

Weesageechak Meets the Weetigo: Storytelling, Humour, and Trauma in the Fiction of Richard Van Camp, Tomson Highway, and Eden Robinson

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DURING A PRESENTATION at the University of Toronto, Tomson Highway described his time in residential school and then, with a grin, quipped, “I had to get out of there. I just couldn’t swallow it anymore.” His audience nodded seriously. After a pause, Highway laughed, “It’s a joke! Don’t you get it?” The audience squirmed and giggled nervously, clearly uncomfortable with the prospect of laughing about sexual abuse in residential schools. Highway’s novel, *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, uses a similar dark humour to deal with sexual abuse, a technique we can also see in the work of other Aboriginal writers, such as the Dogrib writer Richard Van Camp’s *The Lesser Blessed*, as well as “Queen of the North” and *Monkey Beach* by the Haisla writer Eden Robinson. Explaining this sort of humorous treatment of painful events, many Aboriginal artists have commented that laughter enables their people to bear the unbearable and thus to survive. For example, Mohawk actor Gary Farmer has remarked, “Because Aboriginal communities have gone through probably the worst situations in North America that any peoples have gone through they *had to have* the ability to laugh. If they didn’t, they wouldn’t be existing today. So humour has been a means of survival, *the only means*” (qtd. in Ryan 72). However, despite the popularity of such assertions, the connection between humour and Aboriginal trauma has rarely been theorized in an academic context.¹ In this essay, I propose that humorous responses to trauma can be understood in terms of traditional Aboriginal ethics around communication. However, in asserting the traditionality of this humour, I am not suggesting that the writers are passively or inevitably carrying on in a traditional mode. Rather, I argue that the writers use storytelling to explore connections between the traumatic past and troubles in the present and to self-reflexively examine the potential and limits of such indirect and

humorous communication. Through a reading of *The Lesser Blessed* and *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, I explore how these novels use storytelling to create “Aboriginal trauma theory.” However, some have argued that the use of such “Aboriginal theory,” based in traditional principles and practices, is untenable given the powerful influence of Western culture on Aboriginal communities. Thus, I conclude by responding to this counter-argument, while drawing on examples from “Queen of the North” and *Monkey Beach*.

Western psychology currently favours theories of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to describe the effects of sexual abuse. Articulated as a response to the difficulties of American soldiers returning from Vietnam, these theories posit that events that are too painful to bear become cut off from ordinary consciousness and are expressed only through symbolic symptoms such as dreams, phobias, or violent behaviour. Trauma theory generally “construct[s] trauma as an individual phenomenon” to be dealt with through therapy (Nader et al., *Honoring* xviii). Medical anthropologist Allan Young describes the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder: “In order to recover, each patient must satisfactorily recall his etiological event and then disclose it, in detail, to his therapists and fellow patients in the course of psychotherapy sessions, the narrative is the Rosetta stone of his disorder” (111). PTSD is now widely considered an explanation for social problems in Aboriginal communities (Kenny 163). However, it has been increasingly argued that psychological theories do not necessarily apply cross-culturally and that Western trauma theory may be insufficient in understanding Aboriginal expressions of trauma (Duran 2). Several psychologists working in Aboriginal communities have found that therapeutic approaches that emphasize community harmony and integration are more successful than individual therapy (Koss-Chiorno 157-58; Thomason 173-74), and *The Circle Game*, a study of the residential school experience, condemns the individualistic therapy model as applied to the abuse of Aboriginal people (Chrisjohn et al. 272-87).

Anthropologist Michael Kenny emphasizes that the Western trauma therapy model involves “the construction of a story or ‘narrative’ — a return to the scene of the crime in which the formerly disassociated material now finds a place in consciousness” (Kenny 154). When we consider that Aboriginal societies have their own distinct traditions of storytelling, it makes sense to consider that Aboriginal people may

express the connections between past and present pain in ways that differ from Western therapeutic models. Aboriginal societies have evolved their own theories to explain the connection between past traumas and current misfortunes. For example, when a Kwa'kwala'wakw man was killed in a confrontation with the police, a variety of culturally informed interpretations of the event were offered. The man himself believed that he was transforming into an eagle. Some members of his community accepted this interpretation, while the Western establishment offered a variety of medical explanations of his "psychotic episode." The *Vancouver Sun* reported on the incident:

The inquest revealed that his original psychiatric diagnosis was of "complex" Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, supposedly provoked on return home [to his reserve] by arousal of memories of his childhood with alcoholic and sexually abusive caretakers. Others thought that perhaps his behaviour was due to an old head injury. Still others believed that he was trying to complete his transformation, something whites could not understand. (qtd. in Kenny 162-63).

Kenny views all these readings of the man's death as equally valid, culturally embedded attempts to understand the man's behaviour. As he emphasizes, psychological interpretation is a *creative* act (167).

In this essay, I argue that some Aboriginal writers engage in this creative act, drawing on the traditions of their people by using humour and storytelling to "establish meaningful relations between past [trauma] and present in a culturally and socially appropriate way" (Kenny 167). My argument is influenced by a group of Aboriginal scholars often referred to as Aboriginal (or American Indian) nationalists who argue for the use of theories that arise out of the knowledge and traditions of Aboriginal people. Rather than treating Aboriginal people and their writings only as objects of study, these scholars insist that Aboriginal knowledge can provide theories and methodologies. As an unnamed Kwa'kwala'wakw woman commented in an interview with Taiaiake Alfred, Aboriginal people have their own psychological theories which need to be reclaimed, not replaced by Western models: "White people are just starting to discover that yes, we do have a lot of answers, and we did have really elaborate, complex systems that spoke to every aspect of life" (Alfred 14).

