

Tragedy into Art:
The Canadian Aboriginal Residential School Experience Expressed through Fiction

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“As a certain philosopher of ancient Greece once put it, the difference between the historian and the poet/storyteller is that where the historian relates what happened, the storyteller tells us how it might have come to be”

– Tomson Highway

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Introduction:

“The Truth about Stories is that’s all we are” – Thomas King

This thesis will seek to answer the question of how the Canadian Aboriginal residential school experience is reflected in Aboriginal fiction, and to what extent the writing of these stories has helped Aboriginal people to process the individual and collective trauma produced by this institution. By analyzing the legacy of the residential school system in Canada through the fiction produced by both survivors and later generations, I will provide a different, though valid, window into an experience that will complement traditional historical sources.

The importance of stories and storytelling in the Canadian Aboriginal community cannot be overstated. Since time immemorial storytelling has served a variety of functions within differing Aboriginal groups. The role of stories in Native cultures ranges from teaching to punishment, to healing and spiritual needs, to simply for pleasure or celebration. Stories have often been used to make sense of the nonsensical experiences of life, such as creation myths and explaining the concept of birth to children. In the modern context, survivors and their relatives are using stories to make sense of the devastating residential school experience, an institution that was both traumatic and illogical to its students and later generations. This project will analyze the modern medium of written fiction, which though different in form from oral stories, serves some of the same functions as its predecessor, as both an individual coping technique and a teaching tool for the Aboriginal community.

Throughout my reading of nine selected fictional works by Aboriginal authors on varying subject matter, the one common thread throughout the books was the reference to residential schools. From this one can deduce that though residential schools are closed,

their memory and impact are not, nor will they soon be forgotten. By analyzing works of fiction that address the residential school experience in differing formats and levels, my hope is that some conclusions can be made on the impacts of the schools on both direct survivors and later generations, and that the greater reason and purpose behind the creation of these stories can be found.

Terminology

Throughout the paper, I will avoid the frequent lumping of Indigenous Canadian peoples as ‘Indians.’ Specific Native groups will be named whenever possible and in their absence the term *Aboriginal* will refer to the Indigenous peoples of Canada, which can and should be broken down further into *First Nations*, *Inuit*, and *Métis*.¹

Acknowledgement

The fact that I, a non-Aboriginal person, have written a paper that promotes the importance of Aboriginal people telling their own stories may seem somewhat contradictory. I cannot fully understand the problems of the Aboriginal community, both past and present, and I do not attempt to. Yet the writing of non-Aboriginal scholars such as Sam McKegney and John Milloy has shown me that it is important for non-Aboriginals to study the history of residential schools because this was, after all, an institution that was created by non-Aboriginals. Thus as a group we must be instrumental in supporting the Aboriginal community in their healing process.

¹ Inuit refers to Canadian Aboriginal people who speak Inuktitut. Métis refers to Canadian Aboriginals who are descendents of both Europeans (primarily French) and an Aboriginal group (Cree, Ojibwa, etc.) First Nations refers to all other Aboriginal people of Canada.

I. The History of Residential Schools in Canada

Introduction

The forced removal of at least 100,000 Inuit, First Nations, and Métis children from their homes, and their subsequent placement into government-funded, Church-run boarding schools constitutes one of the darkest incidents in both Aboriginal and Canadian histories.² Yet it has only been through recent scholarship that the truth about the conditions of and treatment in the residential school has been exposed. Throughout the mid-twentieth century, while the Canadian government pushed along plans to shut down all residential schools, the federal government via the Department of Indian Affairs continued to shroud the truth of the residential schools and their impact. As a result, widely used Canadian history textbooks such as Kenneth McNaught's *The Penguin History of Canada*, first published in 1969, fail to mention residential schools or Aboriginal education even once.³ Despite this omission the book was described by George Woodcock in *History Today* "as a general introduction to Canadian history, this seems to me one of the best available," and according to the WorldCat database there are still over one thousand copies of the book currently available in libraries worldwide.⁴ For the better part of the twentieth century, residential schools, and Aboriginals in general, remained at best, a footnote in Canadian history.

² Aboriginal Canadians, "Indian Residential Schools." *CBC News*.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/aboriginals/residentialschools.html> (30 April 2008).

Figures vary on these statistics but most place the number of present survivors at 80,000 to 90,000 so it can be extrapolated that addition of deceased students (both during and post-residential schools) the total would number at least 100,000.

³ Kenneth McNaught, *Penguin History of Canada* (New York: Penguin Books, 1969-91).

⁴ Numbers taken from the WorldCat List of Records for "The Penguin History of Canada," WorldCat Collections, <http://www.worldcat.org/>

There are four different editions of this text. The number of available copies for each is as follows: 1988: 479, 1982: 196, 1976: 110, and 1969: 256, totaling approximately 1,041.

Within the last two decades, the tragic history of the residential schools has come to light. Yet, though the system has had an immense impact on the Canadian Aboriginal community, it was not their first taste of oppression or assimilation, nor would it be the last. Paternalistic educational measures have been imposed on Aboriginals since the first Europeans arrived on the rocky shores of Newfoundland. The following is a brief sketch of European and Aboriginal interaction in Canada from the time of contact.

Aboriginal History

At the time when the first Europeans stood on Canadian soil around the year 1000, Indigenous population estimates are placed between 500,000 and two million, with a large percentage concentrated along the Northwest coast.⁵ In the seventeenth century some early European exploration missions kidnapped Native people, bringing them back to Europe as proof of reaching Canada and with the hopes that they could be educated to act as an interpreter. This practice was rarely successful, as most captives did not survive the trip, but it was an early indication of the uneven power relationship between the two groups.⁶ Diseases brought by European explorers and later settlers also had a devastating affect on the Aboriginal population. A clear example of this was the Beothuk population in Newfoundland. After Europeans began settling on the island in the seventeenth century to fish for cod, the combination of resource competition, violent interactions, and most importantly the spread of tuberculosis, quickly wiped out the population, with the last member dying in 1829.⁷

⁵ Olive Dickason, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992),63.

⁶ Dickason, 90.

⁷ Dickason, 96.

At this time, Canada held abundant reserves of fish and fur, which Europeans viewed as valuable resources. As the fur trade expanded throughout the seventeenth century, there was increased trade between the Europeans, who wanted furs and other products, and the Natives, who wanted metals, guns, and other goods. Along with increased European involvement and settlement came missionaries, who viewed the large population of Aboriginal “heathens” as ripe for conversion.

History of Residential Schools

The earliest known attempt at assimilation education was enacted in 1620 by the Recollects, a French, Roman Catholic missionary order. The program selected Native children, sent them to France for several years of education and then returned them to Canada. Unsuccessful, the program was discontinued, but the concept of assimilation education via day schools and boarding schools was continued on a small scale in New France by Protestant, Jesuit, Catholic and Anglican orders over the next two hundred years. Generally the schools faced strong resistance from the Aboriginal community, especially since the foreign French education and discipline system had negative results including poor health and death. Still, French missionaries expanded west, building several missions along the Great Lakes, including the mission at Sault Ste. Marie in 1671, which became the main hub from which the Jesuit deployed missionaries into the North.⁸ Though small pockets of competing missions had emerged by the end of the century, such as the Sulpicians and the Recollects, the Jesuits were the largest and most successful group.⁹

⁸ John Webster Grant. *Moon of Wintertime* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), 48.

⁹ Grant, 49.

