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Writing “Home”: The Healing Power of Métis Storytelling in Cherie Dimaline’s *Red Rooms* and *The Girl Who Grew a Galaxy*

PETRA FACHINGER

Contemporary Indigenous literature serves two transformative functions — healing Indigenous people and advancing social justice in settler society — both components in the process of decolonization. . . . I believe that everyday stories, *âcimowina*, the stories that are the foundation of contemporary Indigenous literature, although not spiritual, are nevertheless spirit. Everyday stories, too, have transformative powers, but they must first implicate the audience before transformation can occur. (Episkenew 15)

EVER SINCE THE PUBLICATION of Cree-Métis writer Maria Campbell’s memoir *Halfbreed* in 1973, the notion of “returning home” — that is, reconnecting with land, language, culture, and community — has been a major theme in Indigenous literature in Canada in general and in Métis literature in particular.¹ As Cree-Métis scholar Emma LaRocque points out, “the publication of *Halfbreed* changed the course of Aboriginal writing, and ultimately non-Aboriginal literary criticism in Canada, for it not only inspired younger generations of Indigenous authors to re-inscribe the Canadian narrative, but also provoked White Canadian readership to see Aboriginal people in a new light” (135). Forty years later a new generation of writers — such as Georgian Bay storyteller Cherie Dimaline of Anishinaabe and Métis background, Métis writer Joanne Arnott, Anishinaabe activist writer Leanne Simpson, and Anishinaabe author Lesley Belleau — portrays Aboriginal characters who “return home” by way of “internal self-recognition” (Simpson, “Anger”) and “decolonial love” (Simpson, “Falling”).² Simpson observes that “the violence of colonialism really damages our [Indigenous peoples’] intimate relationships and Indigenous peoples have to continually work really hard to connect to each other in

a way that is healthy. It's an on-going collective process because we only exist in our relationships with each other" ("Falling"). Because physical return to the specific places of childhood or to ancestral sites is not always possible, these urban writers promote decolonization or *biskaabiyyang*, which means "looking back" or "return to ourselves" in Anishinaabemowin.³ While, according to Simpson, Indigenous people need to "grow and nurture" a generation that has intimate knowledge of and connection to the land, "this doesn't have to take away from the contributions of urban Indigenous communities to our collective resurgence. Cities have become sites of tremendous activism and resistance and of artistic, cultural, and linguistic revival and regeneration, and this comes from the land" (*As We* 173). Resurgence, a sociocultural movement that focuses on regeneration within Indigenous communities, is thus understood as the daily process of keeping culture alive.⁴ As Simpson explains,

Indigenous internal self-recognition is a core building block of resurgent struggle because it is the mechanism through which we reproduce and amplify Indigeneity. When another Native person recognizes and reflects back to me my Nishnaabe essence, when we interact with each other in a Nishnaabeg way, my Indigeneity deepens. When my Indigeneity grows I fall more in love with my homeland, my family, my culture, my language, more in line with the idea that resurgence is my original instruction, more in line with the thousands of stories that demonstrate how to live a meaningful life and I have more emotional capital to fight and protect what is meaningful to me. ("Anger")

Through acts of "internal self-recognition," these writers playfully, and often provocatively, challenge stereotypical notions of what Native literature is about, and they combine elements of the political and the sacred to promote healing and social justice.⁵ Storytelling thus becomes one of the most powerful tools for decolonization besides language revitalization and political activism.

As I will demonstrate in this essay, Dimaline employs a distinctly Métis approach to the notions of "internal self-recognition," "home," and "community" through her choice of narrative strategies. By looking back and making the old stories current, and by turning to Western literary genres to write Indigenous identities against generic constructs based upon Western worldviews, Dimaline evokes the complexities of

contemporary Indigenous identities, critiques the dominant politics of representation, and reconnects with her community in her narratives. According to LaRocque,

Metis writing involves a re-collection of scattered parts, both personal and communal, and while in its initial stages it talks back and *at* the proverbial imperial centre, it quickly repositions by decentering the “empire” (Ashcroft et al.), “coming home” (McLeod), and foregrounding “healing” (Episkenew, *Taking Back*), cultural rebuilding, and self-determination. The body of literature that forms a Metis literary aesthetic is marked by mixing, transgression, and a reinvention of genres, languages, tropes, and techniques. (134)⁶

LaRocque observes that, in addition to these aesthetic strategies, “there is a powerful ‘returning home’ motif that runs throughout Metis writing” (142). The two texts on which I focus, *Red Rooms* (2007) and *The Girl Who Grew a Galaxy* (2013), undermine the European/Indigenous dichotomy associated with the Métis and the stereotype of the rootless nomad caught between races by portraying characters as achieving self-recognition and rebuilding community. I read *Red Rooms* as “reinventing” the short-story cycle and *The Girl Who Grew a Galaxy* as rewriting chick lit to demonstrate the importance of self-recognition, decolonization, and reconnection with community. It is important to note that Dimaline is not primarily interested in writing or rewriting generic fiction. Rather, she creates a new kind of Métis writing by using the literary strategies discussed by LaRocque as characteristic of Métis literature in an innovative way, going “beyond the confines of culture” to address a national and international audience because, as she explains, Canada needs to recognize that Indigenous stories are “distinct and essential to our identity as a nation” (“Interview”).