These "elaborate, complex systems" are very often expressed through Aboriginal traditions of storytelling. Stories, told and retold over gen-

erations, contain complex teachings about Aboriginal history, science, ethics, spirituality, and methods of survival. As this essay will explore, stories can provide means of both articulating and understanding traumatic events. However, stories rarely express their embedded knowledge explicitly or directly. Kimberley Roppolo refers to the way in which stories pass on knowledge as “indirect discourse”: “A common Aboriginal American speech phenomenon in which the speaker avoids directly stating something to the listener or listeners, instead implying meaning and expecting those hearing to make meaning for themselves” (513). This “indirect discourse” of Aboriginal storytelling is not always recognized within Western communicative practices. Julia Cruikshank recalls that, when working with Tagish and Tlingit elders, she would ask them direct questions about historical events and was, for a while, frustrated by what she perceived as a lack of answers:

The women would give brief answers to my direct inquiries and then suggest that I write down a particular story they wanted to tell me. Usually, such stories involved a bewildering series of characters and events, but with practice I learned to follow the complex plots and to understand that when women told me stories they were actually using them to explain some aspect of their lives to me. (15)

In a similar way, the direct communication encouraged by Western trauma theory often clashes with Aboriginal means of expression. Proponents of trauma theory generally assume that it is both healthy and right to speak about, to bear witness to, your traumatic experience and to name and blame the perpetrator of the trauma (Kenny 153). While the process of witnessing may be terribly difficult, perhaps sometimes even impossible, it is seen as part of healing and as a good thing to do. For example, Kali Tal, in *Worlds of Hurt*, describes bearing witness as “an aggressive act. It is born out of a refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity, to endure a lifetime of pain and anger rather than to submit to the seductive pull of revision and repression” (7). Public responses to sexual abuse in residential schools have largely followed these principles of witnessing and blame. Sam McKegney explains that

narratives by residential school survivors have generally been perceived as performing two political functions: The first involves the

creation of healthier communities through the cathartic re-visitation of past trauma by individual victims. . . . The second involves the production of testimonial evidence that forms the precondition for litigation against individual abusers and administrative overseers. (80)

These two kinds of responses make sense within white Western notions of justice and psychological health. But we must remember that they are culturally formed and informed. In fact, the terms with which Tal approvingly describes witnessing — as aggressive, angry, individualist — are the antitheses of the traditional ethical principles of many Aboriginal peoples.

The very word “witnessing,” found so often in contemporary trauma theory, points to the difficulties in unquestioningly applying that theory to Aboriginal people, who have long complained about and worked to make changes to the confrontational system of witnessing in the Canadian courts. In *Dancing with a Ghost*, Rupert Ross, a Crown attorney in Northern Ontario, describes the difficulties that he has seen many Northern Aboriginal people experience on the witness stand. Ross explains that, at first, he could not understand why the witnesses were so uncomfortable, evasive, and emotionally inexpressive. But he came to understand that the process of witnessing violates the traditional ethics of Northern Aboriginal peoples. His analysis is heavily based on the work of Clare Brant, a Mohawk psychiatrist, and Charlie Fisher, the first Aboriginal Justice of the Peace. According to Ross, there are three ethical principles with which witnessing in court interferes:

1. The Ethic of Non-Interference. To explain this, Ross quotes Dr. Brant: “We are very loath to confront people. We are very loath to give advice to anyone if the person is not specifically asking for advice. To interfere or even comment on their behaviour is considered rude” (13).

2. The Ethic that it is wrong to express anger and grief, especially towards family members. Ross writes that he regularly receives psychiatric assessments of Aboriginal people in trouble with the law. The assessments, he says, almost invariably read something like, “in denial, unresponsive, undemonstrative, uncooperative” (33). These assessments show a misunderstanding of traditional ethics, which forbid the standard Western therapy of digging deep into your psyche and divulging all.

3. Finally, what Ross calls the “Doctrine of Original Sanctity.” In brief, this is the belief that people are fundamentally good and that the emphasis should be on encouraging the restoration of that goodness, rather than the prohibition and punishment of wrongs.

These ethical principles emerged at a time when Aboriginal people lived primarily in small, family-based groups. They arise out of the interrelatedness and interdependence of group members and encourage personal submission to the community’s need for harmony. Clare Brant explains:

The individual and group survival of this continent’s aboriginal Plains, Bush, and Woodlands people required harmonious interpersonal relationships and cooperation among members of a group. It was not possible for an individual to survive alone in the harsh natural environment but, in order to survive as a group, individuals, living cheek by jowl throughout their lives, had to be continuously cooperative and friendly. (534-35)

In this context, it is not only that witnessing may be difficult, but that it may be seen as ethically wrong if it is destructive to community harmony. Several studies have documented the ways in which people in Aboriginal communities carefully observe principles of personal privacy, not exposing things that might be socially harmful.² In such cultural contexts, where speaking can be seen as risky, not speaking can become the preferred response to an uncomfortable situation; Pomo-Miwok writer Gregory Sarris says that this is “the Indian’s best weapon”: “Be an Indian, cut yourself off with silence any way you can. Don’t talk” (81).

