

Spin the Tale Inside: Opacity and Respectful Distance in Lee Maracle's Celia's Song

Valentina De Riso

Volume 46, numéro 2, 2021

Indigenous Literary Arts of Truth and Redress
Arts littéraires autochtones de vérité et de réparation

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1091103ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1091103ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

University of New Brunswick, Dept. of English

ISSN

0380-6995 (imprimé)

1718-7850 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

De Riso, V. (2021). Spin the Tale Inside: Opacity and Respectful Distance in Lee Maracle's Celia's Song. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 46(2), 88–107. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1091103ar>

Spin the Tale Inside: Opacity and Respectful Distance in Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song*

VALENTINA DE RISO

SET IN THE LATE 1980s, *Celia's Song* (2014) by Lee Maracle (Stó:lō) is a story of Indigenous resurgence in the Nuu'chalnulth and Stó:lō territories on the North Pacific coast of Canada. Maracle imagines what it might mean for Indigenous peoples, settlers, and beings on the land to co-exist more equitably, by foregrounding modes of speaking and understanding which afford space for respectful distance. For Maracle, it would seem that lack or incompleteness of understanding is not an obstacle to respectful relationships but constitutive of them and set against absolutist notions of achieving total understanding that risk recreating the colonial violence of assimilation. In claiming that understanding can be appropriative, I draw from postcolonial scholar Édouard Glissant's theory of opacity. Glissant's argument develops from etymological analysis of the French *comprendre* which, like the English "comprehend," is formed from Latin roots *con-* (with) and *prendre* (to take, to grasp) and contains an almost aggressively appropriative propriety (191, 192). To accept, live with, and cooperate with others, one does not need to understand them on all levels to afford them respect; opaque understanding leaves space for unintelligibility and impenetrability. This is a model of understanding that may be understood as "standing-with" in respectful reciprocity and irreducible incommensurability.

Glissant suggests that the instrumentalization of speech creates finite parameters for expressing and conceptualizing human experience, which is irreducibly disordered and non-linear, by turning it into something easily accessible and intelligible. Inherent to this discursive model is the notion of transparency, a process of understanding that involves measuring what is said, comparing it to one's own system of knowledge, and reducing it to an absolute (Glissant 190). Dialogue may be built instead by a more respectful "speaking nearby," an idea I draw from Trinh

T. Minh-ha's notion of a form of speaking that "reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it" (qtd. in Chen 87). This way of speaking, where "closures are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition" (87), resists fixed meanings and may defy listeners' expectations. The problem I pose in this essay through a close reading of Maracle's novel is how to imagine and assay a model of speaking truths that avoids the risk of decontextualizing Indigenous knowledges or de-politicizing Indigenous texts when employing postcolonial conceptual frameworks and terminology in settler-colonial contexts. Postcolonial theories are often met with hostility by scholars of Indigenous studies because of these risks.¹ In an essay titled "The 'Post-colonial' Imagination" (1992), Maracle rejects the term *post-colonial* and suggests the need for a space to "imagine something beyond the colonial condition" (*Memory* 111). Indigenous scholars working with postcolonial paradigms invite this criticism. Glen Coulthard (Dene), Robert Warrior (Osage), and Jodi Byrd (Chickasaw) are among critics who theorize Indigeneity and decolonization with recourse to postcolonial theories. In the introduction to *ARIEL's* 2020 special issue on "tensions" and "interrelationships" between Indigenous and postcolonial studies, Deanna Reder (Métis) and Sophie McCall (settler) assert that "the language and theoretical frameworks for conceiving and mobilizing comparative studies have changed" precisely because "Indigenous and racialized scholars and writers have pushed to change them and to challenge the power relationships underpinning these disciplines" (10). Postcolonial frames of interpretation may be useful to emphasize interconnections between decolonization and anti-colonial resistance across the globe. Glissant's approach as a French-Caribbean philosopher and Minh-ha's as a Vietnamese filmmaker working in different contexts, including Africa, foreground spaces for respectful distance, ambivalence, indirectness, poetic language, and non-reductive understanding. This approach resonates with Indigenous views and is suggested by Maracle through story.

The story she tells also distinguishes its modes of telling from models for Indigenous-settler relations like "reconciliation," which, since the establishment of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), has become a dominant paradigm through which the state negotiates relationships with Indigenous peoples. From 2007 through 2015, the TRC investigated the lasting impacts of the Indian Residential School system on Indigenous families; its final report includes ninety-

four calls for acts of “reconciliation” to promote peaceful and respectful relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The TRC provided a forum in which to testify to colonial injustices, re-orienting the frame of public discourse and collective memory. However, national discourses of “reconciliation” have been criticized for the instrumentalization of speech in several contexts, including models for testimony. Settler anthropologist Ronald Niezen observes that specific “preferred narratives” and templates for testimony were encouraged by the TRC (68). A particular notion of healing employed in this discourse of reconciliation locks Indigenous peoples into a paradigm of trauma and becomes part of a master narrative in which “negative” affects such as pain and anger are expected to be overcome through narration and replaced by forgiveness.² As Dylan Robinson (Stó:lō), Peter Morin (Tahltan), and Anne-Marie Reynaud (settler) all emphasize, Indigenous peoples at TRC events have often refused to abide by this narrative and employed highly varied forms of testimony. But, if “reconciliation” is framed as a state-determined biopolitical “humanitarian project,” as Dian Million (Athabaskan) contends, it becomes a neoliberal tool that “reaffirms the people’s systemic inequality and endemic social suffering as a pathology, a wound that is solely an outcome of past colonial policies” (6).³ This model of witnessing is neoliberal. The “contemporary subject” is constituted as “the site of healing or of overcoming trauma” (Ahmed and Stacey 4). *Celia’s Song* suggests that truth, testimony, and healing cannot be reduced to absolutist claims or tidy conclusions.