In addition to certain resistant and decolonizing elements of “talking back” to Western genres, both of Dimaline’s texts foreground healing through self-recognition and resurgence by crossing the short-story cycle and the chick lit novel with “spiritual journey literature” (Fiola 21). According to Chantal Fiola, “literature on spiritual journeys often speaks of . . . life-altering transformative experiences either resulting from spirituality or leading to a life of spirituality” (22). As she explains, “Aboriginal perspectives within spiritual journey literature often speak of healing from colonization and traditional forms of healing as processes of

decolonization” (22). Indigenous Hawaiian scholar Poka Laenui argues that those on a journey of healing move through five stages of decolonization — rediscovery and recovery, mourning, dreaming, commitment, and action — that reconnect them to their culture, language, and identity. According to Laenui, “each phase can be experienced at the same time or in various combinations” (2). Dimaline’s Indigenous characters, not all of whom are Métis, pass through these stages on their journeys to self-discovery. Set in an unidentified Canadian city and in Toronto and post-Katrina New Orleans, respectively, these texts are concerned with the constructive and creative tension between traditional life and urban life, between the individual and the community, in their portrayals of reconnecting with “home” as desirable and restorative. Dimaline thus continues in the vein of Métis writer Maria Campbell’s and Métis poet Gregory Scofield’s memory work — “a re-collection of scattered parts,” as LaRocque put it, as it constitutes community by emphasizing “everyday acts of resurgence” (Corntassel 88) within the urban context. Dimaline’s stories demonstrate that Aboriginal people who live in cities have a heightened awareness of the fact that culture constantly changes and that community is a choice.

In *Red Rooms*, Naomi, the narrator, portrays the need for cultural renegotiation through the lives of the characters. The stories emphasize the importance of healing gender relations, the decolonization of masculinity as part of the larger project of decolonization, and everyday acts of resurgence. As a literary form, the short-story cycle lends itself to exploring the tension between the individual and the community, and life at home and away from home, as no other literary genre does. As Rachel Lister observes, “homecomings are a common feature of the short story cycle. They mark the moment when characters confront the tension embodied by the form. Where some characters resist the home and continue to guard their autonomy, others re-engage with their communities” (3-4). Moreover, the stories in a cycle are linked to each other in such a way “as to maintain balance between the individuality of each of the stories and the necessities of the larger unit” (Ingram 15), so that the meaning of each story is revealed through the process of joining the stories together. James Nagel in *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle: The Ethnic Resonance of Genre*, and Rocío G. Davis in *Transcultural Reinventions: Asian American and Asian Canadian Short-Story Cycles*, have argued that the cycle has thus given voice to margin-

alized and racialized characters exploring their identities in relation to their ethnic and racial communities and those communities' relations with the dominant society. In addition to their preoccupation with the tension between "the one and the many" (Lynch), both structurally and thematically, short-story cycles are often connected by shared local and temporal settings, a central figure, recurring minor characters, unifying themes, and a specific tone or style (Lynch 21). According to Gerald Lynch, "Canadian short story cycles unified primarily by a recurrent character *are* reliant also on place. In the Canadian short story cycle, place plays an essential role in the formation of character" (21). As much as Dimaline's stories ask to be read as Canadian, with their specific cultural references and sensibilities, and their emphasis on the tension between place and character formation, Dimaline also insists that they be read from "within."⁷ As she explains, "The question is not asking for our works to be 'set aside' or 'safe from analysis.' Rather, the question is, can western/globalized critical analysis hold up to its function and form when attempting to address Indigenous story? It can, only if we as a literary community employ and push forward Indigenous standards of story and analysis, which is to say, story as medicine, story as magic" ("When"). Emphasis on the healing power of storytelling, representation of moments of "decolonial love," and everyday resurgence differentiate her short-story cycle from those written by non-Aboriginal authors.

The five stories of *Red Rooms* — "room 414," "room 502," "room 106," "room 207," and "room 304" — are set in a hotel "where people stay when they have moderate expense accounts and very little imagination" (1). They are connected through the shared setting, the narrator Naomi, and the theme of the "return home." Locating her stories in a space that advertises itself as providing a home away from home, but is anything but that, gives Dimaline the opportunity to explore the notion of home. Moreover, contrary to what hotels pretend to offer, there is no privacy. Naomi, an Aboriginal woman who works in the hotel as a maid, illustrates this paradox by observing that a hotel maid is an "urban anthropologist," "discerning lives and interpreting trends through trash can contents and receipts left on bedside tables" (1), listening in on phone calls, and reading notes that were left behind (3). Her observation satirizes anthropological methods, which have been criticized for misrepresenting Indigenous cultures. "Being the token Indian on staff," Naomi is called on to mediate disputes, for "every year

