed light on a forgotten part of Vancouver’s history. On the extratextual level, this narrative resists trauma and its silencing by conjuring up a vivid image of a forgotten place and its forgotten history. As literature has the power to shape collective memory, this short story challenges the master narrative by providing a detailed and vivid description of a valid counter-memory.

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