Aboriginal people have found, however, that “not talking” may not always be the most successful way to deal with some situations, particularly in a contemporary context in which people can avoid or escape community pressures. For instance, in order to begin to deal with contemporary sexual abuse, Aboriginal communities have had to ask for offenders and victims to fully disclose the abuse. They have also had to interfere with the freedom of sex offenders, demanding that they undergo tests and healing programs and restricting their activities and movements (Fournier et al. 143-72). There are, then, two contradictory impulses at work for Aboriginal people when it comes to speaking about sexual abuse. There is often a need for them to speak about traumatic experiences in order to change what is happening. But there is also a

strong cultural prohibition against making direct or angry accusations. There exists simultaneously a need to tell and a sense that one should not tell.

Storytelling and humour offer responses to this dilemma, and can act as alternatives to witnessing. They offer Aboriginal people indirect forms of communication, giving them means to show their pain, anger, and criticism in a non-confrontational way. In particular, humour allows the communication of the hidden and taboo without openly revealing deep negative emotions and without directly interfering with, criticizing, or blaming others. Through a joke, one can both say something and not say it at the same time. Even an insulting joke will often be accepted because it is “just a joke.” We can see this use of humour to express negative feelings at work in Basil Johnston’s *Indian School Days*. In this memoir of his time in Garnier Residential School, Johnston uses humour to criticize the Jesuit priests who ran the school. He jokingly complains about the poor food, the constant surveillance, and the unjustified thrashings. At the school, humour was the boys’ only possible form of rebellion. They pelted the priests with rotten potatoes, laughed at their stumbling lectures on sex, and used their inedible bread as frisbees. Johnston explains that this joking resistance was a code for deeper troubles:

Food was the one abiding complaint because the abiding condition was hunger, physical and emotional. Food, or the lack of it, was something that the boys could point to as a cause of their suffering; the other was far too abstract and therefore much too elusive to grasp. (137)

We can guess at the elusive “other causes of their suffering” — loneliness, loss of language and culture, loss of normal childhood relationships, perhaps abuse — but they are rarely mentioned outright, and never in an angry way. For Johnston, humour is the only mode through which he can let us know about residential school. He seems to leave it to us to read further into his laughing complaints.

Humour and storytelling can provide a slow and controlled way of accessing deep-seated and even hidden thoughts and memories. A trauma involves, not only the violent event itself, but also the way that the experience is repeated again and again — through, for instance, flashbacks, nightmares, and repetitive, destructive actions. In the case of

sexual abuse, the victims will often create imitations of their own abuse, either through inescapable memories, self-destructive behaviour, or the abuse of others (Caruth 6). While the repetition of traumatic experiences may be painful or harmful, humour and storytelling can provide a more distanced and self-aware form of repetition, allowing repeated and indirect revisiting of a trauma. In a story, aspects of traumatic memory can be reshaped, reordered, and metaphorically or symbolically expressed. The repetition of stories over time can also allow the teller or listener to gradually think about the trauma from various angles. Rupert Ross recalls that when dealing with difficult issues in Northern Cree communities, he had to learn to wait through long silences, which were then, he said, followed by long and often repeated stories:

Over time, I began to see that their recitals of fact, often repeated in a different chronological order, as if being chewed over, revealed an emphasis on certain facts rather than others. It was as if the speaker wanted to say that in his or her view those particular facts were more significant than others. Invariably, concentration on those emphasized facts led more towards one sort of conclusion than another. . . . They would not, however, give those views directly. Instead, they would recite and subtly emphasize, often only through repetition, the facts that led towards their preferred conclusion. (21-22)

Repetition serves as a means of thinking through a story's implications. It can also be a source of humour. In the works that I will discuss, the humour often comes from the characters' abilities as mimics. But their mimicry is not just funny, it is also painful. The characters replay their abuse over and over, often in humorous ways. These imitations are a form of resistance, but they also continually connect the characters back to their abusive pasts.

The Ojibway artist Carl Beam reveals the ambiguity of such imitative humour in one of his photo-emulsion engravings, entitled *Semiotic Converts*. The most prominent photograph in the piece shows the reunion of a group of Aboriginal men who once attended a residential school. The men, laughing and smiling, stand in the carefully regimented rows of the official class photo. The title of the piece can be read in two ways. On the one hand, "Semiotic Converts" may suggest that the men have been converted, not only religiously, but to the signs of a domineering and abusive culture (Ryan 163). Their careful adher-

ence to the inevitable rows may suggest a deeper kind of imitation. On the other hand, "Semiotic Converts" can be read much more positively. The men may be converting and subverting the school systems through their joking parody of a school photo. The message may be something like, "Look at us now! We survived this kind of thing!" Both meanings co-exist in the piece and its title. This kind of ambiguity, this mixture of imitation of and resistance to trauma, can also be seen in the humour of Van Camp, Highway, and Robinson.

