

Reincarnating Fatherhood in Aboriginal Fiction

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Le père comme archétype littéraire du roman autochtone d'Amérique du Nord peut être vu comme une victime issue du processus de colonisation et connue comme le proverbial "indien disparu". L'auteure affirme que le père absent est souvent mentionné par les auteurs autochtones au sens propre ou au figuré pour décrire le vide laissé par les pères absents dans les sociétés autochtones. L'article a remarqué que la fiction autochtone suggère que les fils devraient aussi rejeter la définition coloniale de la masculinité autochtone, restaurer leur relation avec la femme et la terre-mère, (ré)clamer leur rôle dans la sphère familiale et par le fait même (re)définir la virilité de l'autochtone non seulement pour eux-mêmes mais pour les générations à venir.

Where have all the Aboriginal fathers gone? The Father as a literary archetype in North American Aboriginal fiction can be seen as a casualty of colonial process, embodying the proverbial "vanishing Indian." Where Aboriginal women, it has been argued, have enjoyed some continuity of their social role as mothers and managers of home/community (although devalued in western culture), Aboriginal men have suffered centuries of social/political emasculation as well as a deskilling and devaluing of their labour in the economic arena. In North America, Aboriginal males

have higher unemployment rates, lower average income, higher rates of illness, and a significantly shorter life span than the general Euro-North American population. Aboriginal males are most at-risk for suicidal behaviours among North Americans (Krug et al. 8; Health Canada; Rhoades 774; WHO 189).

Perhaps for the above reasons, the absentee father appears to be a figure much visited by Aboriginal authors, articulating (either literally or metaphorically) the rift in Aboriginal societies left by fathers not present. Often, these fictive fathers die (illness, suicide, murder), or abandon their families, such as in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* and Lee Maracle's *Ravensong*. When the father is present, he tends to be emotionally unavailable because he is abusive, addicted, or just plain ineffectual—as is Victor's father in Sherman Alexie's short fiction. At times the absentee father appears as an uncle, compelled to keep a distance from his progeny—the result of an illicit affair, as in Tomson Highway's *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* and Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*. Sometimes he is erased completely—replaced by a Euro-North American—as in Thomas King's *Medicine River*, echoing a colonial process that both displaced Aboriginal manhood and supplanted him as father in his own

family—a ubiquitous and genocidal colonial practice known as assimilation through miscegenation.

The emasculation of Aboriginal males, a process inveterate to colonization, is embodied in the archetypal figure of Tonto: a once-was-a-warrior-turned-sidekick to the colonial hero. Tonto is to the Lone Ranger as Friday to Crusoe: both represent the quintessential "good native" (read subjugated) whose power, if any, is sublimated to that of the colonizer. In the colonial grand narrative, the Fridays, Tobys, and Tontos never get the bad guy, never save the day (not by themselves, anyway) and *never* get the girl. By the standards of both colonial and Aboriginal societies, Tonto is rendered impotent, both figuratively and quite literally.¹² Tonto is not the Aboriginal warrior, but the warrior subverted. He represents both a sexual and physical threat: in order to secure the primacy of the Euro-colonial male, the Aboriginal warrior must die, if not literally, then symbolically—transformed into a metaphorical eunuch.

It is no wonder, then, that Aboriginal Fathers—and notions of Aboriginal masculinities more generally—manifest themselves as a "dark horse" in the Aboriginal literary imagination: Tonto has left the building. His absence carries profound consequences. Histori-

cally, the cultural transmission of gender roles in many Aboriginal societies was passed from same-sex parent to same-sex child; colonization interrupted this pattern of transmission.² The authors that I chose for this comparative analysis are Aboriginal males whose works examine those points of cultural disruption from a male point of view: an approach that not only offers insight into father/son relationships from a qualitatively different perspective than we might encounter from Aboriginal women authors, but also adds another dimension to our understanding of how Aboriginal peoples experience the effects of colonization in their interpersonal lives.

Using Thomas King's *Medicine River*, Tomson Highway's *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* and selected short stories from Sherman Alexie's *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, I will examine how the absentee father exists as a literary archetype in this Aboriginal fiction: both as a social representation and as a literary device necessary for the Aboriginal father to be reincarnated in the sons.³ Through this literary process, which requires the use of rhythm, ritual, and rites of passage, the male protagonist(s) are able to resurrect traditional notions of Aboriginal masculinities, (re)create their roles in a contemporary context, and (re)define Aboriginal manhood in the process, especially as it relates to their relationships with Aboriginal women.