When conflict broke out between Britain and France in the late seventeenth century, British and French missions became embroiled in the struggle for control of Canadian territory. Missionary groups were in fierce competition as evidenced by the ‘battle for souls’ by the Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries at the end of the 1700s. The goal of the missionaries, beyond conversion, began to include preaching loyalty to one of the two European powers.¹⁰ During the eighteenth century the connection between the state and the churches further increased, as both countries relied on the missions for support during the Seven Years War. As French forces weakened, Roman Catholic missions were slowly destroyed including Beauseiour in 1755, Louisburg in 1758, Quebec in 1759, and Montreal in 1760.¹¹ Though the French would lose the war and the majority of their land in what would be Canada, their defeat did not mean the end of French missionaries in Canada.

In the immediate aftermath of the Proclamation of 1763, Britain put little emphasis on the assimilation of Aboriginals in their newly acquired territory. Yet, beginning in the 1800s, “the British would adopt the French practice of using missionaries as agents of the state,” and some churches began to open up day schools at their facilities.¹² In 1820 Sir Peregrine Maitland, the governor of Upper Canada, proposed the idea of a residential school system for Native children that would remove them from their traditional lifestyle and place them in boarding schools. There they would learn basic mathematics, reading, writing, and practical agricultural skills, thereby transforming them into future Canadian settlers. While Maitland’s plan was never

¹⁰ Grant, 65.

¹¹ Grant, 67.

¹² Dickason, 111.

officially made into policy, the concepts would later be used in the formation of the Canadian government's residential school system.¹³

The British colonial administration in the 1830s was divided over two streams of thought regarding Aboriginals: assimilation into British society or the removal of the Indigenous people away from the white community. The colonial government chose the former path and focused on the goal of "civilizing the savage." In this period Britain was trying to decrease its colonial costs. Therefore at the same time that America had declared that this method of assimilation was not working, Britain decided to develop a similar program in Canada, in which missionaries assisted in education and the transition to settled farming agriculture.¹⁴ Resistance to assimilation by Aboriginal adults mounted, and by the 1840s the focus was redirected to "civilizing" the youth. As Historian John Milloy described, "Tribal dissolution, to be pursued through the corridors of residential schools, was the department's new goal."¹⁵

Though the management of Indigenous people had been shifted from military to civil jurisdiction in 1830, the real assimilation program did not begin until 1860 when control of Indian Affairs was transferred from the British Crown to the Canadian colony.¹⁶ The British North America Act of 1867 reinforced this shift by giving the colonial government federal responsibility over Indian affairs, and essentially making all Aboriginals "wards of the state."¹⁷ While the act had placed education under provincial control, it had also made Native people a federal responsibility, and thus their education

¹³ John S. Milloy, *A National Crime: The Canadian Government and the Residential School System 1879 to 1986* (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 1999), 14-15.

¹⁴ Roger L. Nichols. *Indians in the United States and Canada: A Comparative History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 185.

¹⁵ Milloy, 19.

¹⁶ Nichols, 200.

¹⁷ Milloy, 20. Refers specifically to Section 91:24 of British North America Act.

was too. Faced with an ‘Indian problem,’ Ottawa decided on a cost effective plan, in which the government would pay for construction and maintenance costs and supervise the administration of the schools. The churches, meanwhile, including Catholic, Presbyterian, Anglican, and United Church denominations, would provide teachers and control the operations of the schools.

Colonial administrators had long viewed a school system that removed children from the home, and away from the influence of their family and community, as the quickest route for assimilation of Native populations. Additionally, boarding school removed the problem of low attendance, often seen in day schools, which was attributed to weather conditions, traditional work seasons, and general refusal. Yet neither the Canadian government, nor early missionaries in New France, was the first to establish residential schools. Many early examples of this type of institution were seen in Canada’s neighbor to the south.

In 1769 Congregationalist preacher Elezar Wheelock, founded a boarding school for Indian Children in Hanover, NH, now known as Dartmouth College.¹⁸ Beginning in 1787 an English Philanthropic group and Puritan missionary society known as The New England Company began building schools for Native peoples along the US East Coast and the Maritimes.¹⁹ Later boarding schools such as the Hampton Institute in Virginia (1880s) and the Carlisle School (1879) were examples of United States Indian assimilation attempts, though their programs were more focused on integration into the white society and the workforce. Also, these two schools pushed the method of “planting out” or placing Native children in white homes, rather than in boarding schools. By 1884

¹⁸ Nichols, 71.

¹⁹ Nichols, 149.

the United States government was running seventy-six day schools and eighty-one boarding schools. Yet while a select few hired religious groups to the run the schools, religion played a much smaller role in the United States than in Canada.²⁰

The proposed curriculum in Canadian residential schools also varied from that of the United States, as it consisted of academic studies for half of the day and practical chores, duties, and trade-skills for the other half. Essentially this meant that the chores and necessary upkeep of the school would be maintained by the children, under the auspices of providing them with training in household duties. The Churches had the additional goal of instructing Aboriginal students in Christian morality. Residential schools were to be, as Milloy described, “an all-encompassing environment of re-socialization,” in which school became the child’s whole life and the teachers became their substitute parents.²¹

The boarding school system began with two types of institutions, the residential school and the industrial school, the latter being closer to white cities and with more intensive technical programs. The industrial schools were phased out or combined with boarding schools in the early twentieth century due to extensive costs and poor success rates.²² Scholar John Milloy marks 1879 as the official beginning of residential school history, though construction of schools began in 1868 and two schools in Ontario, Mount Elgin and Mohawk, were running in the early 1870s.²³ With four schools officially open in 1879 the number of schools began to spread exponentially towards the west, and by

²⁰ Nichols, 230.

²¹ Milloy, 24, 33.

²² J.R. Miller. *Shingwauk’s Vision* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 141.

²³ Milloy, 53.

1900 there were 3,285 children enrolled in sixty-one residential schools.²⁴ Attendance was made mandatory for all children under sixteen in an 1894 amendment to the Indian Act.²⁵ This policy, combined with the decline in the buffalo population during this period in the Canadian Plains, aided in the increased attendance, as more Aboriginal families began to settle down.

By 1923 there were seventy-one schools with 5,347 students in attendance, though this additional 2,000 students had only led to an additional ten schools being built. Compulsory attendance was more heavily enforced into the 1920s and residential schools reached their highest point in 1931 with eighty schools in every province except Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, and New Brunswick.²⁶ Indian Agents assigned to enforce attendance often took to withholding government rations in order to pressure parents to release their children to the schools. Though federal funding decreased, residential school numbers remained steady during the two World Wars, with seventy-five schools still open in 1943, and the few that closed were due to fires.²⁷ The government introduced the Family Allowance Act in 1945, which provided Aboriginal families with a monthly monetary assistance that came with a number of strings, including children's attendance of residential schools.²⁸

While the Department of Indian Affairs and the Church stood behind the residential schools for the first half of the twentieth century, there were several calls for reforms during this period, though most were ignored. Doctors, school inspectors, and government officials cited overcrowding, poor building conditions, poor sanitation and

²⁴ Dickason, 334.

²⁵ Miller, 128.

²⁶ Milloy, 102.

²⁷ Miller, 384.