a hundred different people make their way into the rooms from reserves and Native communities all across the continent. And the stories that are played out here keep the staff talking long after and well into the Christmas season” (2). Each room is thus intimately connected to the stories unfolding within its walls. By setting her narratives in a three-star hotel of a “nondescript chain” in a major North American city, many of whose guests are Indigenous, Dimaline undermines the dominant assumption that Native literature deals with “reserves, wolves, and shamans” (“Interview”). The five stories of *Red Rooms* focus on three Aboriginal women and two Aboriginal men, respectively, indicating that gender, sexual orientation, and class shape an individual’s sense of self in relation to the collective. By imaginatively witnessing these characters’ longing to reconnect with their communities, Naomi reveals important information about herself. We learn that she shares a small apartment with her young son and that her mother is trying to find the “right” man for her. A photograph of an Aboriginal boy “from a community up north,” left behind by a photographer who stayed at the hotel, makes her “homesick” (67). By telling stories about these characters, she also tells her own story, lending the book a self-reflexive quality. Cree poet and scholar Neal McLeod uses the term “ideological home” to refer to this kind of discursive location of a people. Referring to an Indigenous group’s removal from the land as a “spatial diaspora” and the alienation from one’s stories as an “ideological diaspora,” he maintains that “an ideological home provides people with an Indigenous location to begin discourse, to tell stories and to live life on their own terms” (18-19). Although Dimaline and the characters find themselves removed from the places of their ancestors’ homes, they are able to “come home through stories” (McLeod) that create collective consciousness.

The three stories in *Red Rooms* featuring female characters — a teen-aged sex worker referred to as “the girl,” a curatorial expert on Native artifacts, and a single professional mother — portray a range of experiences. The girl leaves the hotel room, where the white man who took her there immediately falls asleep, to visit a bar. Naomi observes that this stranger is the kind of man who would call her “squaw” and “half-breed” (6), a comment that reflects the extent to which she is exposed to racism and violence. The story shows that her life has been affected by the tragic cycle of sexual abuse and addiction as a result of ongoing colonization. We learn about her traumatic past through flashbacks via

several visions that she has in the bar, a curious scenario that undermines our expectation that visions occur in unspoiled nature or sacred places. The girl was raised by her Aunts Gladys, Ida, and Rose because her mother, a drug addict, abandoned her, and she never met her white father. The matriarchs of this unidentified Aboriginal community were unable to guide and protect the young woman while she was still living with them, and we learn that she was sexually assaulted by several boys in the community and bullied by a group of girls (16). Although she is currently trapped in an unhealthy and dangerous life in the city, she is reconnecting with her family and community through dreams and visions. The women who appear to her are protecting her from the immediate dangers lurking in the dark streets and alleyways that she frequents. In one vision,

she saw her aunties' legs and her small sleeping body on a brown velour couch. She saw the harsh face of [a] dark-eyed apparition and the sweet concern on the face of the butterfly woman sitting on an inner-city park bench with a tired little hooker at her knee as if it were story time in a kindergarten class revolving around a different sun in an alternate universe. She saw her Nokomis wishing her return. Then she saw her life here, devoid of thought. (33)

This vision, in which her maternal grandmother invites her to reconnect with her community, evinces the disconnection between impoverished urban Aboriginal reality and traditional and spiritual life. This moment also represents a kind of awakening in which the emptiness of her current situation becomes most compelling to the girl:

People all over the world at this very moment were dying for their right to more than exist, to live as free people, to think and feel and cry and dance. They bled for these small and beautiful freedoms. To peel potatoes in their own kitchens and hold on tightly to sweet, sweaty lovers in twisted sheets under skies they could never see from the inside of cement jail cells. She fought to exist and not to live. She was dying for it. She was slowly bleeding over years of pills, needles, punches and bruised thighs. . . . She was dying for the freedom not to live. (33)

This passage addresses a number of issues that Indigenous people have been dealing with as a result of colonization: loss of their land, a high rate of incarceration, substance abuse, and suicide.

Back in the hotel room, the girl finds the man dead on the bed. His self-inflicted death has a visceral effect on her and makes her even more aware of her own mortality. The story does not reveal whether “returning to the rez,” thanks to the money for a bus ticket that she removes from the dead man’s wallet, will bring about a reunion with her family and community. As the story bears witness to intergenerational trauma resulting from the residential school experience and continuing colonization, it also serves as a reminder of the hundreds of missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls. Dimaline suggests that healing needs to occur within the community and that reconnecting with tradition and storytelling holds the key to a healthier future. The therapeutic power of reconnection is symbolized by the girl’s replacing her “‘anonymous girl’ cape” with the cloak of “star-filled sky,” which the two aunties from her dream pulled around her shoulders (33, 12, 35).

The story of Constance the curator, having an affair with a prominent Aboriginal lawyer whose white wife is expecting their first child, demonstrates that repairing gender relations within the community needs to be part of the overall healing process. As Scofield observes about

the missing and murdered Aboriginal women in our country — the men have not been there to protect those women. They have not been there to look out for those women, whether in terms of the leadership or in terms of their own fathers, their own brothers, their own cousins. My belief is that Aboriginal men will only become strong again once our women become strong, because it was a reciprocal traditional relationship that had always existed between men and women, and there’s a responsibility that goes with that. (“Strong Men” 252)

In *Red Rooms*, Constance realizes that her obsession with a married Aboriginal man, who has sold out to the white world, has its roots in the sexual abuse that she suffered from a white teacher when she was thirteen years old. When she learns that her lover’s wife is pregnant, she ends the relationship in the hotel room where they used to meet whenever he was in town. She becomes aware that “he could welcome this new baby without trepidation” because she was “the one person who kept him from suffocating under his beautifully tailored life” (107). Constance arrives “home,” so to speak, by regaining her sense of self-

worth and leaving this exploitative relationship. Her story, which deals with an Aboriginal woman's lack of self-worth and an Aboriginal man's lack of respect for Aboriginal women because of his own feelings of inferiority, shows that under these circumstances "Indigenous internal self-recognition" cannot be achieved.