According to a Cheyenne adage: "A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground. Then it is done, no matter how brave its warriors nor how strong their weapons" (cited in Lavell and Lavell-Harvard flyleaf). What better way to "divide and conquer" a people than to pit one half against the other—to turn the men against and/or away from their own women? For this reason, the restoration of men's "right relationship" to women is essential to the survival

of Aboriginal cultures. In the works studied here, Alexie, Highway, and King illustrate how the imposition of colonial patriarchy on Aboriginal peoples has fragmented generations of families, resulting in the anomie experienced by many Aboriginal males, and their consequent estrangement (physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual) from Aboriginal women and children.

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Abandonment in one form or another is thematically significant in the three works analyzed here, epitomized by one of Thomas Builds-The-Fire's eerie insights:

[Y]our father's heart is weak. He is afraid of his own family. He is afraid of you. Late at night he sits in the dark. Watches the television until there's nothing but that white noise. Sometimes he feels like he wants to buy a motorcycle and ride away. He wants to run and hide. He doesn't want to be found. (Alexie 61)

In Alexie's stories, the absence of Victor's father is multi-layered although he lives with the family during Victor's early childhood, his alcoholism renders him both unreliable and emotionally unavailable. Eventually, Victor's father not only

leaves the family home: after buying a motorcycle, he leaves town, then the state, and eventually, the world of the living:

[W]ith that bike my dad learned something new about running away.... He lived in Seattle, San Francisco, Los Angeles, before he finally ended up in Phoenix. For a while, it was postcards every week. Then it was once a month. Then it was on Christmas and my birthday. (Alexie 32-34)

Similarly, *Medicine River* documents the truant behaviour of the protagonist's father. The novel begins with a series of "un-love" letters from Will's father to his mother, Rose. This "deadbeat dad's" infrequent correspondence contains the typical rhetoric: questionable tales of his travels, equally questionable excuses for unfulfilled promises, missed visits/birthdays/Christmas-es/child support, and the inevitable supplication for forgiveness. Since the letters are the sum of the physical evidence left of her husband, they are secreted away by Rose in blue velvet wrapping bound with yellow ribbon, locked in a small wooden chest.

Will's father is not only absent from family life—he is also almost entirely absent from the family narrative. What the letters actually mean is that Will's father has forsaken *them*, and so Rose is determined that she and the boys will forget about *him*. Rose's censorship is so complete he remains nameless, hinting at his name only once (King 1989: 8). Usually, she refers to him simply as, "your father," or more anonymously, "someone" (King 1989: 123 -24). Even the few photographs in the packet reveal little, as the face of Will's father is always obscured: a shadow here, a tilt of the hat there. An aged photo that Will receives from his mother bears the terse editorial marks of a vengeful (Aboriginal?) cupid:

He was leaning against a fence with four other men. He had on a pair of jeans, a work shirt and a hat that was pulled down over much of his face. There was a short letter from my mother with the photograph that said, "Happy birthday. Found this picture. Third from the right. That's him." And she signed it "love" like she always did. That was it. He had a cigarette hanging from his mouth. My mother had drawn a circle around him with an arrow pointing at the side of his head. (King 86)

With both parents are now dead, their unresolved angst plays out in Will's life, where he must come to know the father in himself—to *father* himself—before he can (re)define himself as an Aboriginal male within the context of his community, and ultimately, (re)create his role within it.

Throughout the works, the relationships that form between the sons and their fathers are both fragmented and filtered through the lens of the fathers' relationships to other people, each with their own angle, agenda, and attitude. This prismatic rendition of the father is illustrated in the competing narratives around the paternity and birth of Dickie Bird Halked, from witness Pierre St. Pierre:

I was there in the same room as your mother when she gave birth to you. So I know well who you are and where you came from. I remember the whole picture. Even though we were all in a bit of a fizzy... I remember. Do you know...that you were named after that bar? Anyone ever tell you that? ...And I'll never forgive your father Big Joey ... oops ... I mean—Wellington Halked, for letting your mother do that to you.... (Highway 57)

Similar to Highway's play, Alexie's and King's protagonists also engage in a quest to know their fathers, and the primary (sometimes the only) means by which they can achieve this is through the narratives of others. The only memories Victor has of his father are from his childhood; Will has none at all. Their fathers remain phantoms of speculation and conjecture that can be called