²⁸ Miller, 170.

ventilation, inadequate food, diseases, specifically tuberculosis, and inadequate health services as major factors behind the high numbers of deaths in the schools.²⁹ Politicians such as Minister Clifford Sifton publically expressed concern over whether the money being put into the schools was actually producing results, though his opinion was based more on his belief of Aboriginal inferiority than the quality of the schools.³⁰

Change came in 1946 when Ottawa began a massive, two-year investigation and review of the Department of Indian Affairs. The result was number of progressive recommendations regarding Aboriginals, yet the only real policy change put into action was that regarding education. By 1948 the Department and Ottawa both agreed that a turnover be made from residential schools to integrating Aboriginal children into public schools.³¹ With seventy-two schools housing an estimated sixty percent of the Aboriginal school-age population, this would become a difficult and lengthy process, hindered by increasing resistance from the Church.³²

While a few of the most dilapidated schools closed quickly in the 1950s and 1960s, by 1965 there were still sixty-six schools operating, due to several closing schools joining together with other institutions. Still by 1969, government figures showed that sixty percent of Aboriginal school children were attending provincial public schools.³³ Yet during the decade, the residential schools had reported only a slight drop in students. The Church maintained residential school attendance by increasingly using the schools as “social welfare institutions” that took in Aboriginal children from alcoholic, abusive, or

²⁹ Milloy 75. Accurate death statistics in the school are impossible to calculate, as official death records were not kept in the majority of the schools. The number of deaths have been estimated between the low hundreds to thousands. Head of Indian Affairs Department Duncan Campbell Scott estimated that up to fifty percent of students would not survive school.

³⁰ Nichols, 244.

³¹ Miloy, 189.

³² Milloy, 190.

³³ Milloy, 208.

neglected homes, and by increasing recruitment of Northern Inuit children.³⁴ In 1960 records showed that fifty percent of children in residential schools came from broken or neglectful homes, and by 1974 this figure had increased to eighty-three percent.³⁵

The Department of Indian Affairs continued their attempt to close the schools by looking towards other forms of child-care, most notably foster care. The government officially broke the one hundred year partnership with the Church in 1969 after a major protest, thereby secularizing Aboriginal education. Over the next decade, the government began a feverish program of closing schools, mainly due to financial necessity, though the Indian Movement of the 1960s is often attributed to the swift action. By 1979 only twelve residential schools remained. There were rare exceptions in which a handful of schools were turned over to Aboriginal community administration, such as the Blue Quills School in Alberta, but the government's hard-line Aboriginal education policy remained focused on assimilation through mainstream integration.³⁶ The last of the federal residential schools, The Gordon Residential School in Saskatchewan, closed its doors in 1996.³⁷

It is estimated that during the hundred-year period between 1870 and 1970, up to one third of all Aboriginal school-aged children were placed in boarding schools.³⁸ The reason that the program continued for such a long period, despite initial calls for reform and later, hard evidence of poor conditions, neglect, and abuse, can be dually blamed on both the Church and the Canadian Government. From the onset, the schools lacked direct

³⁴ Milloy, 204, 209.

³⁵ Milloy, 214.

³⁶ Milloy, 236.

³⁷ Aboriginal Canadians, "A timeline of residential schools." *CBC News*. 28 April 2008. http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/aboriginals/timeline_residentialschools.html

³⁸ Suzanne Fournier and Ernie Crey, *Stolen From Our Embrace: The Abduction of First Nations Children and the Restoration of Aboriginal Communities* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1997), 50.

control and proper funding from Ottawa. The Church itself often staffed schools with individuals who lacked adequate experience or training, and teaching positions were hard to fill due to the low salaries. The 1948 study by the Department of Indian Affairs found that forty percent of teaching staff at schools had no professional training and some lacked high school degrees.³⁹

There were three major factors that created the disastrous experience of the residential schools. The first was the unbridled power held by school officials and staff, which created an institution of total power. The second was the lack of oversight by the Canadian Government, and their failure to take necessary action against schools that did not meet standards. Third, and possibly most important, was the inherent racism that existed at this time towards the Native population of Canada. The majority of teachers, staff, government officials, and even Canadian citizens did not view Aboriginal people as equals. The common belief was that Native people should be given some type of paternalistic education for their own good, so that they could become ‘civilized.’ It is no coincidence that violence was used in this process, as the mantra behind the entire education system was to “kill the Indian in the child.”⁴⁰ These racist attitudes, combined with the lack of structure, created a hundred-year long experience for the Aboriginal Community, which can only be described as a tragic.

Aftermath of Residential Schools

One must remember that the experience of each student who attended a residential school was unique. There are accounts of Aboriginal people who have said that their memories from the schools were generally positive. Yet, beginning in the 1980s,

³⁹ Milloy 176.

⁴⁰ Milloy, 43.

accounts of abuse and neglect began to emerge that portrayed an overwhelming negative picture of the schools, beyond the recognized health problems. While not all children suffered abuse, all students suffered from the emotional stress of being removed from their families, communities, and cultures. Sending children away from their homes upset the entire framework of traditional Aboriginal society, where the youth learned spiritual and practical knowledge from the oral and hands-on teaching of elders in the community.⁴¹

Though this form of cultural dislocation would have long-lasting negative effects, including loss of language, culture, and familial bonds, for survivors of the residential schools these losses were less invasive than the immediate personal loss experienced as a direct result of mental, physical, and sexual abuse. While the intended goal of the schools was to be a ‘home-like’ environment, the concept behind the assimilation and civilization of the Aboriginal children was inherently violent. While the official policy of the Department of Indian Affairs stressed the use of corporal punishment only in extreme cases, the lack of supervision led to the rampant use of physical violence, verbal assault, racist insults, and humiliation. These forcible discipline tactics were viewed as necessary means to create a standard of control, and to remove the “savage” from the child, thus creating an obedient pupil. This unsupervised environment also created a setting in which varying levels of sexual assault and abuse could, and did happen, which is described in detail below.

Upon returning home, the abuse, oppression, and loss suffered led many school survivors to turn to alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism for both their detachment from their community, as well as their memories of abuse. Former students often

⁴¹ Fournier and Crey, 52.

exhibited one or more symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder including: depression, panic attacks, insomnia, uncontrollable anger, alcohol and drug abuse, sexual inadequacy or addiction, the inability to form intimate relationships, and eating disorders.⁴² Yet life in Aboriginal communities went on as former residential school students returned home and began to form their own families. While this second generation would be liberated from the physical confinement of residential schools, they would not be free of its legacy.

Until the late 1980s, the majority of published information on residential schools came from non-Aboriginal sources, including historians, the media, and Canadian governmental records. At the end of the decade, Aboriginal residential schools survivors slowly began to tell their own stories, both about their experiences in the residential schools, and the subsequent effects on their families, their communities, and themselves. The following nine works represent the outpouring of Aboriginal fiction that emerged beginning in 1992, which describe the residential school experience and the collective trauma produced by the system.

⁴² Fournier and Crey, 63.

II. Approaches to Literature

In addition to fiction, the residential school experience has also been expressed through autobiographies, memoirs, and diaries written by former students. I chose to focus on fiction for several reasons. Fiction offers an alternative and valuable insight, and should be considered no less useful than non-fiction sources, as it can provide the emotional and personal side of a history. The writing of fiction has also played an important role in healing for members of the Aboriginal community. Additionally, current fiction dealing with residential schools tends to focus on the modern day, thereby refusing to place the experience solely in the past, and bringing the tragedy into a modern context with ongoing effects.

Regarding the following works of fiction, they can be broken down into two distinct types. The first approach can be called ‘survivor accounts,’ which are written by Aboriginal people who attended residential schools. These stories focus on a main character (or characters) that is also a survivor of the residential school system. The second approach can be called ‘second generation accounts,’ as the authors are Aboriginal people who did not attend residential school, but have parents or grandparents who are survivors. These books focus on contemporary characters that did not attend the schools, but are still directly affected by a multitude of generational effects.