In sharp contrast to Constance's story, the third story with a female protagonist represents celebratory moments of "decolonial love." This narrative, a story within a story, is also the most complex. Natalie, happy to take a break from the challenges of being a single parent, enjoys her night off from parental duty by reading the journal (left behind in the hotel room) of a young Anishinaabe woman referred to as T. Unlike Natalie, T. is connected to her community by attending pow wows, jingle dancing, and sewing and beading her outfits. This story turns into a love story when T. recognizes that Nathaniel, also Anishinaabe with strong connections to tradition and community, is more to her than just a friend. Natalie, an Anishinaabekwe herself, is moved and inspired by T.'s story: "Natalie couldn't remember ever really being involved in her community at all. . . . It was more like it really wasn't all that important to her, so why bother? Through this girl's days and nights, she began to develop a soft, unformed sense of homesickness for a place she doesn't really know. It was like a blood memory had started to spill over in her head" (134). When Natalie reads in the newspaper that T.'s twelve-year-old daughter is performing at the pow wow in the city, she decides to try to find T. and return the journal to her. The fact that Natalie's moment of "internal self-recognition" is brought about by reading another Anishinaabe woman's story demonstrates the value of storytelling as "medicine" and "magic."

Dimaline's reference to "blood memory" in this story evokes a crisis of memory. In "Blood (and) Memory," Chickasaw scholar Chadwick Allen asks "what exactly, scholars want to know, do indigenous peoples 'remember' about their familial and collective pasts before and during those first contaminating contacts with the West?" (93). According to Allen, American critics have debated the likelihood of these memories surviving "in the face of high degrees of cultural and linguistic assimilation, physical relocation, and genetic hybridity" (93). He explains that "nowhere has this debate been more clearly articulated in American literary and cultural studies than in the controversy generated by the signature trope of N. Scott Momaday (Kiowa), *memory in the blood*

or *blood memory*” (93), and he argues that Momaday’s trope “seems an obvious appropriation and redeployment of the U.S. government’s attempt to systematize and regulate American Indian personal and political identities through tabulations of ‘blood quantum’ or ‘degree of Indian blood’” (94). The “degree of Indian blood” carries additional racializing significance for those who identify as Métis. According to LaRocque, “terms and notions such as ‘whole’ or ‘pure’ cultures (and their reverse, ‘contaminated’), ‘mixed’ or ‘full blood,’ and certain derogatory usages of ‘halfbreed’ — all terms that come from eras of unscientific folk biology and racist ethnography — are problematic” (142). However, as Otipemisiwak-Métis scholar Jennifer Adese explains, we need to understand that, “as a people, Métis are woven together by shared language, kinship ties, stories, cultural practices, and worldviews, all of which have been negated by a preoccupation with race thinking” (“Spirit Gifting” 49). The ideological connection of blood with memory, passed down through the generations, thus offers an alternative way of defining Native identity based upon the passing on of cultural knowledge and “the re-collection of scattered parts.” Memory thus becomes the connecting agent between generations and communities.

The second story in Dimaline’s cycle in *Red Rooms*, and the only one featuring a Métis character, relates an experience of “self-recognition” similar to Natalie’s. The story demonstrates that decolonizing masculinity needs to be part of the larger project of decolonization. It is about a young gay Métis man named Marcel, who, dying of cancer, befriends Naomi during the last few days of his life. He tells her about his non-Native lover, Jack, who recently died of AIDS-related pneumonia. Marcel explains that, growing up Métis, he fit in with neither the white students nor the First Nations students bussed in from the reserve to the school and that he was bullied for being gay. Jack, a great admirer of Louis Riel, was unable to understand why Marcel is indifferent to Métis history and culture: “‘How can you be a part of such a great history,’ he would almost scream. ‘How can you be descended from such nobility and character, be the living embodiment of all that is Canadian and unique, and be so indifferent?’” (54). Jack’s reverence for the Métis Nation leader represents a recent shift in Canadian attitudes toward Riel. As Adese argues, one recent example is the marketing of Riel through the “Heritage Minutes” on CBC Television: “Riel’s life and execution are portrayed as a defining moment of Canadian history

with the late Métis Nation leader recast as a *Canadian* hero rather than as a ‘half-breed’ heretic” (“Anxious States”). In the story in *Red Rooms*, Marcel’s final thoughts return to Riel and his own Métis heritage. Marcel imagines being buried in his “prized Dolce and Gabbana coat” and, as he hopes, “the Métis sash . . . that [he] found wrapped in layers of scented tissue paper behind Jack’s old register (*This is important stuff, missy! Love Jack’ the little note card had read*) will be tied around [his] waist” (65). The sash, a symbol of nationhood and cultural distinction, originally worn only by men, is one of the most enduring elements of traditional Métis dress, used as both a practical and a decorative item of clothing. Marcel’s appreciation of both luxury Italian fashion and the traditional Métis sash can be read as a humorous comment on the mixing of “genres” as an element of Métis aesthetics. Moreover, the poet Riel (Jack and Marcel used to read his poetry together), whose leadership skills have been viewed as complementing those of buffalo hunter Gabriel Dumont, is portrayed as the model of an alternative masculinity that undermines stereotypes of Indigenous masculinity associated with the warrior and the hunter. Dimaline, obviously aware of the cultural shift in the perception of Riel, indicates here that Métis people need to embrace their cultural heritage and be aware of the complexities of their relationship with the dominant society.