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forth only through secondhand incantations. For both men, their journeys to claim the material artifacts left by their fathers become a quest to reclaim the stories about them—their only real inheritance. The hope lies in that there are inheritors at all: sons who remember their fathers enough to care about what happened to them. Things could be worse, and are, for some Aboriginal men:

When [Victor] was five years old, an old Indian man drowned in a mud puddle at the powwow. Just passed out and fell facedown into the water collected in a tire track. Even at five, Victor understood what that meant, how it defined nearly everything. (Alexie 7)

How does Aboriginal manhood fall from grace?⁴ By what process is

the warrior transformed into the invisible, ineffectual eunuch? Through colonization, Aboriginal men have been emasculated in a number of ways, including: the devaluing of their traditional modes of production (such as hunting and fishing); the mass deskilling of their labour (achieved by streaming them toward unskilled jobs and away from trades or academics); and, discrimination in the marketplace (systemic and overt).⁵ No skills means no job, and no job means no income. No income means that Aboriginal fathers have no way to provide for their families. Sometimes, some Aboriginal men must rely either on social welfare programs or their women.

Five-year-old Victor recalls a particularly destitute Christmas when there was no money for gifts: [He cried] "huge, gasping tears. Indian tears.... Just the week before, Victor had stood in the shadows of his father's doorway and watched as the man opened his wallet and shook his head. Empty. Victor watched his father repeat this ceremony again and again, as if the repetition itself could guarantee change. But it was always empty. (Alexie 4)

Victor's father is a fallen warrior and ex-con who spent two years in Walla Walla penitentiary for "beat[ing] the shit out of a National Guard private" at a peace rally in the '60s (Alexie 25). When Victor laments that his generation of Indian youths are "rebels without a cause," his father points out the irony of wanting to fight for a nation with genocidal tendencies towards Indians. Because of this history, he maintains that, "Indians are pretty much born soldiers anyway. Don't need a uniform to prove it" (Alexie 29).

Big Joey, a fallen warrior from the glory days of the '70s Red Power movement, plays a mostly voyeuristic role as Dickie Bird Halked's ab-

sentee father, and it is his attempts to deny his paternal responsibility that cause Dickie Bird's condition: first Big Joey watches silently as the pregnant Black Lady Halked drinks herself into a nine-month stupor, and again as Dickie Bird assaults Patsy Pegahmagahbow. Pointedly, Dickie Bird's assaults Patsy Pegahmagahbow with a crucifix. The rape of Patsy Pegahmagahbow (and her subsequent miscarriage) manifests a genocidal misogyny transmitted by Christianity, colonialism, and patriarchy to generations of Aboriginal males—a tried, tested, and true “divide and conquer” strategy. The characters Big Joey and his son, Dickie Bird Halked, play out the social dissonance that is frequently experienced by politically, economically, and culturally marginalized males who must survive in patriarchal societies based on male dominance and privilege. The resulting frustration caused by this dissonance is too often redirected as aggression against females, a phenomenon endemic to Aboriginal communities. When Zachary demands, “Why? Why did you let him do it?” Big Joey's misogynistic rant reveals his misplaced animosity toward Aboriginal women, whom he perceives as traitorous and emasculating: “[T]hey—our own women—took the fuckin' power away from us faster than the FBI ever did.” To which Spooky Lacroix replies, “They always had it” (Highway 120).

Spooky is referring to the high status held by women in many Aboriginal societies before and around the time of contact. In these societies, women enjoyed a certain amount of power, privilege, and prestige in their roles as home/community manager, caregiver, and nurturer—roles that, for many Aboriginal women, still hold constant today, even if their status has been savagely demoted by the dominant, patriarchal culture (see Anderson 2000). In many contemporary Aboriginal societies, women are still

considered the centre of the household and the givers of life: a performance that they stand and deliver, even in the face of crushing poverty. This is an ephemeral talent imbued with the sublime:

During these kinds of tiny storms, Victor's mother would rise with her medicine and magic.

She would pull air down from empty cupboards and make fry bread. She would shake thick blankets free from old bandanas. She would comb Victor's braids into dreams. (Alexie 5)

It is no wonder that, already feeling defeated, disenfranchised, and dependent, the warrior regards the numinous power of women with a mixture of awe and envy, his frustration eventually giving way to rage. Lacking the power to strike out at the true source of his anger, the warrior implodes, turning inward on himself in a pursuit of self-hating destruction (addiction, suicide) or explodes in an act of lateral violence, lashing out at his family, community, and in particular, Aboriginal women.