Instead, Maracle explores the intrinsic opacity in acts of telling through “spider storytelling,” a narrative technique in which temporal and storied layers are used to challenge conceptions of linearity. Different notions of truth emerge when the limits of the known are exposed and incommensurable realities acknowledged. For Maracle, opacity is key because, she emphasizes, colonizing empires granted themselves the rights to “define, delineate, and demarcate,” to “speculate” on “what is in the mind, body, heart, and spirit of others” and “arbitrarily determine the nature of their relations with all others, often without due consideration to those others” (*Memory* 230). Colonialism cannot tolerate opacity, nor can a settler state if it aims to settle issues to ensure its continuity, rather than negotiating differences and ambiguities through constant renewal of relationships. Opacity informs treaty relations as a model of relationality that respects the unknown and unassimilable, in opposition to liberal frameworks of democracy

and equality that may be used to supersede Indigenous sovereignty. By imagining a model for “speaking nearby” in *Celia’s Song*, Maracle opens up ways of understanding coexistence as mutual honouring that pays attention to the right to opacity and the right to say what is not expected, with the implication that testimony may neither be complete nor understood completely.

Spider Telling: The Generative Potential of Doubt

Celia’s Song is a sequel to *Ravensong* (1993), which is set in the 1950s amidst a swine flu epidemic. In *Ravensong*, Celia James is a child and a secondary character, a seer who grows up without the guidance of her Elders and, unable to make sense of her power, gradually withdraws from her family.⁴ Thirty years on, in *Celia’s Song*, the James family faces a different “epidemic” of “suicide and violence” (218). In her forties, and having lost her son to suicide, Celia is unable to find meaning in her life and initially accepts a diagnosis of her visions as “delusions” (6). But, when a member of Celia’s family, five-year-old Shelley, is brutalized, raped, and almost killed, Celia is compelled to ground herself in material reality and, together with family and friends, takes responsibility for Shelley’s care. The novel traces Celia’s personal resurgence and that of her community, how she learns to embrace and actively make use of her gift of vision to help Shelley and to provide guidance for her nephew Jacob, also a seer. As the villagers and allies from “white town” come together to heal Shelley and deal with the perpetrator of the crime, Amos (a victim of abuse at residential schools), they find strength in Coast Salish philosophies and beliefs, connection to the land, and healing practices that have been undermined and damaged by colonial policies. The main narrator is a trickster, Mink, who recounts the hardships of the James family and, concurrently, the vicissitudes of a double-headed sea serpent. Weaving in and out of Celia’s tale, then, is a traditional story of the double-headed serpent, an archetypal symbol of crisis and irreconcilable rationalities. Protector of a forgotten longhouse, the serpent is exhausted by waiting for humans to honour their promises and feed him with songs and ceremony. Stirring in disgust and rage over a contract breached, he rips himself off the longhouse and stirs up a terrible storm, which is witnessed by Celia in her visions. The havoc the serpent wreaks is equated to Amos’s abuse of Shelley: two moments

of crisis mimic the double exposure of the mythical and the social upon which Maracle builds in this fiction.

Temporal layering suggests the novel's historical and socio-political contexts and constitutes one way in which Maracle scrutinizes modes of telling and understanding. *Celia's Song* is an expressly non-linear narrative, drawing simultaneously on Celia's visions, described as "scattered moving pictures" with "no order" (45, 46), and on the traditional story of the serpent. In the novel, visions are narrative portals through which to tell a multigenerational story of colonial contact, largely through memories that Celia inherits from her great-great-grandmother, the "first Alice." The arrival of the European colonizers, the illnesses they brought with them and how they traded Christian names for medicines, experiences of dispossession and of residential schools, and poverty, addiction, suicides, and gendered violence criss-cross in a web of interweaving patterns of colonialism. Countering linear chronologies of time is a narrative technique employed by many Indigenous and postcolonial authors, a decolonial aesthetic strategy that decentres linear order and unsettles colonial conditionings of transparency and possibility. This emerges compellingly through the story of the serpent who moves in a dimension that is seemingly both outside of time and contemporaneous with Celia's story. Temporal markers situating the serpent are created by storytellers: for Mink, the story of the sea serpent has just begun (26), but when Celia witnesses the serpent's storm in a vision, she says "*It happened a long time ago*" (13) because, as an origin story, it takes place at "the beginning of the world" (79). This might suggest that Celia witnesses the storm after it occurs, but the serpent moves cyclically across time, not incrementally. The moment Celia witnesses the storm does *and* does not correspond to the moment of the storm because the storm "*happened even if it didn't*" (7).