The cycle’s major theme of celebrating the individual as part of the collective culminates in the story of the Photographer. This story, placed in the middle of the cycle, is most explicitly concerned with the relationship between the individual and the community and the meaning of “home.” A library book on the art of tribal markings and traditional customs of Indigenous peoples around the world inspired the Photographer to travel to the Ivory Coast to find out about the community spirit of the Baule. As explained in a quotation from the Photographer’s book in *Red Rooms*, “the entire custom [of marking] required strong belief in the values of the community and its distinct identity” (71). Living among the Baule, whom he believes “perhaps . . . were one of the few who understood what identity meant” (72), makes him homesick. After completing his photo essay on the Baule, the Photographer returns to his *Kokum*, who “carried the language, the superstitions, the humour and the history of her own ancestral people on broad shoulders” (83). Desperate to discover the glue that creates community, he travels across Canada to take pictures of Aboriginal communities. Surrounded by the

portraits of his people, the Photographer then takes his own picture. The result “was stunning as it hung in galleries around the globe along with the entire work titled ‘Finding Home.’ It showed a skinny Cree man with a boyish grin and a bit of a mullet. . . . Around him were the photos he had taken along his journey through Indian country” (85). The closing lines of this story illustrate a particular understanding of the position of the individual within the community, reflected in the intricate connections among the five individual stories as they combine to form a whole, in their allusion to the notion of “all my relations”:

He carries each of these people with him. They are not pieces of a separate whole; they are each in and of themselves perfect, and they are all connected and inside of one another like a set of cedar babushka dolls. The Photographer is filled with the urge to run out and mark himself so that everyone can see his true identity, to whom and what he belongs. Instead, he swings down to the pow wow and picks himself up some fry bread. (86)

Although forging tribal identity by marking the skin is not always an option for urban Indigenous people today, the story humorously suggests that everyday acts of resurgence are an important first step.

Healing and decolonization within the context of the everyday are also the major concern of *The Girl Who Grew a Galaxy*, which focuses on a young Métis woman’s spiritual journey. Both of Dimaline’s texts were published at key moments in Aboriginal history, culminating in the Idle No More movement, supported by a great number of non-Indigenous allies. In addition, both texts focus on the female experience, demonstrating the growing number of Indigenous women in leadership roles. Like *Red Rooms*, *The Girl Who Grew a Galaxy* is concerned with (re)defining imaginary “red” space. The text, also more decisively written from a Métis perspective than *Red Rooms*, follows the chick lit formula in its packaging, the representation of some of the protagonist’s qualities, certain themes, comedic and ironic moments, and a happy ending.⁸ The book’s dust jacket features an attractive, dark-haired, young woman with large brown eyes and bright red lipstick who appears to be lying on a bed. She faces the reader against the backdrop of a galaxy consisting of bright stars and colourful planets. The author’s name is written in pink at the bottom of the front cover, and the book’s title appears at the top in a script that looks like handwriting. The same script is used for the titles of the twelve chapters. Its typography is over-

sized, and the image of a galaxy embellishes each of the chapter titles. According to Rocío Montoro, all of these elements are part and parcel of chick lit (2-3). Also in keeping with this formula, Dimaline's protagonist, Ruby Bloom, is a young, single woman on a quest for her Prince Charming, and like many chick lit heroines she lacks self-confidence (Wells 59) even though she is intelligent and beautiful. And, like many of her sisters, Ruby receives advice from her "simply marvelous gay friend" (Yardley 12), her fashion consultant who stands by her in times of crisis. These textual features cater to a younger female readership, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, tapping into the genre's propensity for creating reading communities.

However, the way that Dimaline "bends" chick lit conventions to transform the narrative into a journey of spiritual healing is more relevant here. Whereas much chick lit is written in a confessional mode in the first person, *The Girl Who Grew a Galaxy* is written from a third-person omniscient point of view in keeping with Native oral tradition. Moreover, the third person de-emphasizes the importance of the individual voice. It also indicates that Ruby, twenty-eight years old, cannot "own herself" until she is ready to move on with her life after her father's death.⁹ Also, the typical chick lit novel is set in the present and focuses on the heroine's adult life, without much concern about her childhood and the past. In contrast, Dimaline's narrator explains how a particular event in Ruby's childhood is to blame for her lack of self-worth and anxiety. The galaxy of odd planets — Anxiety, Guilt, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Agoraphobia, Envy, Fantasy, and Longing, still spinning around her head — "grew out of trauma that occurred in the middle of an otherwise quiet childhood" (16). The seven planets, rather than the Seven Grandfathers, begin to rule her life because at "age seven and a half [she] killed her grandfather" (16). Ruby believes that she killed her Métis grandfather, Pitou, who died of a massive heart attack, by losing track of time while riding her new bike, which he had just given to her as a birthday present: "Ruby understood that her wandering had murdered him. And she also understood that she would never, ever wander again" (33). Two references to chest pain that he experienced prior to her disappearance make it clear that the heart attack was not brought on by concern for his granddaughter's safety.