Survivor Accounts

Survivor accounts paint a realistic picture of life in the schools, from the day-to-day life of the Aboriginal child to the horrors of sexual and emotional abuse. Such fiction can provide an accurate portrayal of the schools while granting the author the creative liberty to integrate Aboriginal knowledge, which they may have lost as a child, into their stories. This process can be beneficial both for the contemporary generations who read

the literature, and for the authors themselves, in terms of learning about one's heritage for the purpose of inclusion in the stories. For the authors of this approach, the writing is semi-autobiographical, thus it serves as an outlet to express their anger, confusion, and pain without having to directly discuss their own abuse, which is often too traumatic.

What follows is a brief description of survivor accounts that will be referenced throughout the text:

Kiss of the Fur Queen by Tomson Highway follows the lives of Jeremiah Okimasis and his brother Gabriel. After attending residential school in southern Manitoba, the Cree brothers have moved to Winnipeg where they struggle with their identity, their careers as artists, and the ever-present memories of their childhood. Highway uses mythology and dream sequences to weave the story between the present-day (1980s) and the distant past.

Porcupines and China Dolls by Robert Arthur Alexie chronicles the troubled lives of two Teetl'it Gwich'in friends, James Nathan and Jake Noland, who are living in their alcohol and drug-ridden community in the Northwest Territories. A memory from the past urges Jake to open up about the abuse he suffered in residential school, prompting community-wide "disclosures" that James may not be ready to accept.

My Name is Seepeetza is a children's novel written by Shirley Sterling, which provides an in-depth look at the daily life of Martha Stone at the Kalamak Indian Residential School in British Columbia. The semi-autobiographical story is written in diary format and expresses the character's struggle between her current environment and her life at home.

As Long as the River Flows is a children's story by Larry Loyie that illustrates the experiences of Lawrence and his Cree family, who are living near Slave Lake in Northern Alberta in the 1940s. After finding an injured owl, Lawrence spends the summer nursing the animal back to health while learning traditional skills. The story culminates with the realization that the time has come for his siblings and himself to go to residential school.

Bear Bones and Feathers by Louise Bernice Halfe is a book of poetry that draws from the author's own childhood experiences including residential school, her community and culture, and her parent's tumultuous relationship. Her poems include stories about both residential school and the cycle of violence, including her abusive father and her own abusive relationships. Other poems include stories about her grandmother, a Cree medicine woman, and several are written in an oral vernacular.

Second Generation Accounts

Second generation accounts focus on contemporary characters whose parents, grandparents, aunts, and/or uncles went to residential school. Though the main characters and the authors themselves never attended residential school, the fictional medium allows them to tell the stories that their elders were unable to. In these books, the authors allude to residential school experiences but rarely describe it in detail. Rather, the authors choose to highlight the ongoing negative effects of the residential school system that are manifest in today's Aboriginal communities and Canadian cities. Such effects include alcoholism, drug use, physical and sexual abuse, and rape. The stories aim to show how the negative effects of the residential schools are part of an ongoing cycle, which affect both survivors and their families and children.⁴³

Second generation accounts that will be referred to throughout the paper are:

⁴³ Note: These "generational" or "cyclical" effects are also addressed in some survivor accounts.

The Lesser Blessed is a novel by Richard Van Camp, set in the fictional Fort Simmer, Northwest Territories. The dark story is told through the eyes of Larry, a sixteen-year-old Dogrib youth who struggles with making friends and fitting in. He is haunted by his past and abusive memories until a new and unexpected friendship provides him with hope. The book provides a startling description of a modern, northern Aboriginal community plagued with drug and alcohol addiction, sexual abuse, promiscuity, AIDS, and poverty.

In Search of April Raintree by Beatrice Culleton Mosionier follows the life of two Métis sisters, April and Cheryl Raintree, who take divergent paths as they are shuttled through the Manitoba foster care system after their parents are deemed unable to care for them. The effects of their differing foster care experiences shape the two women as adults, leading April to reject her Native identity and Cheryl to embrace it. Yet the truth about their parents is what eventually leads one sister to destruction and the other to find closure.

Ravensong by Lee Maracle tells the story of seventeen-year-old Stacey, who is conflicted between the traditional ways of family and village, and the White society she encounters going to public school across the bridge. Stacey believes the solution is to go to university, so she can return and teach the village children. Set in the Pacific Northwest in the 1950s, the novel chronicles the history of the flu' epidemic and its effects on the village, while the mythological Raven character in the story warns Stacey that her people might be on the brink of disaster again.

Finally, *Three Day Road* is a novel by Irish and Ojibwe author Joseph Boyden, and is appropriately a hybrid of the two streams of fiction. The story details the lives of

two generations of residential school survivors, but the author himself did not attend the schools. The story focuses on the experiences of two Aboriginal soldiers in World War One, Xavier Bird and Elijah Whiskeyjack, and how the death and destruction of the war affects the two in different ways. When Xavier returns from war with a broken body and spirit, it is his Aunt Niska, who once saved him from the residential schools, who must revive her nephew again.

Analysis of Texts

The emotional experience of the Canadian residential school system and the subsequent generational effects produced by the institution can be viewed in a thematic approach as a series of ‘losses,’ addressed by the texts: whether immediate—loss of home or hair, or long term—loss of language or culture. To maintain a historical basis to this literary analysis, this section will analyze the residential school experience in a chronological format. Thus it will naturally begin with the removal of Aboriginal children from their homes and arrival at schools, and work towards the present day depictions of the Aboriginal community that are found in the fiction.

III. Removal

The increased enforcement of mandatory attendance in the twentieth century made Aboriginal families, even in the far North, aware that they would have to release their children into the care of the Church-run residential schools, or be subject to legal punishments. This knowledge did not make the experience of removing an impressionable child from their family, and the only home that they knew, any less emotional or painful. Therefore, as several stories portray, both parents and children looked upon the imminent removal from home with a feeling of dread—the day when parents lost their children.

This feeling of loss is illustrated in *Porcupines and China Dolls*, as Alexie describes the day when the children depart on the mission boats. “Their parents and grandparents don’t know it, but someone has ripped out their hearts [...] They don’t know it, but they are going to think about their children every minute of every hour until they return. If they don’t return—and some of them won’t—they’ll remember it

forever.”⁴⁴ Alexie describes how the children are equally distraught, though the irrationality of the event stuns them into silence. “They are quiet and show no emotion. The boat starts to move and they have the urge to stand and look for their parents, but they don’t. They wonder if this is real. Maybe it’s a dream.”⁴⁵

In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, as the Okimasis children grow up, their maturity is marked with a feeling of fear rather than happiness. The boys’ mother laments, “‘Come December,’ said Mariesis with an undercurrent of sadness, ‘Champion will be seven years old.’” It is clear that she views this milestone in her child’s life as melancholy. When the time comes for Jeremiah to leave their home in Eemanapiteepitat, in northwest Manitoba, and go to the Birch Lake Residential School, Mariesis fears sending her young son out into the world alone. She asks her husband if perhaps Jeremiah could wait two years until his younger brother Gabriel could join him. Her husband Abraham’s response is evidence of the serious nature of school attendance, “‘*Sooni-eye-gimow*’s [Indian Agent] orders, Father Bouchard says. It is the law.”⁴⁶ Yet while Okimasis parents release their children to the residential schools, they did not have complete faith in the system. As Abraham questioned: “what on earth their son was going to get ‘down there.’”⁴⁷

The first-person narrative, diary format of *My Name is Seepeetza* provides an alternative perspective on the experience of leaving home, one from the eyes of the child. Yet the feelings behind the removal are the same. Martha writes in her diary, “We have to come here every September and stay until June. My dad doesn’t like it either, but he says

⁴⁴ Robert Arthur Alexie. *Porcupines and China Dolls* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing Company, 2002), 10.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Highway, 40.