Impotent male rage, especially as it is directed at females, is a common theme in the works discussed here. *Medicine River* contains the parallel narratives of Mr. Oswald and Jake Pretty Weasel, both wife abusers. Mrs. Oswald, a Euro-Canadian neighbour of Will's family, flees the murderous hands of her husband, moves into a new town, and re-writes her personal narrative for a new audience. She claims to be a widow, expunging Mr. Oswald's more unsavory qualities from the tale: that is, until he finds her and beats her severely. Afterward, he remains conspicuously absent from her story, while she recasts her very conspicuous injuries as an “accident.”

The name “Jake Pretty Weasel” suggests the duality that arises from the tension of who the character

really is and who his family and community want him to be. Will recalls an incident in which Jake was playing in a basketball tournament in which he had “fouled out.” When his wife January attempts to comfort him, he first twists her arm until she cries, then punches her in the face—a very public act of cruelty that is witnessed by the team, the crowd, and worst of all, the Pretty Weasel children. No one acts to intervene: they remain passive spectators as though Jake's brutality is simply part of the spectacle, while “January tried to smile, and she waved her hand as if everything was okay” (King 45).

January eventually murders Jake, setting it up to appear as a suicide. Jake's death allows January to remodel him from “beast” to “beauty”: she authors a note, ostensibly written by Jake, that not only transforms murder to suicide, but also reforms Jake's selfish past into a final act of selflessness:

Harlen and me figured that Jake probably shot himself maybe because he hated himself for beating on January or because he was angry at the time and didn't have anyone else to hit. It was funny, in a way. Jake's suicide, I mean.... We all had Jake stories, and even January was anxious to tell about the times Jake had taken the kids shopping or made a special dinner or brought her home an unexpected and thoughtful present ... she seemed to have forgotten the beatings and the pain, and in the end, all of us began talking about the letter as if Jake had written it. (King 51)

The townsfolk, choosing to believe January's revisionist narrative, express an eagerness to overlook any evidence implicating her in Jake's death while reconstructing him in their collective memory as everything he was not: a caring father, a

loving husband, a respectable community member.

In these works, abusive men are not living in “right relationship” to others, and it seems that there is no place for violence in Aboriginal families who are attempting to restore a sense of balance, wellness, and continuity in lives that have been disrupted by generations of colonization. The Aboriginal father that was sublimated to the imperialist agenda must necessarily vanish so that a new generation of Aboriginal males can (re)define themselves as men, (re)creating their roles in “right relationship” to their families and communities. Subsequently, in all three works, the stories by which the sons come to know their fathers are transformative, and ultimately, redemptive.

Transformation doesn’t occur in a vacuum—it needs a catalyst. The trickster figure is ubiquitous in Aboriginal mythologies, representing a “wild card” in the mix: an unknown quantity that can bring chaos, restore order, and sometimes both at once. In all of the works discussed here, the male characters are led to and through these redemptive transformations by trickster figures appearing in three levels of incarnation: The spirit, the shaman, and the storyteller.

In Tomson Highway’s works, the Trickster is a genderless spirit being, a shape-shifter, who has an often-absurd sense of humour. In *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Nanabush toys with the Madonna/Whore complex, challenging popular notions of both. Nanabush uses the feminine principle to instigate the men to action, appealing to them in a series of manifestations, at once both sacred and profane: a drunken, wounded Madonna; a stripper who doesn’t just dance on tables, but turns them on the men; and, a decorous Indian maid with a suggestively large bottom. Nanabush, inhabiting/animating the spirit of Black Lady Halked, Gazelle Nataways, and Patsy Pegahmagahbow, plays

out for the men their deepest desires as well as their darkest secrets, forcing them to acknowledge their own personal and collective truths. For example, in the denouement when Big Joey finally admits to Dickie Bird’s paternity, his own misogyny, and ultimately his culpability, he also tacitly acknowledges his own continued, internalized oppression: “Wounded Knee ... The FBI ... beat us into the ground. Ever since that spring, I’ve had these dreams where blood is spillin’ out from my groin, nothin’ there but blood and emptiness. It’s like ... I lost myself” (Highway 120). The reconstruction of Big Joey and Dickie Bird Halked’s story is central to the play: it is this reunion, however perverse and grotesque, that exposes the sins of the father, allowing the son, and ultimately Aboriginal manhood, to heal.