Later in life, Ruby also blames herself for her parents' divorce and for her mother's extraordinary weight gain — 374 pounds — when Ruby

leaves home to attend the University of Toronto. Here again Dimaline revises the formula by “supersizing” the protagonist’s mother rather than the protagonist herself, as in the case of Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones. According to Alison Umminger, “in many of the books this quest for a partner is entirely secondary to the ongoing battle chick lit’s heroines are engaging with themselves — particularly with regard to weight” (240). Although many chick lit protagonists “are looking for a way out of or around the ‘beauty myth,’ even as they unconsciously reinforce a number of its more destructive conclusions” (241), in *The Girl Who Grew a Galaxy* Ruby’s mother’s weight gain, caused by her addiction to junk food and soap operas, is associated with poverty, intergenerational trauma, and colonization. Moreover, Ruby’s Catholic schooling, with its residential school legacy, is blamed for her irrational feelings of guilt and for the development of an anxiety disorder in the wake of her grandfather’s death. Although both of her parents are Métis, they are not particularly connected to their heritage. After losing her grandfather, Ruby would have been completely cut off from her tradition had it not been for her Great-Aunt Harriet Boucher, her grandfather’s sister, whose house “up north” stands “at the crossroads, between the modern world and a small piece of the bush” (50, 52). As the narrator explains, Harriet only felt safe inside her house, though it had been over twenty years since the last of the area’s residential schools closed. During her first two-week visit following her grandfather’s death, Ruby is reconnected to nature, eats traditional food, and is taken to an elder, who gives her the name Chibiish’kwe, “Big Water Woman.” Because of her great-aunt’s teachings on the constraints of consumption, Ruby is not addicted to shopping — unlike the typical chick lit protagonist. Back in the city, the only things that she continues to collect are planets for her galaxy. As a consequence, she becomes increasingly isolated, a situation exacerbated by her mother’s own withdrawal from the world.

The most obvious difference between mainstream chick lit, much of which continues to be written by white women portraying white female protagonists, and Dimaline’s text is the fact that her protagonist is Métis. This racial and cultural difference plays an important part in the choices that Ruby makes and in how others relate to her. Her father blames white society for the loss of his job: “‘Goddamn hillbillies,’ Wayne swore, pacing the kitchen, a pink slip clenched in his fist. . . . ‘They don’t want to see a half-breed get ahead’” (44). Ruby’s upbringing

has been shaped by her mother's belief that Métis people need to outperform white people to gain respect: "You want those white people to look down on you? No, we gotta do better than them just to be equal" (162). Moreover, Ruby's experience with discrimination illustrates that colonization is alive and well in the form of overt racism, stereotypes, internalized racism, and discrimination even by fellow Métis, including her own mother. Stereotypes of "the drunken Indian" and "the sexually available Indigenous woman" abound in the text. When Ruby brings half a bottle of Jack Daniel's, left behind in a cupboard by her father, to a grade-eleven party at a white friend's house, she is greeted with "Oh my God, you're so Indian!" (102). The narrator explains that "being Indian" was a "common expression at the school for anyone who managed to procure or drink liquor" (102). The novel links the adult Ruby's binge drinking to her lack of self-worth.

Her tasks as a curatorial assistant at the Museum of Canadian History include cataloguing "bones, clothes and farming implements," writing "analyses on the condition of artifacts," and uploading "images onto the database" (147). What attracts Ruby to this job is that she can spend hours in solitude and is not challenged intellectually; her mother refers to her demeaningly as an "inventory girl" (148). Moreover, the description of her job conjures up stereotypes both of the "lazy Indian" and of the "dead Indian," even though her work is a constant and painful reminder of how Indigenous peoples continue to be objectified and classified for the pleasure of white viewers who want to see them as a dying race. The structural as well as the textual presentations of the exhibition in the First Peoples Hall, one of the permanent collections of the Canadian Museum of History in Ottawa, to which the text playfully refers, perpetuate colonial structures of power. The white curators' decisions about what deserves to be kept and remembered stem from an ideology of conquest of the cultures to whose objects the hall provides a home. Like the Indigenous artifacts in the museum, Ruby is both invisible and visibly "other" at the same time. For example, her white boss does not recall her name, and the men working in the mail room want to have sex with her because they are attracted to her perceived "otherness."