⁴⁷ Highway, 47.

it's the law. All status Indian kids have to go to residential schools."⁴⁸ The passage implies that neither Martha nor her father support her attendance of residential school, and comply only to avoid punishment.

The parents in *As Long as the River Flows* are similarly unsure about the benefits of their children be taken away to residential schools, but fear the legal repercussions of dissent. The beginning of the children's story presents an idyllic view of Larry's childhood, with the family living traditionally off the land. Yet during this time of happiness and innocence the threat of residential school looms. The adults in the book discuss the threats made by the government. "Mama spoke quietly. 'Kokom keeps hearing that the children are being taken from their families and put in a school far away. She looked at Lawrence, then lowered her voice even more. He could only hear part of what she said, it was something about prison."⁴⁹ This fear of removal is actualized at the end of this illustrated children's story where a sad picture shows a frightened Lawrence and his siblings being taken away from their parents.

In *Porcupines and China Dolls*, the parent's of Jake Noland, who also attended residential school, consider running away with their sons to avoid having to turn them over to the Church. They question, "Would the Powers That Be come after the and remove their children and take them to jail? They think about it, but that's all they do."⁵⁰ Alexie describes how for school age children, the joy and freedom of the summer months were overshadowed by the constant thought of returning to residential school. At the end

⁴⁸ Shirley Sterling, *My Name Is Seepetza* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1992), 13.

⁴⁹ Larry Loyie. *As Long as the Rivers Flow* (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2002), 34.

⁵⁰ Alexie, 22.

of the August, when the children are given a bath in the outdoor tub, “they are quiet and know what’s coming.”⁵¹

In Louise Halfe’s poetry the experience of removal is one not of dread, but of total confusion. The poem *Boarding School* reads: “Two white-skins/ talked in tongues/ Father’s long face/ stretched further to the floor/ *Namoya maskoc* It’s a mistake/ Father’s voice/ shook.”⁵² The author alludes to the sheer panic that a family experienced when the removal was instant and incomprehensible. The poem ends with the line, “The family is gone. The family not ever more.” Thus the poem creates a direct link from the residential schools to the loss of family.⁵³

The physical removal of the children is also addressed in several of the texts. In *As the River Flows* the final image shows the children being loaded into the back of a truck. *My Name is Seepeetza* uses similar imagery, as the Aboriginal children in the story are transported from their homes to the school on a “cattle truck.” Analogous language is used in *Porcupines and China Dolls*, as the narrator explains, “the first mission boat arrived in Aberdeen, and thirty-five children were herded out of the Blue Mountains and dragged off to mission school.”⁵⁴ These examples are representative of the racist undertones of the Church and the Canadian Government, in that Native children could be treated like animals.

A differing depiction is presented in Halfe’s poem *The Residential School Bus*, where she described the vehicle that transported the children as “A yellow caterpillar/ it

⁵¹ Alexie, 21.

⁵² Louise Bernice Halfe, *Bear Bones and Feathers* (Toronto: Coteau Books, 1994), 63-4.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Alexie, 8.

swallows them up.”⁵⁵ These words describe the total and enveloping power of the schools, which began once the students stepped onto the bus. Finally, in the hybrid novel *Three Day Road*, Niska the protagonist’s aunt, explains that “I was forced, just like all the others, to go to their school.”⁵⁶ While Niska resisted longer than her siblings, eventually a priest and soldier came to her home to physically take her away.

The removal of Aboriginal children from their homes was an experience full of varying emotions as depicted most prevalently in the five survivor stories. While some experiences were marked with dread and hesitation, others involved confusion and terror. All the examples of removal are underlined with the impending threat of legal intervention if the children were not released to the school system. The Canadian government and the Church viewed the age of seven as the appropriate time to begin the assimilation process of Aboriginal children. Yet the removal experiences depicted in the above works of fiction suggest the emotional blow that such removal produced, as well as foreshadowing the long-term effects of young children being ripped away from their families and communities.

Arrival at Schools

Many of the fictional works provide powerful and vivid descriptions of the immediate reactions upon arriving at the residential schools, which ranged from awe to fear. One of the most powerful portrayals comes from *My Name is Seepeetza*, at the moment when Martha enters the school: “I felt like a bee sting all over my body. Then I

⁵⁵ Halfe, 65.

⁵⁶ Joseph Boyden. *Three Day Road* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2005), 84.

stopped feeling anything.”⁵⁷ This simple analogy conveys the initial feelings of fright, followed by emotional detachment.

Another initial reaction seen in the texts is in response to the size and appearance of the schools. This created a feeling of the unknown and reminded the children that they were far from home. Halfe flatly describes the school, “The building is huge/ with long white empty hallways” and full of unfamiliar smells like Lysol and wax.⁵⁸ In *My Name is Seepeetza*, Martha gives a lengthy physical description of school, clearly impressed by its size. “The school is four storey’s high. It’s a big red brick building with a church steeple right in the middle above the chapel. The kitchen and dining room are under the chapel. The boys live on the left and the girls live on the right.”⁵⁹ Finally, in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, the immense size of the foreign school is translated into an Aboriginal context, “Champion had never seen such an enormous room, bigger than the Eemanapiteepitat church; arctic terns could fly around in here with ease.”⁶⁰ This passage is an example of the way in which Aboriginal children tried to make sense of parts of White society they didn’t understand, by relating it to their experience with the land.

Objects often taken for granted, such as stairs, were a source of amusement, which Jeremiah called “a clever, whimsical whiteman sort of thing.”⁶¹ Some technologies were complete mysteries, as shown by Halfe’s description of a television as a “vision box” that “collects people and makes them dance.”⁶² And in *Porcupines and China Dolls* the children tragically try to make sense of the talcum powder they are doused with after

⁵⁷ Sterling, 17.

⁵⁸ Halfe, 65.

⁵⁹ Sterling, 11.

⁶⁰ Highway, 51.

⁶¹ Highway, 55.

⁶² Halfe, 67.

their baths. “They don’t know what it’s for. Some wonder if the powder will make them white.”⁶³ With their heads shaved and dressed in new European clothes, the boys try to make sense of their transformation. “They all look like. They look like porcupines: well-dressed porcupines.”⁶⁴ This technique of creating stories to make sense of the irrational, a part of Aboriginal tradition, shows that the children still maintained a connection to their heritage at this early stage.

This connection to home and Native culture would soon be broken as the children’s lives were turned upside down. Several stories describe the strict rules of the residential schools as being an incomprehensible lifestyle change. The characters in the stories compare the new rules to the relative freedom that they experienced at home, at least in terms of space. In *My Name is Seepeetza*, Martha explains the strict limitations on movement within the schools, “We’re not allowed to leave our own rec or dorm except for meals.”⁶⁵ Martha then compares this confinement to her home life:

When we’re at home we can ride horses, go swimming at the river, run in the hills, climb trees and laugh out loud and holler yahoo anytime we like and we won’t get in trouble. At school we get punished for talking, looking at boys in church, even stepping out of line. I wish I could live at home instead of here.⁶⁶

The strict schedule of the daily routine created a total loss of freedom for the children. Martha explains how they wake up every morning at six, pray, and get ready, and during this time “we’re not allowed to talk.”⁶⁷ Martha contrasts her loss of power to the horses that she envies due to their ability to run free.