One element used in the mythos of many cultures for spiritual healing and purification is fire. In Alexie’s works, it is Thomas Builds-The-Fire who transforms Victor and the boys’ perceptions and expectations of their realities by showing them alternate realities. Where there’s fire, there’s smoke—a medium of communication between Aboriginals and the divine. Fire is symbolic of Thomas’s character on many levels. Fire, often associated with the male principle, is ancient and elemental: a constant, yet ever-changing. Humanity has long associated fire with technological, intellectual, and spiritual illumination, as well as with the homely comforts of food, warmth, and security. Like Prometheus, Thomas is the bringer of illumination; unlike Prometheus, Thomas’s light offers hope and life, rather than corruption and death, to his people. Thomas is the shaman, sending and receiving “smoke signals” to and from the beyond, acting as a conduit between worlds: “We are all given one thing by which our lives are measured, one determination. Mine are the stories which can change or not change the world.

It doesn’t matter which as long as I continue to tell the stories” (Alexie 72).

Thomas’s visions also feed the people spiritually, although they may not always be cognizant or appreciative of this fact. However, when his father dies, Victor “feels a sudden need for tradition” (Alexie 62), and seeks Thomas’s help. When Thomas throws a house party, he buys all the beer, then sits in the fridge when guests complain that it’s empty. The implicit message is, “EAT ME” (double entendre). A can of mushrooms in corporeal form is later served up in a “vision salad” with psychotropic dressing, tossed together by none other than Thomas himself.

Like Alice’s “magic mushroom,” *Thomas is the drug* that allows the boys to experience alternate realities: “[H]ell, he looked around our world, and then poked his head through some hole in the wall into another world. A better world” (Alexie 14). Subconsciously, the boys attempt to recreate something like the peyote ritual: through the looking-glass that is Thomas, they experience their realities transformed.

The transformative power of Trickster takes on more mundane proportions in *Medicine River*. Here, it is Harlen the “storyteller” whose fabrications weave a closely-knit community:

Helping was Harlen’s specialty. He was like a spider on a web. Every so often, someone would come along and tear off a piece of the web or poke a hole in it, and Harlen would come scuttling along and throw out filament after filament until the damage was repaired. Berth ... called it meddling. Harlen would have thought of it as general maintenance. (King 31)

Harlen’s stories, which are only loosely based on reality, represent a form of sympathetic magic, which can be described as the practice of

attracting desired outcomes by behaving as if they were already true (another trickster trope). As Harlen begins to behave as though Will and Louise are dating, the next thing Will knows, they *are* dating. The rest of the community picks up this campaign, and just assumes, *de facto*, [need “de facto” italicized?] that Will, Louise, and South Wing comprise a family unit. Similarly, when the nurses at the hospital assume that Will is “Mr. Heavyman,” both Will and his friends go along with the ruse. Warming to the idea of fatherhood, Will even names the baby, and begins to think of her as his daughter: when asked to pick out which baby in the nursery is his, he points to South Wing and says, “that one” (King 42).

Little does Will realize that he is resurrecting notions of marriage and kinship that belong(ed) to many Aboriginal societies (pre-contact and contemporary), in which babies often precede marriage, no child can be considered “illegitimate”—not in the western sense—and biological paternity does not always define “fatherhood” (see Anderson 2000; Olsen 1995). It is this flexibility of family structure that has allowed Aboriginal families to survive against incredible oppositional forces, and will enable them to carry Aboriginal families into the future.

A return to traditions like these allows Aboriginal males to (re)create positive and healthy visions of Aboriginal manhood, and with them, Aboriginal fatherhood. Although the roles of Aboriginal fathers cannot be reconstituted in the strictest pre-colonial sense, Aboriginal masculine sensibilities can be redefined, thus reincarnating the father in contemporary Aboriginal males. In the works studied here, this transformation is achieved through the practice of these three R’s of traditional Indigeneity: rhythm, ritual, and rites of passage.