Maracle's claim that "Fiction is powerful truth" (*Conversations* 82) is echoed by Mink when he confides, "*some piece of me believes that doubt is somehow the best part of being alive; I love the suspiciousness of doubt and all the angles for retelling stories that this doubt spawns*" (6, 7). Like an optical prism refracting light, doubt is an aperture onto the infinite possibilities of not-knowing, when it is acknowledged that one story is the starting point for many more. Recognizing a multiplicity of stories is crucial to rebutting settlercolonialism, wherein one story is made the sovereign rule and the colonial moment magnified so that it becomes the central authority that determines reality, and "history" becomes

the history of colonialism. In *Celia's Song*, Maracle returns to “an old story” in order to “tell it like it’s happening now so people will continue to grow and learn from it” (Maracle and Simpson). She suggests that retelling stories from different perspectives is “the heart of where transformation comes from” (qtd. in Kelly 86). In fiction, Maracle recovers “stories of implosion” that narrate how Indigenous peoples have traditionally dealt with crisis. These stories are survival mechanisms that policies of assimilation were meant to destroy. Maracle has spoken of how residential schools “separated us from those stories” and said that this is why she decided to “write from those stories” and tell about the double-headed serpent (*As It Happens*).

In *Celia's Song*, Maracle performs the role of spider, the storyteller who spins a story so that “You don’t know what her story is about until after she has spun the tale inside, twisted you in all kinds of crazed directions” (128). Indigenous storytelling evades directedness and works like “a spider web,” as Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Marmon Silko observes, “with many little threads radiating from the centre, crisscrossing one another. As with the web, the structure emerges as it is made, and you must simply listen and trust . . . that meaning will be made” (*Yellow* 48, 49). Spider storytelling emphasizes the importance of what Jo-Ann Archibald (Stó:lō) calls “story listening” and “learning to make meaning from stories” (76, 85). Stó:lō Elders stress that a “hearer isn’t meant to understand the story at all levels, immediately” because meanings “are revealed to the listener at different stages of life” (qtd. in Archibald 84, 125). The relationship that takes shape during the storytelling process, between storyteller and listeners, generates a model in which opacity is cherished. In *Memory Serves* (2015), Maracle emphasizes oratory as a model of relationality that is based on a “concatenation” between storytellers and listeners, and on stories that “activate the listener’s community-based thought process without prescribing a response” (173). Listening carefully is more important than knowing or understanding because stories do not necessarily “offer answers to problems” but “stimulat[e] thought in the listener” (170). In *Celia's Song*, Maracle recreates some of the characteristics of oral traditions she values by building levels of story through scattered memories, conversations, origin tales, dreams, and more. In this sense, Maracle’s text may be read in the rich context of Indigenous writers across North America, in particular Silko’s spider storytelling in *Ceremony* (1977). This narrative technique suggests that multiple truths may emerge from what is left

unsaid and what is said indirectly. It is an example of strategic opacity because it illustrates that “Truth can only be approached indirectly if one does not want to lose it. . . . Even when the indirect has to take refuge in the very figures of the direct, it continues to defy the closure of a direct reading” (Minh-ha qtd. in Chen 87). This ambivalence is inherent to Stó:lō oratory: words are “spoken with care” and with “poetic force, vision, and poignancy,” and listeners have the responsibility to pay careful attention to “what is said, what is not said, and what is connected to what is not said,” so that the story “will encourage us to look again, to peel back each layer and gain deeper understanding” (Maracle, *Memory* 233). When Maracle represents these processes, she uses doubt generatively to explore where storywebs may lead readers and listeners.

Maracle practises spider storytelling by questioning models of thinking and speaking, leaving a trail of questions that are not answered directly. When Celia’s nephew Jacob reflects on the realities of settler-colonialism, he asks about the loss of traditional smells in Indigenous homes and initiates a conversation that generates more questions, none of which are answered (63). Jacob’s grandmother, Momma, addresses her sense of loss in a monologue marked by the repeated question “Where is my family?” (93). Sometimes, too, Maracle suggests answers to questions that are left unasked, as when Momma says “to no one” that “We are not who we used to be” (77). Momma struggles to find answers until she cannot “bear the question anymore,” and faints under the weight of it (77). In storied layers, Maracle lays bare that there are “too many threads to this web” and “a simple answer is impossible” (139). What is left “opaque” is not obscure, “though it is possible for it to be so and be accepted as such,” but “that which cannot be reduced” to a fixed and absolute truth (Glissant 191). Maracle’s storytelling technique illustrates that truths cannot be contained within finite parameters for smooth comprehension because “Truth never yields itself in anything said or shown” (Minh-ha qtd. in Chen 87). A deeper appreciation of difficult truths may be reached through opacity; doubt is intrinsic to spider telling and generative in Maracle’s imagining of respectful relationships.

Opacity in Relationality

In *Celia’s Song*, Maracle scrutinizes liberal frameworks of equality that are considered pillars of democratic progress and often perceived as commensurate with the goals of different communities. As Eve Tuck