⁶³ Alexie, 10-11.

⁶⁴ Alexie, 11.

⁶⁵ Sterling, 12.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 13-14.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 24.

Compared to the freedom of nature, Martha compares her life in the school to being a servant, as she spends her weekends cleaning bathrooms and windows and waxing floors.⁶⁸ This theme of required housework in the supposedly educational setting is also addressed in *Bear Bones and Feathers*. Halfe's poems cite repetitive chores such as peeling potatoes, ironing sheets, and polishing floors. These examples, which come from stories written by female authors, support the idea that domestic tasks were assigned only to female students. Alexie also refers to the gendered structure of the residential school when he explains how girls were ordered to clean the kitchen and boys had to haul water and chop wood. The narrator explains the severity of the tasks, "If they don't do it right the first time, they'll do it a second time. If they don't do it right the second time, they'll do it a third. No one does it a fourth."⁶⁹

The gender divisions present throughout the schools are depicted in several of the texts. This separation often came as a shock to Aboriginal youth who had grown up interacting with both sexes. In both *My Name is Seepetza* and *Porcupines and China Dolls* the boys and girls dormitories are described as being on opposite sides of the school, and there is little to no interaction. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Jeremiah describes the immediate separation of boys from girls, "Uniformly garbed in sky-blue denim shirts and navy denim coveralls, the boys marched out into the long, white passageway that smelled of metal and Javex—where lines of Indian girl strangers were marching in the opposite direction."⁷⁰ It is impossible to ignore the potential long-term affects of creating such a firm line between boys and girls, in which interaction was looked upon as sinful.

⁶⁸ Sterling, 26.

⁶⁹ Alexie, 11.

⁷⁰ Highway, 55.

These gender divisions even applied to siblings, who, from the moment they arrived at the school, became strangers. This change is seen in *Porcupines and China Dolls*, as narrator describes, “The young girl tried to go with her brother, but she’s grabbed by a woman in a long black robe and pushed into another room. The last thing he hears is her cries followed by a slap, then silence.”⁷¹ This division is also highlighted in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, when Jeremiah sees his sister for a brief moment in the hallway. “He waved surreptitiously at her but, just then, one of the innumerable doors that lined this tunnel swallowed her.”⁷² Similarly, in the poem *Returning*, Halfe writes that a sister is not allowed to talk or even look at her brothers, though she “sneaks a peek” at them during dinner.⁷³ Even for siblings of the same sex, interaction was limited and constantly scrutinized. In *My Name is Seepeetza*, Martha makes the tragic commentary, “One of the Sisters watches us eat, but not when we walk back to our recs. That’s when my sisters Dorothy and Missy and I sometimes hold hands as we walk down the hall. It’s the happiest part of my day.”⁷⁴ These examples address the emotional weight of being unable to communicate visually or orally with the siblings that a child had grown up with. This stress is compounded by the fact that the children are in a new and foreign environment, and their only source of connection and comfort are cut off.

A final cultural change that is described in several stories was the sleeping arrangements in the schools. In many Aboriginal communities entire families slept in one room, and siblings often shared one bed. In the schools, strict adherence to sleeping in one’s assigned bed was enforced. Martha in *My Name is Seepeetza* expresses confusion

⁷¹ Alexie, 10.

⁷² Halfe, 64.

⁷³ Halfe, 105.

⁷⁴ Sterling, 12.

over having to sleep by herself, since she and her sisters slept in the same bed at home. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Jeremiah goes over to Gabriel's bed in the middle of the night, to comfort his crying brother. The behavior is normal to Jeremiah, as his family had always slept together on the floor of their house or tent. The priest, Father Lafleur, comes upon the two boys and forces Jeremiah to return to his own bed. At this moment Jeremiah realizes he must follow their rules.⁷⁵ Alexie describes how prohibiting interaction led children to feel isolated in the unfamiliar environment, and thus the boy's dormitories at night sounded like "a million porcupines crying in the dark."⁷⁶

Unfortunately, as evidenced by the texts, the school administration and its assimilation agenda did not take into consideration the cultural norms of its Aboriginal students. For many students the very idea of the "school," as well as its regulations, did not make sense and violated their upbringing. The children quickly learned that those who did not follow the rules or challenged authority were swiftly punished. And so, they complied, and the real process of assimilation began.

IV. Loss of Culture

The assimilation process at Canadian Residential Schools resulted in both immediate losses, such as hair, as well as long-term losses, such as language. Both types of losses experienced by impressionable children would have a long-lasting effect on both their self-esteem and the way in which they viewed their Native heritage. The selected stories provide an emotional account of how these assimilation tactics affected the psyche of the students. There are four main examples of loss that are prominently

⁷⁵ Highway, 74.

⁷⁶ Alexie, 13.

described in a majority of the novels. The following section will analyze these losses, which include hair, name, language, and spiritual values.

1. Loss of Hair

In Aboriginal culture, hair was extremely significant and was considered to be a living part of a person. Hair, specifically the braid, was representative of social status, status changes, and milestones in Native life. The braid represented the three essential parts of the individual: mind, body, spirit. Since hair was sacred and respected, the act of cutting a person's hair was used as a form punishment for improper behavior in some Aboriginal cultures. Therefore the loss of one's hair was accompanied by feelings of humiliation, in addition to destroying the connection to one's Native culture and spirituality.⁷⁷

Upon arrival at the schools, children often immediately received a haircut, typically a "crew" cut for males and a short bob for females. For many Aboriginal children this would be the first time their hair had ever been cut, or even touched by a stranger. From the school administration's standpoint shearing the Aboriginal child's hair represented the first step in removing the child's Native identity by giving them a European hairstyle. More openly the schools cited the motive that the children's hair must be cut for health reasons, to ensure the removal of lice or other contaminants. Still, this process of cutting hair is consistent with other types of assimilative, or "total"⁷⁸ institutions such as the military and concentration camps. The removal of an individual

⁷⁷ Agnes Grant, *No End of Grief: Indian Residential Schools in Canada* (Winnipeg: Pemmican Publications, 1996), 18-19.

⁷⁸ The concept is taken from Sociologist Erving Goffman's work on the "Characteristics of Total Institutions," as addressed in, *Asylums* (New York: Doubleday, 1961).

identity in these types of systems demonstrates power and control, which often opens the door for injustices and abuses to occur.

While the residential school's leaders deemed hair removal both practical and necessary, the administration did not have a complete understanding of the effect that this simple action would have on the child. Combined with an inability to understand English, it can be imagined that many Aboriginal children were in a state of complete confusion and fear as they had their long locks of hair snipped off, sometimes minutes after they entered the school. As seen in the following examples of fiction, the common hair-cutting experience stripped children of their cultural identity, and left them feeling both physically and emotionally naked.

In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Jeremiah's experience of having his hair cut is a poignant episode that spans several pages of the novel. Highway describes eloquently,

Poised for the slaughter, Champion straightened his back and called forth every ounce of courage so he wouldn't burst into tears. The bristles of discarded hair made his neck itch. He wanted desperately to scratch but his arms were immobilized. If he started to cry, he wouldn't be able to wipe away the tears and he would be seen by all these strange boys from other places with a baby's crying face. He wished he could look at his hair one last time. He wished he was on Nameegoos Lake with his family.⁷⁹

This passage speaks to the emotional and physical loss of Jeremiah feels while having his hair cut, which makes his mind retreat to his home and the land. Jeremiah later describes the experience as a being "being skinned alive, in public; the centre of his nakedness shriveled to the size and texture of a raisin, the whole world staring, pointing, laughing." This signifies the additional stress of trying to remain strong while the act was performed in front of his future classmates.