In these narratives it is intimated that for Aboriginal men to restore Aboriginal masculinities, they

must restore “right relationships”; they must live in harmony with the world, rather than in discord to it. In particular, Aboriginal men must (re)learn to walk in rhythm with Aboriginal women. In many Aboriginal cultures, the drum is strongly associated with the feminine principle; it signifies the womb of our mothers, but also of our common mother, the earth. The drum

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makes manifest the sacred feminine, representing women’s generative energy, as well as her innate pipeline to the divine, as illustrated by one of Victor’s psychotropic revelations, in which he sees his grandmother, Christ-like, walking on water (Alexie 22). Among many Aboriginal peoples, the sound of the drum, or that of any percussion instrument, is said to echo the heartbeat that the fetus hears *in utero*, which in turn recapitulates the rhythm of the earth: the never ending life-pulse that unites us all.

Rhythm is a motif that resounds throughout the works, repeating womb-like imagery that evokes notions of “the mother” with all of her life-giving power and nurturing qualities: “Big Mom was the spiritual leader of the Spokane Tribe. She had so much good medicine I think she may be the one who created the earth” (Alexie 23). Big Mom gives

Victor a miniature drum, telling him it’s her pager: “just give it a tap and I’ll be right over” (Alexie 23). Although Victor cannot bring himself to beat the drum, he admits, “I keep it really close to me, like Big Mom said, just in case. I guess you could call it the only religion I have, one drum that can fit in my hand, but I think if I played it a little, it might fill up the whole world” (Alexie 23).

The centrality of Aboriginal women’s productive and reproductive labour within their traditional societies is also well illustrated in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. Simon Starblanket, who is drawn to the tradition of his ancestors, has an epiphany as he chants and dances the sacred rhythm in the bustle that Patsy’s step-mother made for him: “[T]he drum has to come back. We have to learn to dance again ... I’m the one who has to bring the drum back. And it’s Patsy’s medicine power, that stuff she’s learning from her step-mother Rosie Kakapetum that ... helps me....” (Highway 43-45). Simon goes on to proselytize to his devoutly Christian friend: “Rosie Kakapetum is gonna be my mother-in-law in two months, Spooky Lacroix, and if Patsy and I are gonna do this thing right, if we’re gonna work together to make my best man, Dickie Bird Halked, well again, then Rosie Kakapetum has got to birth to [Spooky’s] baby” (Highway 91).

The venerated power of old women as carriers of culture, language, and traditional knowledge is embodied in *Medicine River’s* “marriage doctor,” Martha Old Crow. She gives Will a rattle for South Wing—unbeknownst to Will, she has given Louise an identical one. The rattle is made of deer hide and willow, materials that are used in some Aboriginal cultures to construct sweat lodges, which symbolize the womb of mother earth. To use a broad understanding of the term, people “sweat” in order to (among other things) re-join with mother earth to cleanse themselves

(spiritually, emotionally, physically, mentally), emerging renewed, time and again. Reminiscent of the peace pipe, the physical construction of the rattle connotes the joining of the masculine and the feminine, both in a metaphorical and literal sense. The handle is phallic while the shaker symbolizes the womb: in it are the seeds of potential. The rattle represents both rhythm and ritual: rattles are often used in shamanic healing practices, along with chants and songs.

The rattle is also blue and yellow, colours used throughout *Medicine River* to signify the feminine and the masculine. Rose's memories of Will's father are swaddled in blue velvet and secured with a yellow ribbon. Along with the "un-love" letters are a smattering of photographs: mainly of "men and women standing against prairie and sky" (King 4), recording for posterity not only the relationship between the sexes, but also the yellow of mother earth's prairie, and the blue of father sky. Through the ritual of sympathetic magic, Louise and Will use the twin rattles to sing their relationship into being, chanting to their own rhythm. The horsehair adorning the rattle not only brings to mind Will's mother, echoing the romance between his parents: hair is also known to many cultures as an ingredient in magic spells, especially love magic.

The final stage in any transformation ritual is the rite of passage; another common motif in the three works. The stealing of horses was a rite of passage into manhood as well as a badge of honour and prestige among North American Aboriginal horse cultures. The stealing or capturing of horses was a form of "counting coup": a non-violent way of demonstrating superior intelligence, stealth, cunning, and power over rivals or enemies. Horses were so valued in these cultures that they were often part of the gift made by the groom to the bride and her parents.

In *Medicine River*, Rose's surname,

Horse Capture, takes on great significance. Playing cowboy to Rose's Indian, Will's Euro-Canadian father not only "captured her heart," he also counted coup on her family by stealing her away from her home, as well as by stealing her Aboriginal right: "Sorry you had to leave the reserve, but Calgary's a better place for a swell girl like you. Stupid rule, anyway..." (King 4).⁶

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Although horse theft is no longer a capital offence and horses are no longer used as a primary mode of transportation, the horse-theft motif has not disappeared from Aboriginal fiction; it has only changed its shape. Alexie's character, Thomas Builds-the-Fire recounts a story about two contemporary youths who steal a car and leave it in front of the police station, making their parents proud. Viewed this way, the theft is a misguided attempt to recreate the traditional "way of the warrior" in a new context that has rendered traditional notions of masculinity obsolete.