(Unangaâ) and K. Wayne Yang (settler) posit, “an ethic of incommensurability” is crucial to developing models of relationality that recognize what is “distinct” and “sovereign” for “project(s) of decolonization in relation to human and civil rights” (28). Maracle threads ideas of social progress through conversations between characters, with the 1954 flu epidemic a watershed after which “their world changed. . . . The shift began with Rosa Parks and it turned into a movement for civil rights. It finally came to the villages as Aboriginal rights” (*Celia* 86). In 1960, the Canadian Parliament granted all registered First Nation peoples the right to vote in federal elections. In *Celia’s Song*, however, the James family discusses how the vote followed a prohibition law banning access to mountains from which to gather wood for building houses. It was this circumstance, and complaints of Indigenous chiefs, that led the government to “deman[d]” the vote in exchange for houses being built (64), suggesting that in this context voting loses its associations with freedom and participatory democracy, on which it is usually understood to be founded as a civil right. In *Celia’s Song*, the tool of democracy *par excellence* atomizes the community: “The vote was silent, ominous in its lack of community and collaboration . . . , powerful in its ability to silence the village and isolate each from the other. It was like the white men, all-powerful and silencing, except it was invisible” (64, 65). In this instance, the right to vote serves the status quo and supersedes Indigenous claims to land and autonomy. Political science professor David MacDonald warns against applying liberal frameworks of equality, multiculturalism, and civil rights to Indigenous-settler relations because they have been used “to suppress Indigenous peoples and their *sui generis* rights to self-determination, and may continue to do so in the future” (5). He observes that the “most popular ideas of reconciliation” among settlers are framed as “closing gaps, making Indigenous peoples equal with settlers, [and] working to create a shared vision of a harmonious future” (7). Dian Million similarly criticizes policies employed by the Canadian government to “stall” self-determination efforts, what she calls “adaptive inclusions” into “neoliberal multiculturalism” (158). These frameworks render commensurable the goals of Indigenous communities to those of the settler state but, in *Celia’s Song*, Maracle shows that they are incommensurable. A precolonial model of treaty relations that is based on principles of non-interference and constant renewal is recovered in the novel as a potentially more ethical framework for rela-

tionships between Indigenous peoples and settlers, as well as between humans, nonhumans, and the land.

To understand how treaty relations are represented in the novel, it is necessary to consider how Maracle's blend of tradition and social critique conveys colonialism's disruptive potential but reduces its authority. In *Celia's Song*, forced relocation, the outlawing of spiritual practices, exploitation of the land, harrowing abuses, and the everyday slow violence of racist misogyny all lead to psychological and emotional traumas that accumulate over generations. The serpent feeds on this. He "lurks in the shadows behind bushes," waiting to hear "the shrieking sound of rage or desperation" that signals "a meal" (236). Maracle uses the serpent to explain Amos's murderous desires (40), Stella's addictions and neglect of her daughter Shelley (155), feelings of hate in abused boys (98) — and to foreground how colonialism dehumanizes those who act as oppressors.⁵ Yet, I would argue that *Celia's Song* focuses less on exposing colonial trauma, abuses, and violence (which Indigenous readers already know all too well) and more on the reparative process of "reconstructing a sustainable life in their wake" (Hanson 105), with a major stimulus for transformation conveyed in Coast Salish storying. Whenever Maracle imagines moments of crisis, she communicates the need for transformation — even when the web of story is too twisted to be easily disentangled. She stresses symbolically what she has asserted in interviews: that the "history of this country is not made up of conquest," it is "thousands and thousands of years old" (qtd. in Kelly 84). The serpent originates pre-contact and exists in a system of treaty relations where stability is ensured through contract. The serpent is obligated to protect the people of the longhouse if they feed him with songs and ceremony, but colonialism disrupts this pact: the "singing" had "stopped during the prohibition laws" (*Celia* 2). The damage, then, originates in the breaching of a contract which grants "*permission to the serpent to slide from the house front and return to sea*" (2). Indigenous peoples have contracts with "all beings" on the land, Maracle writes, and "Violation of these agreements has consequences" (*Conversations* 113). In *Celia's Song*, treaty negotiations are a system of reciprocity, and Maracle suggests ways of understanding treaties outside the discourse in which they are usually contained. For settler scholar Michael Asch, treaties have come to be considered "relatively insignificant in the story of our country" because of a failure to see "the centrality of relations with Indigenous peoples to [Canada's] story" (41, 45). Asch is referring to historic trea-

ties that were signed between 1871 and 1921 and cover most of Western and Northern Canada, formal agreements between Indigenous peoples and the government of Canada. Maracle's novel is set in unceded Coast Salish territory, and the treaties she imagines include Indigenous practice that pre-dates colonial contact.⁶ Métis legal scholar Chelsea Vowel clarifies that "inter-Indigenous treaties were highly sophisticated oral agreements between sovereign peoples" which "covered everything from trade arrangements to the settlement of conflicts, with specific consequences for their breach, and specific ways in which these treaties would be renewed" (244). Leanne Simpson (Nishnaabeg) emphasizes that these treaties involve the animal and plant nations as well humans and suggests "precolonial treaty-making practices" provide "insights into the kind of relationship" that Indigenous peoples intended to have with settlers, based on principles of sustainability, respect, renewal, and non-interference ("Looking" 36). Simpson advocates for decolonizing the Euro-Canadian view of treaties as entrenched in written record, ownership of land, and static understandings of relationships — what Garneau describes as the "government's frantic race to a post-historical space of reconciliation, rather than submission to a permanent state of negotiation, of treaty" (37). From Simpson's Nishnaabeg perspective, a treaty represents an "ongoing reciprocal and dynamic relationship to be nurtured" which, when practised "continually and in perpetuity, maintains peaceful coexistence, respect, and mutual benefit" ("Looking" 35). Continuous negotiation and renewal of reciprocity are necessary to navigate incommensurability. Maracle's claim that oratory "lead us onto a path of continuous growth and transformation" suggests how closely politics and aesthetics are linked in Indigenous storytelling traditions, where stories contain protocols for behaviours and forming relationships so that all beings enjoy a "perfect right to be as they are" (*Memory* 236). A principle of non-interference and a "survival right" (236) ensure that each being maintains a respectful distance from others. Treaties ensure that this distance is respected and treasured, and oratory reinforces "the freedom between beings" because it is about "cherishing the distance between them; it is about relationship, and as such it is about life. Oratory is comprised of the complex relations between disparate characters in their concatenation or their lack of it" (241). In *Celia's Song*, Maracle suggests a complex system of earth relations between peoples and more-than-human beings that is evoked in passages describing Jacob's retreat to the mountain and conversations

with his great-great-great-grandmother, “first Alice.” Jacob’s journey signals the beginning of a collective resurgence of his community by rebuilding the longhouse — the “traditional location for telling stories” (Archibald 71) — and revitalizing Indigenous storytelling modes for law and relationality.