In Richard Van Camp's *The Lesser Blessed*, the protagonist, Larry, uses his abilities as a storyteller to express and understand his traumatic past. That past is gradually revealed through his stories, as well as through fragmentary flashbacks, and we must struggle to put together Larry's horrific history. As a child, Larry saw his mother and aunt being raped by his father. When his father then forced Larry to perform oral sex on him, Larry killed him with a hammer and burned down the house. In a later incident, Larry was sniffing gas with his cousins. He lit a match in the fume-filled room, yelling "Let's die! Let's die!" (79), but he instead ended up in the burn ward.

Within his family and his culture, Larry is not encouraged to deal with his trauma by directly talking about it. He and his mother move to a new town and do not even tell his mother's long-term boyfriend about their past. His mother cannot cry because of a damaged tear duct and Larry, when suffering from a concussion, calls her "Mother no mouth" (82), suggesting that she is not willing or able to communicate about Larry's pain. From a Western psychological perspective, we might refer to Larry's mother as repressed. But, alternatively, we could see her as acting within the principles of traditional Dogrib ethics. Jean-Guy Goulet, an anthropologist who has worked extensively with the Dene people (which includes the Dogrib), has documented among the Dene "the highest regard for one another's autonomy" (112), leading to a reluctance to interrupt, interfere with, or even directly instruct one another. Perhaps Larry's mother is giving her son the responsibility to come to terms with his own experiences. However, as Goulet points out, "To state that true knowledge of the Dene way is firsthand knowledge should not detract our attention . . . from the fact that personal experience is informed by a rich tradition of stories" (29). And, indeed, Larry learns a great deal about trauma from the stories that his mother's boyfriend tells him. Larry is then able to recreate these stories himself, using them to understand his own experiences.

For instance, Larry uses a story to think through the implications of his mother's unwillingness to speak about their traumatic past. He tells a friend the story of a fictional mother and son: "The boy had seen something and his mother knew what he had seen, but they didn't talk about it" (99). But, in the story, the boy refuses to be quiet about what he has seen and his mother banishes him. The boy is frightened: "Mom, don't send me out. I'll freeze. I'll die" (99). And indeed he falls through the ice and dies. The story clearly reflects on the relationship between Larry and his mother, his frustration with her silence, and his fear that to speak of the past will destroy his relationship with his mother and will perhaps destroy himself. The mother in the story is haunted by the ghost of her son and so seeks the advice of a Medicine Woman who tells her to burn her son's clothing, which she keeps because it reminds her of him (100). The burning is successful and the mother never sees her boy again. The mother's haunting by her son can be read as her repetitive revisiting of her trauma. The Medicine Woman's advice, which is in keeping with traditional Dogrib principles, is not, notably, to express her trauma, but to leave it behind. As Ross explains, many Aboriginal communities have such traditions for "putting sources of sorrow out of mind" (30) so that the ongoing sadness does not undermine the cohesion of the community (29). Larry's story is not one with a simple or single moral. The mother seems to have been punished for refusing to talk to her son. But the Medicine Woman's advice is again not to talk but to "banish" the boy's death from her memory. The story is a complex exploration of the consequences involved in communicating or not communicating about trauma.

So rather than, as the son in the story does, directly speaking of his trauma, Larry learns to joke about it. Goulet noticed this practice among the Dene, telling of two friends who laughed long and heartily over an incident where one had broken the other's nose. Goulet recalls finding the laughter strange: "I doubted that it was possible not to feel anger towards someone, albeit a friend, who had inflicted such serious injury" (114). Humour, however, can allow a way of talking about a painful event without leading to a breakdown in relationships. In a similar way, Larry laughs rather than expressing anger about his father. When asked how he was burned, he jokes, "I got kissed by the fuckin' devil, man. They're fuckin' hickies. He sucked me good" (87). This joke is an escape from a difficult question, but also, with its sexually violent

images, an expression of Larry's inescapable memories of his father. In another incident, Larry is at a party and has just smoked dope for the first time. He is lying on the living room floor in a trance-like state:

For no reason whatever, I remembered this joke I had heard once. I couldn't remember how it went or who told it, but I stole the punch line and I started to say it. I started to moan, "Mommy, your monkey's eating Daddy's banana. . ." and then I started to wail "Mother, your monkey's eating Daddy's banana." . . . Don't ask me why but I laughed until I was crying and then I laughed some more. (38-39)

The punch line that Larry repeats is clearly a reference to the oral sex that his father forced him to perform. Larry is the monkey, a symbol that he explores throughout the novel.

The monkey imagery is introduced in the first pages of the novel through Larry's retelling of his mother's boyfriend Jed's story of the "Blue Monkeys." With this story, Larry reflects on the ways in which past trauma creates ongoing damage. As he recounts, Jed is in India, sitting with his buddies on a balcony, smoking up and having some tea and toast. They are being watched by eight monkeys who are missing hands or arms. According to the story, if monkeys in India are caught stealing, they are punished by having limbs cut off. These mutilated monkeys attack Jed and his friends and steal their tea, their toast, any clothes that they had left lying around, even their hash pipe. On the one hand, this is a funny, if scary, anecdote. But the story also explores the theme of destructive imitation. These monkeys had been abused, mutilated, and crippled by humans and, in retaliation, they attack them. But they also imitate those humans, stealing their food, their clothes, even their drugs. Larry's situation is comparable to that of the monkeys. He struck back with violence at his abuser, but he continues to repeat that abuse in his head. He also continues to imitate his father's destructive habits of violence and substance abuse. Larry is like those Indian monkeys, both a comic and a mimic. The monkeys, which seem at first like something from a postcard (4), turn out to be dangerous, just as Larry, who seems like a harmless joker, turns out to have a much darker side. We can view Larry's joking and storytelling both as means of dealing with his trauma within his cultural context, and also as an expression of a theory of how trauma repeats itself. But over the course of the novel, it seems that, through joking and storytelling, Larry is able to slowly and

repetitively revisit his past, analyze it from various angles, and perhaps find a way to live with it.

Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* similarly uses Cree storytelling to create a culturally grounded trauma theory that connects the characters' past abuse to their adult lives. The fictionalized autobiography tells of Jeremiah and Gabriel Okimasis, of the abuse the Cree brothers suffered in residential school, and of the ongoing effects of that abuse on their adult lives. Though they both grow up to be successful artists, they are still damaged by the abuse, damage that reveals itself through self-destructive behaviours. This novel is Highway's first time writing, albeit through the filter of fiction, about the sexual abuse that he suffered in school, abuse of which, for many years, he was unable to speak. In a 1990 interview with Adrienne Clarkson, he said about his residential school experience: "A lot of kids got some really severe physical punishment, and there were a lot of darker occurrences which to this very, very day are next to impossible to talk about" (Highway, "Tomson"). This impossibility, I would argue, is culturally based, an issue which Highway explores in his novel. The Cree community in Highway's novel is unwilling to speak about residential school abuse and other historical traumas. When the brothers see a ghost fire on an island where a shaman had once been captured by the Catholic church, their mother's only response is "Don't look at it" (90). In his work with the Northern Cree, Ross noted that there was a cultural prohibition against expressing anger and sorrow (29). So it is not surprising that the boys do not feel that they can talk to their parents about what is happening to them at school.

It is only as he moves into the more private world of writing that Jeremiah can begin to express what has happened to him. In a similar way, it seems that, in order to finally find a way to tell his own story, Highway turned away from the public world of the theatre, where he had previously worked, and then away from the autobiographical form in which he originally tried to tell his story, and to the more private and distanced world of the novel. Sam McKegney argues that *Kiss of the Fur Queen* "intentionally diverges from the testimonial paradigm" in that it does not offer direct, factual accounts of abuse (81), suggesting that the novel critiques Western, legalistic "legacy discourse" and instead seeks "the reinvigoration of modes of thought, spirituality and being that residential schooling sought to extinguish" (86). I agree with McKegney

and would add that in this move to more indirect communication, Highway is working within Aboriginal traditions. Ross recalls that, in a workshop of Northern Native peoples, one Inuit participant described how her community traditionally dealt with criminal behaviour:

An Elder would say, "I want us all to think about what should happen if a certain kind of problem were to arise." He would then go on to describe what had in fact happened, but it would be treated by everyone as a fictional event, as something that *might* happen in the future. . . . In this way, no one in the community had to come forward and speak of the event publicly in an accusatory fashion. (9)

This strikes me as precisely how a fictionalized autobiography works, allowing one to speak of one's painful experience while treating it as fiction.

Within the novel, we see the brothers struggling with their inability to speak of their abuse. Instead, their memories can be expressed only through destructive behaviour, through visions and dreams, and through jokes and stories. The boys explicitly link their trauma to the realm of dreams, relating their memories to "bad dream power." Gabriel asks his brother:

"Do '*maschipoowamoowin*' [bad dream power] mean what Father Lafleur do to the boys at school?" Although he wanted to tickle his brother with this light-hearted joke, Gabriel's question ended with an eerie, spectral chuckle that could have popped out of a bubble of blood. (91)

The brothers' memories emerging from the realm of "*maschipoowamoowin*" are often accompanied by laughter. Indeed, it is not surprising that the boys find something funny in their abuse. For them, residential school was an absurd mix of Catholicism and sexuality, of caretaking and abuse, of celibacy and sado-masochism. Humour is one way of expressing this incongruity, such as when Gabriel silently propositions a priest while receiving communion:

Gabriel's gaze raked its way up the belly, chest, and neck to the face, where he knew he had induced a flashing spasm in the holy man's gaze. . . . "The body of Christ," said the wizard. But the instant the flesh met Gabriel's, a laugh exploded where his "Amen"

should have been. The laugh was so loud — the joke so ludicrous, the sham so extreme — that every statue in the room, from St. Theresa to St. Domonic to Bernadette of Lourdes — even the Son of God himself — shifted its eyeballs to seek out the source of such a clangour. (181)

Gabriel laughs at the absurdity of the situation and yet he is still, all his life, drawn towards the abusive sexuality represented by the priest.

Highway analyses this ambiguous reaction to abuse through traditional Cree storytelling. Throughout the novel, he associates the Weetigo, a cannibalistic creature in Cree mythology, with sexual abusers: “a monster who eats little boys” (271). For example, Highway describes Gabriel being molested by a priest: “A dark, hulking figure hovered over him, like a crow. Visible only in silhouette, for all Jeremiah knew it might have been a bear devouring a honeycomb, or the Weetigo feasting on human flesh” (79). Weetigos are once-human creatures who, after being “infected” with a Weetigo spirit, have an insatiable hunger and an ability to turn other humans into Weetigos. Highway uses allusions to this figure to explore the cycle of abuse, particularly in relation to the character of Gabriel. On the other hand, Weesageechak, the Cree trickster, is associated with the resistance to that abuse. Clearly, then, there is a great deal of importance placed on the traditional story in which the two figures confront one another: Weesageechak, disguised as a weasel, climbs up the Weetigo’s “bumhole” (118) and then “chew[s] the Weetigo’s entrails from the inside out” (120).