In "A Drug Called Tradition" it is Norma Many Horses who saves young Thomas from a potentially deadly beating by the boy, Victor:

If it had been someone else, even another man, the Indian boys would've just ignored the

warnings. But Norma was a warrior. She was powerful. She could have picked up any two of the boys and smashed their skulls together. But worse than that, she would have dragged them all over to some tipi and made them listen to some elder tell a dusty old story. (Alexie 65)

Norma Many Horses is an example of how many Aboriginal women have had to assume the role of the father in his absence. Although her name speaks to her physical strength and prowess, Norma's solution is not to meet violence with violence, but to hold the boys accountable to an older, higher power: the teachings of their elders.

The need to return to the wisdom of the elders is exemplified in Will and Harlen's journey to Martha Old Crow's home. For Will, this act is both transformative and definitive, signalling his re-birth as an Aboriginal male, and the resurrection of traditional ways. The river *is* the medicine. In its waters, both amniotic and purifying, Will is re-born as a full member of the community, a baptism necessary to restore "right relationships" with his people; a restoration that begins with Martha, a respected female elder, who possesses the traditional knowledge Will needs to manifest his new life-role in corporeal form. Similarly, the traditionalist Simon Starblanket must die so that the more "worldly" Zachary can be reborn in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. Zachary's spiritual infancy is signalled by his nudity for much of the play. Bathed instead in the light of Grandmother Moon, with the feminine incarnation of Nanabush as both executioner and midwife, Zachary experiences the shamanic death (symbolized by the outdoor winter setting) of his former self, so that the new man may emerge re-born.

Through symbolic death and resurrection, Aboriginal manhood

is reincarnated in contemporary context with ancestral memories of “right relationship”: “*It is now....* They are wearing only loincloths and braids. Although it is the twentieth century and planes are passing overhead, [they] have decided to be real Indians tonight” (Alexie 20). Victor believes that his hybrid version of the Sioux Ghost Dance will revive both ancestors and buffalo. Thomas prophesies that, as the Phoenix rises from its ashes, so too will Victor’s father—in salmon form—when Thomas throws them into the Spokane River. The salmon and buffalo were, and still are, sacred to many Aboriginal societies, as well as a food staple; hunting and/or fishing were principle activities for men. The return of the sacred and traditional in current times suggests the return of useful social roles for men. In order to begin a new life cycle, Aboriginal men must learn to remember their ancestral pasts and to envision their futures while they fulfill both in the present because, “That’s what Indian time is. The past, the future, all of it is wrapped up in the now. That’s how it is. *We are trapped in the now*” (Alexie 22).

Will’s return to Medicine River brings him full circle as well; it reunites the ‘prodigal son’ with his home territory, and to fatherhood, the final rite of passage into manhood. Long ago, Will’s father promised the boys a musical top. Although the apocryphal gift never does reach Will and James, having been “lost in the mail,” the top does eventually find its way home—just in a different form, in a different time. The top Will gives to South Wing “made a sweet, humming sound, the pitch changing as it spun in its perfect circle: red, yellow, blue, green” (King 261). The top represents the medicine wheel, an epistemological paradigm emphasizing cyclical motion and balance. The colours on the top suggest the four directions as well as the masculine and feminine, spinning in perfect balance and harmony. Will wraps

the top in—(what else) blue paper and yellow ribbon, indicating the reincarnation of the father in Aboriginal family life.

The final scene in *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* depicts the reincarnation of the Aboriginal Father in Zachary, who awakens from his patri-colonial nightmare to find himself still naked, but safe and sound in his family home. The last we see of Zachary, he croons in Cree as he holds his nude baby daughter in the air above him, his laughing wife looking on beatifically. As the scene fades to black, the last thing we hear is Zachary’s wife, Hera, whose “magical, silvery, Nanabush laugh” peals out; echoing and fading finally into a baby’s laugh (Highway 130). The *mise-en-scène* clearly heralds the return of Nanabush, and with it, Zachary’s (re)awakening to his identity as an Aboriginal man, the restoration of his relationships with females, and his (re)clamation of his rightful role within his family and community.