Speaking Nearby

In *Celia’s Song*, Maracle conceptualizes language as carrying “reference posts,” criteria for making meaning and implementing action that are embedded in Indigenous languages and derived from observation of the natural world.⁷ Illustrative of Maracle’s strategic opacity in this context is a vignette about salmon: “*Their dancing is done in their ocean playground. . . . In this place of dance and play their language is born. This language has reference posts that head them up the right stream to the river the fish-women know well*” (109). This passage sets the tone for how the dynamic language of salmon may be translated into the lives of humans: as Alice’s spirit leaves her body, she ponders that language “*needs a post . . . a reference marker to remind, to tell the rememberer they are hooked to some moment*” (110). With the removal of children to residential schools and the outlawing of Indigenous practices, Alice lacks an immediate family relation to whom she may pass her knowledge. Alice has died “*but she could not really leave*” and floats betwixt “*the stars and earth,*” past and present. Jacob begins to access her ancestral teachings affectively when he “*feels something,*” which affords him space for a “*different kind of see*” (110). Maracle employs the verb “to see” as substantive, without it being nominalized via the suffix -ing. If it maintains the quality of action, it now holds the value of intuitive knowledge, brought into cognition when Jacob reaches the top of the mountain and converses with Alice. Characters in *Celia’s Song* inhabit a “langscape,” which John Borrows (Nishnaabeg) defines as “a place where physical space interacts with human observation to give meaning to the natural and human worlds” (51). In this novel, language is a system of knowledge with reference posts rooted in the land and in the stories of those who inhabit it. As the environment changes, language is adapted.

Insistence on reference posts in the novel allows for emphasis to be placed on the gaps in language that are created by changes in the environment. Cultural gaps exist not only between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples but also across generations. When Jacob lis-

tens to the women in his family discuss the epidemic and the vote, he “feels as if he does not have reference posts” to understand them (110). Jacob belongs to a younger generation, more disconnected from his Indigenous heritage, and feels that “each woman by turns shreds . . . his linguistic markers, rendering useless as slugs the words he so carefully learned at school”; the women “speak in a language that contravenes everything those marks stood for” (111). Education plays a critical role in Jacob’s epistemological and existential displacement because it forces the imposition of white reference posts as it erases Indigenous ones, leaving him feeling unable to connect to either and exposed to assimilation into the dominant system. The English the women speak, and that Jacob will learn to speak, is conceptually bent to convey Indigenous consciousness; it carries reference posts that have been created over time and is reclaimed and imbued with Coast Salish consciousness.⁸ In *Celia’s Song*, the need to forge a new language is a concern voiced by Jacob’s grandfather Ned, who declares, “Jacob doesn’t speak our women’s language, in either his English or theirs. They talk like they are stuck back in some old yesterday and Jacob talks like he is headed for tomorrow. We have to build a bridge between yesterday and tomorrow” (73). Here, linguistic tension is less about epistemologies and more about orientations. While the women’s English may be more substantially connected to traditional Indigenous worldviews than Jacob’s, their conversations are stuck in the past: the epidemic, the prohibition laws, the false victory of the vote. It is not only Jacob’s language that Maracle probes to show its limits but also the women’s because both modes of speaking are approached with doubt.

A mode of speaking that Maracle challenges with subtlety is healing. The belief that truth-telling can have a therapeutic effect underpins dominant ideas of emotional healing and rehabilitation and is also said to be aligned with Indigenous conceptions of restorative justice. Leanne Simpson emphasizes that, in the specific instance of the Nishnaabeg legal system, Indigenous restorative processes “rely upon the abuser taking full responsibility for his/her actions in a collective setting” (*Dancing* 23). Survivors have the agency to decide restorative measures and to hold perpetrators accountable, in order to begin to repair relationships.⁹ Celia is part of a “healing circle” where people talk about experiences of violence to begin to heal themselves. This restorative practice risks being sensationalized when co-opted by national projects for Indigenous-settler relations. TRC events, for example, are modelled upon such

traditional “circle talk” but displace the idea of restorative justice into a neoliberal master narrative of individual healing because perpetrators are absent and cannot be held accountable, testimonies are reinterpreted when they gather media attention, and speech is instrumentalized to promote a narrative where pain is overcome for the purpose of “reconciliation” (Niezen 3, 88). Healing becomes another impossible “simple answer” (*Celia* 139) if it does not leave space for unintelligibility or for differing expressive styles. Celia is aware of the fallacy of this model, which seems to have infiltrated even private and traditional practices. Celia ponders circle talk if it is “limited to disclosing hurt and trauma, or rage” (64). This feels “narrow and tiring” to her; although she knows “they need it,” she wants hurt to be “peppered between the other kinds of conversations they never seem to have anymore” (64). Celia does not reject this model entirely but understands it as insufficient if it eclipses other modes of talking and reduces multifaceted experiences to the shadow of an illness.