The boys recall this story during a visit to the mall. Just as Weasel entered the Weetigo, the boys enter this mall monster of consumption, buying the latest “white boy” fashions and eating until “their bellies came near to bursting” (120). But the visit to the mall also contains a more sinister event. When fifteen-year-old Gabriel enters the men’s washroom, he is confronted by a man exposing himself, “holding in his hand a stalk of fireweed so pink, so mauve that Gabriel could not help but look” (121). However, because of his history with the priests, Gabriel reacts to this abusive behaviour with pleasure and desire. Immediately after the encounter with the man at the mall, Gabriel tells the story of Weesageechak (in weasel form) and the Weetigo. The weasel has just escaped the innards of the monster:

“‘My coat!’ moaned the weasel. ‘My nice white coat is covered with shit!’” Gabriel continued the story of Weesageechak, the image of a certain man aflame with fireweed clinging to his senses with pleasurable insistence.

“Feeling sorry for the hapless trickster,” said Jeremiah circumspectly, “God dipped him in the river to clean his coat. But he held him by the tail, so its tip stayed dirty.”

“And to this day,” Gabriel took his brother’s words away, “as Auntie would say, ‘the weasel’s coat is white but for the black tip of the tail.’” Exulting that they could still recall their wicked Aunt Black-eyed Susan’s censored Cree legends, the brothers Okimasis danced onto the sidewalk. (121)

Sam McKegney suggests that, though the reader may see the metaphorical implications of this story, “the tale functions for the brothers as simple comic relief” (92). I would suggest, rather, that Gabriel is using the traditional story to try to understand his own life, to develop his own “trauma theory.” Like Weesageechak entering the Weetigo, and eating him in a Weetigo-like way, the Okimasis brothers try to deal with their abuse by diving into it. Gabriel does this by willingly entering into a world of promiscuity and sexual self-abuse that eventually leads to his death. Jeremiah immerses himself in school, classical music, religion, abusive sexuality (259-60), and the desire to be white. Though their paths are very different, both brothers are, in trying to escape their past, actually imitating many elements of that past. Like the black tip of the weasel’s tail, part of them is permanently stained by their abuse.

The story can also be read as a reflection on the functions of humour and storytelling. Like Weesageechak, the Okimasis brothers are gifted mimics and shape-shifters — this is what gives them much of their artistic powers. But they also imitate their abusers, both artistically and personally. For instance, the young boys imitate and parody Biblical stories and religious rituals. A young Gabriel, for instance, re-enacts Mass: “‘Me a cowboy, me a cowboy, me a Mexican cowboy,’ he chanted, and he smote his chest, one smite for each cowboy” (94). This is a humorous scene, but also a disturbing one. Gabriel’s imitation of the priests and his self-flagellation foreshadow his abusive and self-abusive behaviour throughout his life. This raises the question of whether the brothers’ artistic creations, an adult development of their childhood skits, are also a way of re-enacting trauma. Jeremiah, like Highway himself, seems drawn to scenes of abuse in his writing. Like Weesageechak diving into

the Weetigo, Jeremiah and Highway dive into this abuse, putting it on the page and on the stage in an effort to destroy it. But do they, this story asks us to consider, end up, like the weasel, carrying the stain of this abuse into their work? Would it be better, as in Larry's story, to "burn" all evidence of the pain? Indeed, in one of my Aboriginal literature courses, an older Dene student suggested just this solution. She explained that she had worked with sexual-abuse victims for many years and felt that Highway was responding to his own history of abuse in an unhealthy way. She said that she encouraged the people she worked with to write about their abuse and then to burn the piece of writing, symbolizing the process of letting their painful history go.³

Through the story of Weetigo and Weesageechak, then, Highway raises complex theoretical issues about the connections between childhood trauma, self-destructive patterns, art, and communication. This trauma theory that Highway draws on and develops can provide a tool with which to better understand both the characters' development in, and the form of, this novel, though such a reading is beyond the scope of this essay. Literary critics have generally viewed "theory" as something produced within the academy. I suggest that we expand our definition of theory to include a wider variety of culturally informed systems for understanding the world. As Lee Maracle writes about Aboriginal theory: "No thought is understood outside of humanity's interaction. So we present thought through story, human beings doing something, real characters working out the process of thought and being" (239). Aboriginal stories and traditions are theory, and they can offer us fruitful ways to understand Aboriginal literature.

However, some have argued that the use of Aboriginal theory is problematic because it relies on notions of Aboriginal identity, traditions, and culture that are not realistic in this deeply hybrid world. Vikki Visvis, for instance, makes this argument in her essay, "Beyond the 'Talking Cure': The Practical Joke as Testimony for Intergenerational Trauma in Eden Robinson's 'Queen of the North.'" In this piece, Visvis analyzes how Adelaine, the protagonist in the short story "Queen of the North," uses joking to communicate about, and to resist, being sexually abused by her Uncle Josh. For example, Adelaine finds a photo of Josh, as a boy, standing with a residential-school priest and realizes that her uncle was molested by this Father Archibald. The next time her uncle arrives at her bedroom door, she says, "Father Archibald? . . . I've said my prayers"

(212). Uncle Josh, reminded of his victimized past, retreats. Adelaine takes the cycle of abuse that has been passed from the residential school and, with bitter irony and humour, turns it into an act of resistance.