The transformation is complete: through rhythm, ritual, and rites of passage, Tonto has been resurrected as something new and qualitatively different. No longer is he a warrior according to traditional Aboriginal sensibilities, but no longer is he a eunuch, either. He’s been reincarnated in the sons, who negotiate a complex and complicated relationship between the teachings of their ancestors, the demands of modernity, and the legacy of colonization. In all of this, these fictive Aboriginal sons must also reject colonial definitions of Aboriginal masculinities, restore their relationships with women and mother earth, and (re)claim their roles within the family unit, thereby (re)defining Aboriginal manhood not just for themselves, but for subsequent generations as well. For Aboriginal men, it seems, “the way of the warrior” hasn’t gotten any easier; it’s just taken a different direction. For Aboriginal women, it means that our men are a few steps closer on their journey home.

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¹This notion was derived from Edward Said’s work, *Orientalism*.

²For a comprehensive overview of this process, see Anderson.

³I chose to use the concept, “reincarnation,” to convey the cyclical nature of what I see as a spiritual journey for Aboriginal men, who must reconstitute in some way those fragments of traditional masculinities that have survived generations of physical and cultural genocide. Reincarnation (in its varied interpretations) occupies a place in the cosmologies of some Aboriginal cultures, as well as in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Conversely, the concept of reincarnation is rejected by mainstream monotheistic religions (Islam, Judaism, and Christianity) as contrary to the basic tenets of their respective belief systems. In this sense, I use the term, “reincarnation,” as a discourse of resistance that embodies ancient and enduring non-western notions of time and spirit.

⁴The fusion of Aboriginal and Christian rhetorical tropes used in this paper reflects Aboriginal peoples’ syncretic response to religious imperialism, both in real life and as a product of literary imagination. All of the chosen works take place within the social, cultural, and spiritual nexus between Christianity and traditional Aboriginal belief systems, with all three authors exploring the ambiguous spaces where the two intersect.

⁵For an illustration of this process as it occurred in British Columbia, see Knight.

⁶This quote refers to section 12(1)(b) of the *Indian Act*, which, previous to 1985, decreed that status Indian women automatically lost that status upon marriage to a non-Indian male, and must move from the reserve, and may not return, even if widowed or divorced. Furthermore, her children and all of their subsequent progeny lost the right to claim Indian status in perpetuity.

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PATRICIA MONTURE

On Writing #1

I suspect I ain't no poet
but I write
in scraps of thoughts
on scraps of paper
when I hurt more than I can carry.

I ain't no poet
but these words sure look organized
when I centre then so carefully on my
computer's screen.
The letters dance as I type
in straight lines, single step, across the page
they dance: pain into reality
because I can now see it on the computer screen.

Press PRINT...

Patricia Monture's poetry appears earlier in this volume.

Second Waves Archives Project Nancy's Very Own Foundation

Where are the stories, minutes, photos, briefs and buttons that tell the story of the women's movement in Canada since 1960?

Few such records are on deposit in public archives. This project aims to direct valuable materials into repositories where future researchers can find them, helping them to create an accurate and complete portrayal of this important period in Canada's history.

The project has four main objectives:

1. To locate second wave records and find them a home in a suitable public archives;
2. To collect stories that are not on paper, through a pilot oral history project, starting in Ontario;
3. To share information about second wave history with feminist activists, academics, archivists and researchers;
4. To create an online resource that makes it easier to donate second wave records to an archives, and to locate and access these archival collections.

We are looking for archival materials from individual feminists and from organizations that worked for women's equality. We want them to reflect the character of the movement — in all its diversity, drama, distinctiveness, influence and consequences.

**If we don't tell our own stories of the last 50 years,
either others will interpret them for us, or they won't get told at all.**

Do you have records related to second wave feminism in Canada?

Have you already sent documents to an archives?

Do you know any second wavers who might be holding onto archival treasures?

Please contact Project Coordinator:

Mary Breen

416-604-4620

archivesproject@sympatico.ca

She can:

1. Put you in touch with institutions and/or archives associations that can advise you on the right repository for your materials;
2. Provide you with further information regarding the accession process;
3. Share information about second wave materials already on deposit at archives across Canada;
4. Take your suggestions about other women and organizations to contact;
5. Connect you with itinerant archivists or students who can help prepare your records for deposit.