Maracle creates a model of reciprocity where discrepancies in language and rationalities exist in moments of convergence that are characterized by a willingness to doubt one’s ability to understand, and to accept that one cannot fully understand another person’s subjective experience. These are the moments in which characters “speak nearby” in Minh-ha’s sense, in a way that “reflects on itself” because it does not involve explicative questions or immediate answers but instead solicits a process of learning how to listen and make meaning from what is left unspoken. Jo-Ann Archibald has suggested that Stó:lō “traditional ways favour no or very little direct guidance from the storyteller,” but that “colonization, assimilation, and acculturation, predominantly through schooling, have left many people unable to engage in story listening and to make story meaning, unless directly guided” (112). In the novel, when Jacob asks a question and the women reply with a story, he “resents” not receiving a clear answer (66). Slowly, though, he comes to realize that he is less “concerned about the question” but seeks “the sound of the women’s voices” (66). Jacob learns how to listen and to negotiate meanings even when they seem to elude him. Understanding is not a rapacious act of grasping and seizing but one of generous reciprocity.

This model of reciprocity is not confined to Indigenous characters but spun outward in the tale so that speaking nearby emerges in conversations with non-Indigenous characters who are trying to surmount

barriers to understanding, like those that Steve and Judy face as white minor characters. They first appear in *Ravensong*, where Judy's "whiteness" is raised by Momma: "She's white and so she don't count" (123). In *Celia's Song*, Maracle recalibrates what may "count," drawing perhaps on her observation that a naturalization process whereby non-Indigenous people are accepted as part of an Indigenous Nation exists traditionally, but "Canada does not allow it, because if it did, that would make us nations" (*Conversations* 81). It is an Elder, Ned, who decides that Judy "has earned a place in this village" and tells her, "you are one of us to me" (71, 73). Exercising Indigenous sovereignty, albeit informally, Ned welcomes Judy as a member of the Indigenous family. In this way, and borrowing Métis scholar David Garneau's terminology, in *Celia's Song* non-Indigenous people enter "irreconcilable spaces of Aboriginality" as "guests" (26, 35), in contrast to colonial models of Indigenous-settler relationships that are focused on assimilating Indigenous peoples to the settler state.

Moments of crisis in the novel foreground how cooperation and reciprocity may be reached, despite incommensurability of understanding, when doubt generates possibilities. At a moment of the highest tension, when Shelley's life is at risk, the contrast between worldviews and understandings of justice brings Judy into conflict with the Indigenous women who refuse to take Shelley to a hospital. Judy does not realize the impact this could have on Shelley, how the intervention of the child-welfare system would likely cut her off from the women who are her family. Judy cannot see that the girl needs her grandmother's "golden-throated" voice to talk her through the experience no less than she needs "glucose, a sanitary room, and surgical instruments," while Celia knows "those sterile things alone will not be enough" (137, 145). As Judy struggles to trust the possibilities of the story unfolding around her, she asks Celia's sister Stacey how she reconciles the realities she lives with the reference posts she has been taught at school. Stacey explains that she attended school "with several pounds of doubt" and that they all need to have "some grave doubts" if Shelley is to be healed (147). This assertion foregrounds the generative potential of doubt in processes of convergence and cooperation, with doubt a spark of hope and a tool of questioning and improvement.

Doubt drives Steve and Stacey to choose to stay together despite the obstacles they face in building a romantic relationship. In *Ravensong*, their relationship fails because of a "gulf" that they fear no two people

alone could “bridge” (185). As adults, they embark on a journey, negotiating each other without pretensions of permanently succeeding in bridging the gulf. When Stacey confronts Steve with the inevitable incommensurability between them, he realizes that “he will never fully understand her” and that “her loving him might be painful for her” (*Celia* 189). In my reading, this exchange is not about Steve grasping Stacey’s reality but is indicative that he is beginning to know himself and unpack his white privilege. Going “within oneself” and doubting one’s own place is an important stage in making meaning in oral traditions, as stressed by Elder Ellen White (qtd. in Archibald 135). In the context of Indigenous-settler relations, it pivots less on the need for white settlers to understand Indigenous peoples and more on understanding colonialism through white privilege. In *Celia’s Song*, then, co-existence may be a spinning tale that can only be known as it unfolds and it requires “the rest of our lives” to negotiate “the maze” of its telling (*Celia* 196). Opacity is presented as fruitful in any relationship that is continuously negotiated. In the case of Stacey and Steve, for example, “She would try, he would try, but they would not always be successful” (201). Maracle dramatizes moments in which characters’ intentions converge; they may be fleeting but they are hopeful and bear the promise of more permanent meaning. These moments are characterized by generative doubt, incommensurability of understanding, and a willingness to stand together. Steve and Judy learn how to listen but, by the end of the novel, they still question whether they hear accurately and accept that they may never understand. Steve declares, “I have no intention of leaving. I worry, though, that I am ever going to get it right” (195), and Judy echoes his words more acutely in the knowledge she has gained: “I am never going to get it right” (269).

Speaking nearby becomes *singing* nearby when Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices come together to sing: “Judy can’t get past her Prussian accent, and Steve can’t get past his lyric-less English, but it doesn’t matter” (205). Reciprocity is a wilful act of love and respect, of voices touching without melting into each other, voices that ring with individuality but forge a communal song. In *Celia’s Song*, Maracle suggests the *potential* of moments of non-reductive understanding and for successful relationships if they are rooted in reciprocal, interweaving modes of telling. In doing so, she problematizes models of relationality that are framed as unequivocal and definitive, even when they are grounded in acts of resurgence. The rebuilding of the longhouse and

the ceremony performed constitute a form of resurgence, but they do not correspond to full revitalization or to a conciliatory solution. By the end of the novel, the serpent still roams and the divide between the Indigenous community and white town may be wider than before. Resurgence and co-existence are shown to be more complex than readers might expect or imagine.