Visvis takes up the question of whether it is reasonable to consider this kind of joking in the story as part of an Aboriginal tradition of communication. She concludes that it is not, arguing against reading the story as culturally Aboriginal. The problem with focussing on the "Nateness" of the story, she claims, is that Robinson's writing is clearly influenced by non-Aboriginal society and literature. For instance, Visvis reveals a striking parallel between Adelaine's actions and those of a character in a James Reaney short story. Such influences, Visvis writes "disallow a definitively 'Aboriginal' understanding of the joke" (53). Visvis goes on to clearly situate herself within the "hybridity" approach to Aboriginal literary studies, arguing that Robinson depicts Aboriginal culture as "ambivalent" and "ambiguous" (53): "The text situates Robinson's culture at the intersection between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies" (53).

Visvis's argument raises a broader and contentious issue in the study of Aboriginal literature: what role should Aboriginal theory have in reading Aboriginal literature, considering the heavy influence of colonizing society on Aboriginal expression? Robinson does indeed depict Haisla culture as interacting with other cultures and, of course, her writing has a wide variety of influences. Viewing such writing as "hybrid" is an approach to Aboriginal literature that has been popular since the eighties, influenced by postcolonial and postmodern theory. Offering an alternative to binaries that would define Aboriginal people as either "pure" and "traditional" or "assimilated" and "disappearing," the hybridity approach instead celebrates the ability of cultures to blend. A problem, however, is that much work on hybridity assumes that this blending necessarily leads to a reduction of indigenous identity. Craig Womack has called this the "deficit theory" of Aboriginal culture, where any non-Aboriginal influence is seen as constituting a deficit in the Nateness of the person or text ("Theorizing" 608).

Like Womack, I do not accept the argument that non-Aboriginal influence undermines the "Nateness" of a text by an Aboriginal writer. Instead, I view Aboriginal peoples and cultures as dealing with and incorporating a wide array of influences, and I view such incorporation not as a sign of "ambivalence" but as one of strength. The hybridity

approach often pays insufficient attention to the integrity and continuity of Aboriginal peoples. When asked, in "Queen of the North," whether she is an Indian, Adelaine does not describe herself as a hybrid; she replies, "Haisla. And you?" (149). In an ever-changing world, Aboriginal people continue to believe in and act on behalf of their Aboriginal identities. To use the terms of Lisa Brooks, I prefer to focus on "adaption" rather than "hybridity": "Note that the word 'hybrid' assumes the existence of two pure, authentic, and disparate originals prior to the new being that is formed, whereas the notion of adaption relies on a dynamic, interactive relationship between a being and its changing environment" (250). Thus, for example, the traditional family and social structures which would have sought to prevent and stop child sexual abuse in Aboriginal societies have been disturbed by colonialism and new kinds of adaptive responses have been required, including the kinds of literary responses that I have described in this essay. While Visvis argues that the existence of these new responses "disallows a culturally specific understanding of traumatic symptoms and cures" (47), I would argue, in contrast, that we can see these new responses as part of the living and adapting culture.

Turning back to the story, then, Adelaine's desire to tell about her abuse can be seen as being in tension with her culturally informed desire to maintain her relationships and her community; she tries to deal with this dilemma through the indirect communication of the joke. Her boyfriend, Jimmy, who is deeply connected to his family and who declares that he is "never going to leave the village" (153), can be seen as representing the kind of connectedness for which Adelaine longs and which she does not want to lose. Thus she does not want to stay in Vancouver, away from her home and boyfriend, even though she is safe there from her uncle's abuse, but neither does she want to live in a situation where even her own mother cannot speak of the abuse in order to stop it: "I knew that she knew. I thought she'd say something then, but we ate breakfast in silence" (154). In this seemingly impossible situation, Adelaine's joking allows her to communicate without ever directly speaking about her abuse.

This kind of cultural tension is explored in greater detail in Robinson's novel, *Monkey Beach*, which expands on "Queen of the North." I would like to turn briefly to the novel to show that considering cultural traditions can help us better understand Robinson's

depiction of the Haisla community's response to trauma. The novel's narrator, Lisa Marie, is part of a community that has experienced a great deal of trauma — from epidemics, residential-school abuses, etc. This has led to a cycle of abuse in the community that includes Josh's molestation of Adelaine, but which the community does not talk about. Lisa Marie has a special ability to receive messages from the Land of the Dead, an ability that allows her to access much of her community's unspoken pain. But whenever she tries to talk about her revelations, she is told that she is behaving inappropriately. For instance, she tries to ask her grandmother about the things that she sees and hears, but the traditional woman warns her away from potentially harmful knowledge: "When someone dies, you have to be careful. . . . Best not to deal with it at all if you don't know what you're doing" (152-54). Anthropologists Ronald and Evelyn Rohner note that this reluctance to speak about troubling matters is widespread among the "Kwakiutl" (a largely obsolete term referring to Kwakwaka-speaking groups, which includes the Haisla): "Noninterference, that is, the norm of not becoming involved in troublesome events unless they specifically concern the individual, is one of the strongest standards regulating interpersonal behaviour" (41). Stanley Walens agrees, pointing out a "fundamental behavioural postulate" among the "Kwakiutl": "criticism of family is rare and heavily camouflaged. . . . It is people's responsibility to work together to prevent conflict and destruction from ever beginning" (36-37).