The novel makes it abundantly clear that Ruby suffers from multiple anxiety disorders because of this perception. In "Anxious States and the Co-Optation of Métisness," Adese discusses the link between "colonial

anxiety” or “settler anxiety” and the recent shifts in attitudes toward Riel (see also Gaudry). She observes that, “in a Canadian colonial context, colonial, settler colonial or settler anxieties involve feelings of fear, terror, and unease. They involve feelings of restlessness, breathlessness, rootlessness, and at times of palpable and negative loneliness that percolates within the Canadian (un)conscious.” Among other things, Adese points to funding cuts to Parks Canada under the former Conservative federal government — resulting in Riel House no longer being partnered with the St. Boniface Historical Society — as an attempt to erase Métis identity and repurpose it. As she claims, the discontinuation of Métis-guided interpretive tours of the site results in a radical “separation of Métis self-told narratives from this key Métis historical site.” The erasure of Métisness and its simultaneous co-optation in support of the objectives of the Canadian state have induced anxieties in Adese herself. As she writes, “perhaps my anxieties are the product of growing up in an anxious colonial state, a nation-state that is at its very core . . . afraid of its own reflection. Perhaps I am also made anxious by the state’s continuing unwillingness to recognize me and other Métis on our own terms, instead attempting to manipulate us, our leaders, and our stories, to fit the nation-state’s perverted fantasies of peaceful settlement.” Similarly, Ruby’s anxieties have been caused by growing up in a racist society in which Métisness is either erased or co-opted. Her anxieties are exacerbated by her feeling responsible for the death of her grandfather, who provided the lifeline to her Métis identity.

Ruby’s “life-altering transformative experience” (22), in the words of Fiola, occurs on a trip to New Orleans, where she travels to retrieve a Nigerian birth cloth and a collection of photo slides, currently on loan at the African American Museum. The two objects have symbolic meanings, for Ruby is about to be “reborn” and to “own herself,” so to speak. Significantly, this is her first trip outside Canada, in keeping with the promise to herself never to wander again. Ruby, to whom the water of Lake Huron reacted strongly when she was a child, is magnetically drawn to the water of the city. Malcolm, the young astronomer with whom she falls in love, explains that the Indigenous people who used to live in the area started performing ceremonies and prayed for water to keep their wooden shotguns safe from fire. Setting her recovery from trauma in New Orleans gives Dimaline the opportunity to highlight the personal connection between Ruby and post-Katrina New Orleans

by exploring Ruby's and the city's capacities for survival and recovery. Having miraculously lost her anxieties on this trip enables Ruby to experience a moment of "decolonial love" with her Prince Charming.

Ruby completes her journey of healing by temporarily returning to the place of her childhood. Soon after arriving in Toronto, she receives a phone call from the partner of her dying father: "He didn't want me to tell you, but he's at the end now and you should come home. You should just come home. So . . . come home, Ruby" (314). Reiteration of the word *home* emphasizes that saying good-bye to her dying father is the first stage of her "homecoming" since it initiates the process of mourning. His death releases a flood of tears that drowns the planets for good. In her eulogy at his funeral, Ruby thanks her father for the red 1957 Plymouth Belvedere, which he fixed up for her when she was sixteen and whose keys he handed her on his deathbed. Taking the Plymouth on a test drive through her childhood neighbourhood brings Ruby full circle when she realizes that everything looks different from the driver's seat of the car. Twenty-one years earlier the seven-and-a-half-year-old Ruby rode her shiny red bike down the street, imagining herself as a "fearless Voyageur with the shiny red bateau. . . . [H]er canoe was laden with furs to trade and the little voyageur moved carefully through the narrows" (24). Her father's death reconnects her with her grandfather's death and with Métis history and culture. She thanks both her grandfather and her father for their gifts of independence "in the most sincere way she could" by using Anishinaabemowin to thank them: "Chi meegwetch" (346).

The text ends with Ruby's dream of returning to Great-Aunt Harriet's house, walking into the water of Lake Huron, and watching planets drop out of the sky into the lake and transform magically into trout: "They shook themselves into a motley formation, stirring up the dissolving bones of grandmothers and aunts from Huron's silt. Then they flexed, stretched dreaming muscles, pushed off the cold currents and headed for home" (351). This dream is connected to one of her great-aunt's most important teachings about the meaning of "home" when Ruby was suffering from depression at thirteen. While taking Ruby fishing, Harriet observes that

Those science guys, I saw them on the CBC talking about how the fish find their way home by smell. How that's why they're gettin' messed up, because we're messing with the water . . . changing the

way it smells. . . . But we know better, us; it's memory. Those fish will always know their way home. Maybe where they're lookin', the fish just don't wanna be there. Maybe they're just waitin' on us to get things right. . . . [T]hey don't wanna come home. And even if they've been doing it for thousands of years, a fish can change his mind too. But, fact is, they know that home is there waiting for them in the end. S'why they can be brave enough to make the change in the first place. (310-11)

Harriet seems to be saying that there is nothing “wrong” with living in the city as long as Indigenous people do not forget “home”: that is, their connection to the land, culture, and language. The important message here is that change is necessary because culture is never static. Tradition needs to be adapted to new circumstances to preserve its healing power and meaning. The prerequisite for decolonization and resurgence is the knowledge of where one comes from and a sense of what “home” means.