* * *

In *Celia's Song*, Maracle questions established models of time, democracy, treaty relations, language, and testimony. Doubt emerges as generative because new possibilities come into view when *the suspiciousness of doubt* renders evident the limits of the known. In my reading, Maracle's novel invites readers to consider a model of relationships that is fluid, grounded in respect for another's opacity and for speaking in ways that do not fit expected models. The cornerstones of doubt and opacity, like speaking nearby and listening attentively, are relevant to how testimonial narratives of trauma and healing are encouraged in national discourses and models for Indigenous-settler relations such as "reconciliation." This model of testimony risks undermining what may be "indescribable" by "turning it into news rather than, more sublimely, *communication*," as Lauren Berlant fears (55). Maracle would seem to reject neoliberal logics by offering an instance of writing as polyphonic singing, where voices meet to *communicate* the ineffable. Maracle's characters accept incommensurability and together add intonation and variation to an infinite web of story.

Celia's Song is a communal song that is rooted in the land and sung for generations past, present, and future. In it, Maracle explores some of the effects of colonialism which, like the double-headed serpent, slip and slide, swallow and poison the lives of Indigenous peoples and white settlers in Canada. The novel has a regenerative quality because it recovers and conveys stimuli for self- and social transformation that are characteristic of traditional Stó:lō stories: song "*move[s] you through life. We are not lost. We are travelling in the wrong direction. Song moves us toward our humanity*" (*Celia* 213). If song is reparative, it is because it signals the ability to dream hopes and to sing them into being. Song is poetry, relation, movement, transformation. It is the felt knowledge of stories, the impression and expression of humanity and interconnectedness. *Celia's Song* is a tale spun inside, its thick webs rendering it irreducible

to any single model of understanding. It suggests ways in which story is a tool for transformation — when different models are probed for how useful or defective they may be, when voting is silencing, linear time is limiting, trauma is narrowing, and truths lie in possibilities created by doubt and imagination.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I would like to thank Sharon Monteith for her comments on drafts of this article. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers and editorial board for their helpful comments.

NOTES

¹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Māori) describes postcolonialism as a “convenient invention of Western intellectuals which reinscribes their power to define the world” (14). British scholars Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman employ the term “post-colonial” as a temporal marker to signify that “the era of formal colonial control is over” (3). When they describe settler-colonial states like Canada, Australia, and New Zealand as “former white colonies” (4), they risk ignoring Indigenous peoples’ ongoing experiences of colonization in these countries. Postcolonial keywords such as “hybridity,” defined as referring to “the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization” (Ashcroft et al. 135), are also perceived as inadequate to describe a contemporary Indigenous experience and as encouraging “already-existing essentialist pronouncements that perpetuate racist stereotypes” (McCall, Reder, and Anderson 50, 51).

² Coulthard (121), Million (2, 3), and Simpson (*Dancing* 22) raise these and other issues in their criticism of the TRC.

³ Million draws on and expands Foucault’s theories of biopower and links them to neoliberal capitalism and colonialism. If “reconciliation” is a biopolitical project that aims to “make life calculable” (30) and intelligible through the logic that disclosure of atrocity is healing, it neutralizes Indigenous political self-determination. Foucault’s late work on *parrhêsia* (truth-telling) and aesthetics, in his final lecture series on *The Courage of Truth* (1983-84), offers helpful insights into interconnections among aesthetics, truth, and healing through a lens of Western philosophy and study of Greek and Roman classical texts.

⁴ The contexts in which the novels were produced, and the historical periods they depict, reflect Maracle’s concerns and the attention she pays to national debates. *Ravensong* was published when the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was investigating Indigenous-settler relations (1991-96), a process which eventually led to the establishment of the TRC. *Celia’s Song* was written while the TRC was meeting and is dedicated to “all those children who were removed from our homes and who did not survive residential school.” If *Celia’s Song* depicts the 1980s as beginning a “healing period” for Indigenous peoples in which they also co-operate with non-Indigenous friends, *Ravensong* focuses more notably on the impossibilities of cooperation during the 1950s (*As It Happens*). As a seer, Celia is connected to “a unique brand of power” (*Conversations* 16) which colonialism

attempts to erase. Whereas she gradually fades in *Ravensong*, her personal resurgence in *Celia's Song* exemplifies her resistance.

⁵ The serpent does not spare settlers, feeding off a pig farmer that kills and mutilates a woman (41). As Laura Beard indicates, readers may associate this figure with Robert Pickton, arrested in 2002 for the murder of dozens of women, mostly Indigenous (165). The Pickton case highlighted the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two-Spirit people (MMIWG2S). The TRC addressed this in its calls to action, leading to the establishment of the National Inquiry into MMIWG2S in 2016.

⁶ British Columbia is not covered by any historic treaty, except for Vancouver Island where the Douglas Treaties were signed between 1850 and 1854 between certain Indigenous groups (not the Nuu'chalnuth) and the Crown colony of Vancouver Island. Modern treaties have been signed in British Columbia since 1975.

⁷ For Nishnaabeg professor of Indigenous law John Borrows, for example, "legal practice starts with understanding our language and drawing analogies from the earth" (51). A connection between language and justice emerges in *Celia's Song* when Momma discusses what punishment would suit Amos: "If she could say it in her language, the word for it would lead her to name the kind of death she should make sure he gets" (149).