As the novel goes on, we see Lisa Marie gradually internalizing the cultural prohibition against speaking about trauma. She even becomes part of the silencing of other members of her community. For instance, when her friend Pooch commits suicide, probably because he was sexually abused by Josh, Lisa participates in the covering up of this underlying cause. Her friend Frank says that Pooch's ghost appeared to him, perhaps to tell him about the abuse, but Lisa responds by quieting him:

"That's a death sending," I said, "It's nothing to worry about. He probably just wanted to say goodbye."

"Mm-hmm," Frank said, obviously only half-listening, distressed. "I saw that. He said . . . he . . ."

"Hey, hey, hey," I said when he started to hyperventilate. "You don't even have to tell me, okay?" (313)

Like Van Camp's and Highway's novels, this one raises many questions about what constitutes appropriate speech. Can traditional principles of communication become repressive or damaging? Are there circumstances in which speaking out about trauma is necessary for individual and community health? The novel ends with conflicting messages about communication. In Lisa's final vision, her brother Jimmy's spirit orders her to "Tell her," that is, to tell Adelaine a secret that he himself had covered up. But other ghosts refute this message, telling Lisa to just go home and have babies, that is, to live and communicate in a traditional way (373). *Monkey Beach* deals throughout with issues of how culture can, and should, interact with trauma and change.

As the fiction of Van Camp, Highway, and Robinson shows, it is possible for writers to draw on traditional cultural principles around communication while remaining aware of the dynamic nature of Aboriginal cultures. I believe that, as critics, we can seek to similarly remain simultaneously aware of continuity and change within Aboriginal communities. I am reminded here of the debate between hybridity theorist Elvira Pulitano and American Indian nationalist Craig Womack, who openly critique each other's work in Pulitano's *Toward a Native American Critical Theory* and Womack's chapter of *American Indian Literary Nationalism*. Pulitano is dismissive of Womack's project of seeking a Creek perspective on Creek literature: "To insist, as Womack does, that seeking out a Native perspective is a 'worthwhile endeavor' (*Red on Red* 114) amounts to a dismissal of the mutual interdependencies that more than five-hundred years of history have thrust on the American continent" (81). Womack responds, with frustration, "I said Native perspectives are *worthwhile* endeavors, not *pristine* perspectives" ("Integrity" 115).

I agree with Womack that seeking out "Native perspectives" on Aboriginal literature is a worthwhile act, and is essential within an academy that has generally not considered those perspectives. This does not mean that Aboriginal literature cannot, or should not, be approached through Western trauma theory or any other theoretical lens.⁴ However, Aboriginal perspectives are still rarely seen within the academy and within CanLit criticism. They have the potential to reveal aspects of Aboriginal literature that may not be considered, or may even be obscured, by Western theoretical approaches. To argue that such a critical approach is "disallowed" by the ever-adapting nature of Aboriginal cultures may shut down such valuing of Aboriginal knowledge.

This is not to say that we cannot criticize attempts to articulate Aboriginal theory. Some would no doubt take issue with the broad approach to Aboriginal theory that I take in this piece. They would point out that there is a great diversity of Aboriginal cultural perspectives on trauma. I would agree, and would add that my more current research and teaching on Highway, Van Camp, and Robinson seeks to place them within more culturally specific traditions. Moreover, I take seriously Helen Hoy's warning, in her essay on Robinson's *Traplines*, that trying to read the Nateness of a text is a task with many pitfalls. It is easy, she writes, to read all Native writing "as a singular narrative of colonization and resistance" (164) or as an expression of "fixed, given notions of Native history and culture" (31). This is where, I would argue, the concept of Aboriginal theory is useful, emphasizing an ongoing thinking process rather than a static culture or identity. As Abenaki literary critic Lisa Brooks writes,

Our claims to an indigenous perspective don't rest on identity politics, or some inherent connection to ancestral voices; it's about understanding literature from a perspective embedded in long-standing sources of knowledge. We are part of a philosophical conversation, which did not emerge only in the last twenty years but has been ongoing on this continent for millennia. (374-5)

In seeking to understand how Aboriginal people have, and do, respond to trauma through humour and storytelling, I hope to contribute to this conversation.

NOTES

¹ As I argue in this paper, the topic has been theorized by Aboriginal people through storytelling.

² See accounts of this concern with privacy by Spielmann, Scollon and Scollon, Allen, Ross, Brant, and Black-Rogers.

³ The deep cultural conflicts around speaking about trauma became more clear to me when I taught *Kiss of the Fur Queen* in an Aboriginal literature course with many Cree students. I have written about that experience in "Private Stories' in Aboriginal Literature," *Intersections of Orality and Literacy*, ed. Keith Carlson, Kristina Fagan, and Natalia Shostak, forthcoming from U of Toronto P.

⁴ Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, a cultural or nationalist approach will not necessarily work well for all works of Aboriginal literature, including, for instance, Robinson's *Blood Sports*. See Fagan and McKegney.

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