⁷⁹ Highway, 52-3.

The girls and boys in *Porcupines and China Dolls* also undergo the emotional process of losing their hair. The title of the novel refers to this traumatic and life-altering experience. When Jake and James first arrive at school and have their hair sheared, and older student reacts to their new appearance, “‘Now you’re a real porcupine!’”⁸⁰ A female character, Louise, also experiences having her hair cut for the first time. “It’s over in fifteen seconds, and six years of hair lies on the floor. She’s screaming, but no one can hear her. She’s crying, but no one can see her tears.”⁸¹ For Sarah, an older student, the process does not get any easier with time. When she returns to school and undergoes the annual haircut, she reflects, “Six months of hair falls. The last time her hair was cut was at Easter, by the same old white woman. She silently promises when she has children, no one is ever going to cut her daughters’ hair.”⁸² This assertion shows the powerful effect of the experience on the young girl, and that the act resulted not only in the loss of her hair, but also of her identity.

My Name is Seepetza describes the haircut as a more direct attempt at assimilation and the removal of personal identity. Shortly after her arrival, Martha describes that Sister Maura “made all the girls line up and she put coal oil in our hair to kill nits and lice, even though we didn’t have them. She made us get haircuts, take baths and put on smocks, bloomers and undershirts, all exactly alike.”⁸³ These steps were clearly part of the process of ‘killing the Indian’ in the child, by making them physically look like White children. Martha explained further, “Sister Theo says long straight hair

⁸⁰ Alexie, 23.

⁸¹ Alexie, 26.

⁸² Alexie, 26.

⁸³ Sterling, 18.

makes us look like wild Indians,” and therefore only those girls with curly or permed hair were allowed to keep it long.⁸⁴

Louise Halfe’s appropriately named poem, *Thieves*, also illustrates the initial assimilation, “In mission school/ the nuns cut my long hair/ and cover me/ in thick dresses.”⁸⁵ The underlying angst is present in the stanzas, and the brevity of the description denotes how quickly and without thought this process occurred. Halfe also uses the foreignness of the haircut experience to revert back to imagery of the land, “Ivan’s ears look like/ two gliding hawks. / They’ve given him a crew cut.”⁸⁶

The loss of hair is also addressed in second generation accounts, which speaks to the long-term impact that this experience had on its students. In *Ravensong*, Stacey describes the importance of hair and the emotional repercussions that hair removal had on her mother in residential school. “These people had no idea how intimate a gesture touching the hair was. Complete strangers fiddled her hair and cut off her braid. Momma cried. A lot. She cried day and night, nonstop for a week. Finally, the nuns sent her home.”⁸⁷ The passage shows how sacred hair was to Stacey’s mother in their Native culture. The fact that she shared this memory with her daughter shows how vivid and traumatic an event it was in her life.

The character Niska, in *Three Day Road*, is similarly distraught over her long hair being cut. She describes the process, “The nuns gave the children funny haircuts, the girls’ bobbed to above their shoulders so that their faces looked round like apples, the

⁸⁴ Sterling, 32, 54.

⁸⁵ Halfe, 61.

⁸⁶ Halfe, 66.

⁸⁷ Lee Maracle. *Ravensong* (Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers, 1993), 107.

boys' cut very close to their heads so that their ears stuck out.”⁸⁸ For Niska, the hair-cutting experience went beyond one of generalized assimilation into a form of punishment. Niska recalled that Sister Agnes, who disliked her, cut her hair shorter than the rest of the girls. “They were going to remove the black hair that reached to my waist as a symbol of *wemistikoshiw* [white] authority, of our defeat.”⁸⁹ Rather than sadness, Niska’s responds to her loss with retaliation, as she cuts her short bob down to stubble in the middle of the night. The nuns are furious that Niska has responded to their assertion of authority with her own defiance, and she is quickly punished by being locked in the basement until her hair grows out to the appropriate length.

This angry response to one’s hair being cut in also seen in *In Search of April Raintree*, though in a much different context. The novel focuses mainly on 1970s Aboriginal society, yet it creates a parallel between the Aboriginal foster care system as being a modern interpretation of the residential schools. This analysis is supported by the fact that both are “total” institutions controlled by white people, in which children are essentially powerless. Therefore when Cheryl’s long hair is cut by her foster-mother as an act of punishment, the experience can be compared to that of the residential school—if anything the action is crueler. Her sister April watches the event in horror and remarks, “Cheryl’s long hair had been her pride and glory. *Had* been her pride and glory. There was hardly any left, and it was cut in stubbles.”⁹⁰ To further strip Cheryl of her power and self-esteem, her foster mother makes the child sweep up her own hair and then do the dishes. The demeaning experience causes the once-meek April to stand up for her

⁸⁸ Boyden, 84.

⁸⁹ Boyden, 85.

⁹⁰ Beatrice Culleton Mosionier. *In Search of April Raintree* (Winnipeg: Portage & Main Press, 1999), 55.

heritage and exclaim, ““Why did you scalp my sister?””⁹¹ In response to her outburst, April receives the same haircut punishment, and ultimately feels defeated.

The loss of hair that occurred in residential schools was a direct attempt at assimilation, which ignored the spiritual and cultural weight that Aboriginal people placed on their hair. It also showed the inherently racist beliefs that Native people’s long hair was wild and dirty, and therefore must be chopped off. In extreme cases hair cutting was used as form of punishment, as a way to humiliate the child and strip them of any remnants of power that remained. In most of the above examples, the initiative was successful, as evidenced in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, when Jeremiah is reprimanded and quickly complies. “His hair was gone, he had no power.”⁹²

2. *Loss of Name*

The replacement of a child’s Native name with a white Christian name was another major step in the assimilation process. The Canadian Government and the Church viewed Aboriginal names as difficult to pronounce and even ‘heathen,’ so children were given Christian names so that they would be able to fit into Canadian society. Sometimes this re-naming process initially occurred when missionaries in their home villages baptized children, but the enforcement of Christian names began most heavily in the residential schools. The re-naming experience, and emotional weight of being told the name you held for your childhood is no longer valid, is discussed in the several of the works of fiction.

The loss of name is illustrated two times in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, which signifies both the personal and cultural loss caused by this process. The disconnect and struggle

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Highway, 74.

between English and Cree is first seen during Gabriel's baptism as Father Bouchard performs the ceremony in Latin. Highway describes, "The words, meaningless to Cree ears, pierced the infant's fragile bones and stayed there."⁹³ When the priest asks "*Abrenuntias satanae?*" [Do you reject Satan?] Annie Moostoos protests in confusion, "'His name,' she stated, 'is Ooneemeetoo. Ooneemeetoo Okimasis. Not Satanae Okimasis.'"⁹⁴ Father Bouchard ignores her, stating only that women are not allowed to speak in church, and continues with the ceremony, formally naming the child Gabriel.