Whereas *Red Rooms* can be read as a self-reflexive narrative about a female storyteller's relationship with stories as “medicine” and “magic,” *The Girl Who Grew a Galaxy* receives its metafictional quality through the self-reflexive use of Métis symbolism. The colour red, as in the bicycle and the Plymouth, and reminiscent of the Métis flag, is probably the most obvious symbol, along with recurring references to the numbers four and seven.¹⁰ The text also humorously refers to the Métis infinity symbol, as when Ruby “found her underpants on the floor, rolled up and twisted like a damp infinity symbol” (116), after having sex with Malcolm. In addition, there are numerous allusions to weaving and embroidery — “the universe was embroidered across the dark night” (258) — in recognition of the importance of these crafts in Métis culture. The Métis colour and object symbolism, some of which might not be readily accessible to non-Aboriginal readers, injects cultural distinctiveness into the text and creates moments of resistance. But the playfulness of Dimaline's prose should not distract us from recognizing some of the pressing social justice issues raised by her text, such as racism, ongoing colonization, and the urgency of healing Aboriginal communities. Most of the stories in *Red Rooms* and *The Girl Who Grew a Galaxy* look forward beyond their endings and backward by linking one generation to the next, creating an “ideological home” — that is, “a layering of generations of stories, and the culmination of storyteller after storyteller, in a long chain of transmission” — to create a new discursive

space (McLeod 19). By reworking two Western literary genres creatively and subversively from a Métis perspective, Dimaline emphasizes the importance of Indigenous storytelling in the contemporary urban setting and its function as “medicine.”

The relationship between the individual and the community in *Red Rooms* is based upon a model of selfhood in which the individual is a part of the unfolding narrative of a people and can thus be understood only in relation to the whole. Moreover, both the representation of the traumatic effects of ongoing colonization and the notion of “story as medicine” give her short-story cycle a distinctive shape and meaning. Dimaline contributes innovatively to Métis aesthetics by combining elements of spiritual journey literature with those of the short-story cycle and chick lit, compellingly expanding the boundaries of genre and identity. The specific structure of the short-story cycle gives her the opportunity to illustrate moments of “self-recognition” and “decolonial love” in her Indigenous characters by portraying their spiritual journeys of decolonization. Crossing the chick lit formula with spiritual journey literature allows Dimaline to undermine stereotypes of Native authors writing exclusively about “reserves, wolves, and shamans” (Interview) and to reinvent genres as tools to be used in the struggle for resurgence and community building. By emphasizing the importance of “returning home” through everyday acts of resurgence, Cherie Dimaline demonstrates that in the Métis experience there is “an unbroken and cohesive home to return to” (LaRocque 142).

NOTES

¹ I would like to acknowledge that I approach Dimaline’s texts from the limited perspective of a white settler scholar. Note that I use the term Aboriginal when referring to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit living in what is now called Canada. Although often used interchangeably with Aboriginal, “Indigenous tends to have international connotations, referring to Indigenous peoples throughout the world rather than being country-specific” (Vowel 10).

² Simpson adopted the term “decolonial love” from Dominican American writer Junot Díaz, who used it in an interview with the *Boston Review*. With reference to his novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Díaz explains that, given the history of rape and sexual violence that created the Caribbean, only “decolonial” love could liberate its people from the legacy of colonial violence.

³ Anishinaabe scholar Grace L. Dillon discusses the relevance of *biskaabiiyang* in her introduction to *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction* (10).

⁴ According to Cherokee scholar Jeff Cornassel, “everyday acts of resurgence aren’t glamorous or expedient. It might involve a personal vow to only eat food that has been hunted, fished or grown by Indigenous peoples, and/or speaking one’s language to family members or in social media groups, or even growing traditional foods in your own backyard” (98).

⁵ Sagamok Anishinaabe poet and scholar Armand Garnet Ruffo has identified two different “branches” of Aboriginal storytelling: political/historical/secular and spiritual/mythic/sacred (118-19).

⁶ LaRocque explains that she writes the word *Métis* without the accent because not all Métis are francophone in origin. I have opted to write the word with the accent for two reasons: this is the spelling used by the Georgian Bay Métis Council, and the protagonist of *The Girl Who Grew a Galaxy* is of francophone ancestry.

⁷ Dimaline echoes here Anishinaabe scholar Kimberley Blaeser’s observation, which continues to resonate, that Aboriginal literature needs to be read from within: that is, with critical methods “that arise out of the literature itself” (68).

⁸ *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines chick lit as “written by women about the misadventures of contemporary unmarried working women in their 20s or 30s who struggle with multiple pressures from reproachful mothers, inadequate boyfriends, and tyrannical bosses while consoling themselves with shopping trips, chocolate, and erotic daydreams. The stories are commonly told in the first person in tones of humorous self-deprecation” (Baldick).

⁹ In *Native Canadiana: Songs from the Urban Rez*, Gregory Scofield explains that the Métis called themselves *katipâmsôchik*, which he translates as “the people who own themselves” (55).

¹⁰ The two numbers are important in Anishinaabe cosmology, as seen in the four directions; the four substances (rock, water, fire, and wind) out of which Gichi-Manidoo created the sun, stars, moon, and earth; the four sacred medicines (sage, sweet grass, cedar, tobacco); the four kinds of plant beings (flowers, grasses, trees, and vegetables); the four animal beings (four-legged, crawlers, winged, and swimmers); the four hills of life; the four colours of humans; the seven prophets who made seven predictions for the future in the Seven Fires Prophecy; the seven stages of life; and the seven grandfather teachings (Vollom).

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