⁸ Maracle bends the grammatical elements of the English language so that it can more adequately express Stó:lō experiences. The expression "a different kind of see" is one example. Another is the use of the intransitive verb "to dance" in the transitive form, "dance someone" (234, 251); the verb breaks free from its fixed form in order to suggest a ceremonial practice.

⁹ An example of restorative justice is represented through Amos's dancing ceremony, when he takes full responsibility for his actions. His release, albeit through death, is witnessed by Shelley's family.

WORKS CITED

- Ahmed, Sara, and Jackie Stacey. "Testimonial Cultures: An Introduction." *Cultural Values*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2001, pp. 1-6.
- Archibald, Jo-Ann. *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit*. U of British Columbia P, 2008.
- Asch, Michael. "Confederation Treaties and Reconciliation: Stepping Back into the Future." *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*, edited by Michael Asch et al., U of Toronto P, 2018, pp. 29-48.
- Ashcroft, Bill, et al. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, 2nd edn. Routledge, 2002.
- Beard, Laura. "'This Story Needs a Witness': The Imbrication of Witnessing, Storytelling, and Resilience in Lee Maracle's *Celia's Song*." *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol. 30, 2018, pp. 151-78.
- Berlant, Lauren. "Trauma and Ineloquence." *Cultural Values*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2001, pp. 41-58.
- Borrows, John. "Earth-Bound: Indigenous Resurgence and Environmental Reconciliation." *Resurgence and Reconciliation: Indigenous Settler Relations and Earth Teachings*, edited by Michael Asch et al., U of Toronto P, 2018, pp. 49-81.
- Byrd, Jodi. *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism*. U of Minnesota P, 2011.
- Chen, Nancy N. "Speaking Nearby: A Conversation with Trinh Minh-ha." *Visual Anthropology Review*, vol. 8, no. 1, 1992, pp. 82-91.

- Coulthard, Glen Sean. *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. U of Minnesota P, 2014.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Courage of Truth (the Government of Self and Others II): Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983-1984*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Garneau, David. "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation: Art, Curation, and Healing." *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action In and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, edited by Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin, Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2016, pp. 21-41.
- Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. U of Michigan P, 2010.
- Hanson, Ellis. "The Future's Eve: Reparative Reading after Sedgwick." *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 110, 2011, pp. 101-19.
- Kelly, Jennifer. "Coming Out of the House, A Conversation with Lee Maracle." *ARIEL*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1994, pp. 73-88.
- "Lee Maracle's Celebrated 2014 Novel *Celia's Song* Finally Hits the Awards Circuit." *As It Happens*, interview by Carol Off, CBC Radio. Sept. 2019.
- Macdonald, David B. "Paved with Comfortable Intentions: Moving Beyond Liberal Multiculturalism and Civil Rights Frames on the Road to Transformative Reconciliation." *Pathways of Reconciliation: Indigenous and Settler Approaches to Implementing the TRC's Calls to Action*, edited by Aimée Craft and Paulette Regan, U of Manitoba P, 2020, pp. 3-34.
- Maracle, Lee. *Celia's Song*. Cormorant Books, 2017.
- . *Memory Serves: Oratories*, edited by Smaro Kamboureli, NeWest Press, 2015.
- . *My Conversations with Canadians*. Book Thug, 2017.
- . *Ravensong: A Novel*. Press Gang Publishers, 1993.
- , and Leanne Simpson. "Lee Maracle's tale." *Quill & Quire*. Nov. 2014, <https://quillandquire.com/authors/lee-maracles-tale/>.
- McCall, Sophie, et al. "First Nations and Native Souths on Both Sides of the 49th Parallel." *The Global South*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2015, pp. 39-61.
- Million, Dian. *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights*. U of Arizona P, 2013.
- Morin, Peter. "this is what happens when we perform the memory of the land." *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action In and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, edited by Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin, Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2016, pp. 67-91.
- Niezen, Ronald. *Truth and Indignation: Canada Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools*. U of Toronto P, 2017.
- Reder, Deanna, and Sophie McCall. "Indigenous and Postcolonial Studies: Tensions and Interrelationships, Creative and Critical Interventions." *ARIEL*, vol. 51, no. 2-3, 2020, pp. 1-26.
- Reynaud, Anne-Marie. "Dealing with Difficult Emotions: Anger at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada." *Anthropologica*, vol. 56, 2014, pp. 369-82.
- Robinson, Dylan. "Reconciliation Relations." *Canadian Theatre Review*, vol. 161, no. 1, 2015, pp. 60-63.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. Viking, 1977.
- . *Yellow Woman and A Beauty of The Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today*. Simon & Schuster, 1996.
- Simpson, Leanne Betasamosake. *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Recreation, Resurgence and a New Emergence*. ARP Books, 2011.
- . "Looking after Gdoo-Naaganinaa: Precolonial Nishnaabeg Diplomatic and Treaty Relationships." *Wicazo Sa Review*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2008, pp. 29-42.

- Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Zed Books, 2012.
- Tuck, Eve, and K. Wayne Yang. "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1-40.
- Vowel, Chelsea. *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Metis & Inuit Issues in Canada*. Highwater Press, 2016.
- Warrior, Robert. "The Subaltern Can Dance, and So Sometimes Can the Intellectual." *Interventions*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2011, pp. 85-94.
- Williams, Patrick, and Laura Chrisman. *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Columbia UP, 1994.