The re-naming process of Jeremiah, formerly Champion, occurs in the residential school immediately upon arrival. During the terrifying process of having his hair cut off, Brother Stumbo asks the new student what his name is. Despite his lack of understanding English, he replies,

'Cham-pee-yun!' He countered the assault by ramming the three syllables in the spots where the ouches would have been. Not only did he now know that he was being asked a question, he knew exactly what the question was. 'Champion Okimasis!' he reiterated, in challenge.⁹⁵

Once again, the Aboriginal person is completely ignored as Father Lafleur appears:

"'Okimasis,' a fleshy voice floated up behind Champion's ears. 'So this is the one named Jeremiah Okimasis.'" He then rejects the child's weak protest by telling Champion that his name is listed as Jeremiah in the baptismal registry, and thus is his official name.

Coupled with his loss of hair, the re-naming process leads Jeremiah to feel total defeat as he struggles not to cry. It can be imagined how painful this experience would have been, especially when the reasoning behind it was based on a religion that the child did not understand.

⁹³ Highway, 37.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Highway, 50.

The emotional impact of the loss of one's name is particularly evident in *My Name is Seepeetza*, in which the title itself focuses on this aspect of assimilation. Martha explains the origins of her Native name, and how it was chosen to match her personality: "My dad gave me my Indian name, Seepeetza. I was named after an old lady who died a long time ago. My dad laughs sometimes when he says my name, because it means White Skin or Scared Hide. It's a good name for me because I get scared of things, like devils."⁹⁶ Not knowing any differently when she first arrives at school, she tells Sister Maura her name is Seepeetza, to which the nun "got really mad like I did something terrible. She said never to say that word again."⁹⁷ In this instance, Martha's Native name is not only considered invalid, but also prohibited. Her parents, former students who understand the consequences of dissent, accept the change. "We don't use our Indian names much. My parents know we would get in trouble at school if we used them there."⁹⁸ The passage shows that the renaming process was not just a temporary change, and would have long- lasting effects.

Even more damaging, Martha explains that all the school children were assigned a number in addition to a Christian name, which they had to stitch onto their clothing. This also is addressed in *Porcupines and China Dolls*, after all the children are given identical haircuts and outfits, "They're given numbers and commit these to memory."⁹⁹ This process was common in residential schools as it was viewed as practical in terms of organization. Yet it had the ulterior motive of dehumanizing the children and once again creating the opportunity for abuse.

⁹⁶ Sterling, 77.

⁹⁷ Sterling, 18.

⁹⁸ Sterling, 78.

⁹⁹ Alexie, 27.

The loss of name is also alluded to in two of the second generation accounts. In *Ravensong*, Stacey realizes at the end of the story that she does not know her mother's real name. Her mother explains, "‘Momma is my name [...] It was the first word your Gramma learned. She thought it was a name. Imagine having Momma for a name.’ Both broke into hysterics. ‘If I’d stayed in school, the nuns would have changed it.’"¹⁰⁰ Finally, in *Three Day Road*, the acceptance of the renaming process signifies a defeat, and an irreversible change in a child's identity. Niska, who did not accept her new name, explained, "They kept me away from my sister. They didn't want me changing what they had taught Rabbit, who they now called Anne."¹⁰¹ Elijah, who also accepts his Christian name at the schools, is confused as to why Niska still calls Xavier, "Nephew." Xavier explains, "Nephew is my real name. I am her nephew."¹⁰² Elijah replies, "Your name is Xavier," clearly exhibiting the success of the assimilation process on Elijah.

While the works of fiction approach the topic in differing ways, all of the examples express the underlying confusion, anger, and sadness associated with the loss of one's name. By re-naming the Aboriginal children, the residential schools were removing not only the child's given name, but also their culture and power. The underlying racism and Christian superiority that motivated the process of renaming is also evident. For many, the change in name would be permanent; and a loss of one's identity as Native person would accompany the loss of one's name.

3. *Loss of Language*

While the loss of one's name was a devastating personal experience, the loss of language that occurred in the residential schools would have long-term and multi-

¹⁰⁰ Maracle, 195.

¹⁰¹ Boyden, 85.

¹⁰² Boyden, 334.

generational effects.¹⁰³ In the schools themselves, children were generally forbidden to speak their native language, and punishments were harsh for those who continued to speak in their Native tongue. The schools believed that prohibiting Aboriginal language would force the student to learn English more quickly. Yet the fear associated with language drove many children into silence. The initial loss of language, as well as its effects, is evidenced in the following examples.

Taken away from one's home and placed in a foreign environment, the comfort of one's language—the ability to speak—cannot be underestimated. Therefore in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, older brother Jeremiah attempts to soothe and reassure a terrified Gabriel, who has just arrived at the school, by speaking to him in Cree. Father Lafleur refuses to let this discrepancy go unnoticed, “‘Now Jeremiah. You know you’re not supposed to speak Cree once you’re off the plane.’ Jeremiah felt a choke breaking against his throat.”¹⁰⁴

The novel also provides an excellent example of the type of trickery used by school administration to stop students from speaking native languages, specifically during their free time. As Jeremiah begins to speak in Cree, he stops and remembers, “the boy who acquired the greatest number of tokens from other boys by catching them speaking Cree was awarded a toy at month’s end. Last month, the prize had been a Indian war bonnet.”¹⁰⁵ The residential schools preyed on the children’s innocence and created a contest that would slowly strip the children of their language. Additionally this tactic further complicated the social structure of the schools by pitting the students against each other.

¹⁰⁴ Highway, 70.

¹⁰⁵ Highway, 63.

Physical discipline was also used to force the children to learn English and forget their Native language. In *Three Day Road*, Niska explained her experience: “The nuns would wake me in the middle of the night and drag me to a brightly lit room where I was made to repeat words over and over again until I pronounced them correctly. When I was caught speaking my tongue, they’d force lye soup into my mouth and not give me anything else to eat for days.”¹⁰⁶ *My Name is Seepeetza* provides a similar example of the violent language removal methods of the Residential Schools. Martha’s parents had also been survivors of the Kalamak Residential School, and her mother remembered being punished for speaking Indian because she couldn’t speak English. Martha described, “The nuns strapped her all the time for speaking Indian, because she couldn’t speak English. She said just when the welts on her hands and arms healed, she got it again. That’s why she didn’t want us to learn Indian.”¹⁰⁷ Sadly, Martha’s own mother’s abusive experiences led her to try and protect her children by withholding their Native language from them.

Violent discipline is also depicted in *Porcupines and China Dolls*, as Alexie describes the experience of a new student. “Sometime during his first week, the young boy will have no alternative but to speak his language and he will be hit, slapped or tweaked.”¹⁰⁸ The narrator states that the same boy will watch his sister be hit for the same reason, and he will never forget the memory or forgive himself for not defending her. “It will haunt him, and each time he remembers it, he will silently promise to kill anyone who has ever laid a hand on him or his sister.”¹⁰⁹ In this passage, Alexie makes a causal

¹⁰⁶ Boyden, 85.

¹⁰⁷ Fournier and Crey, 32.

¹⁰⁸ Alexie, 12.

¹⁰⁹ Alexie, 12.

relationship between the violent policies of the schools and the violent tendencies of survivors.

The residential schools viewed banning Native language as a necessary step to remove the Indian in the child. Prohibiting one's language stripped the children of their ability to communicate, express themselves, or stand-up to the administration. It also destroyed the children's connection to their family and heritage. The policies used to make children forget their native tongue were often successful. Thus, the loss of language caused by the schools would have a devastating effect on the Aboriginal community, as in most Native cultures, language was only passed-on orally. This cyclical effect will be explored later.

4. Loss of Native Religion & Spirituality

Early missionaries believed that Canadian Aboriginal peoples were "heathens" without religion who needed to be taught Christianity. They soon learned that Aboriginal societies already had in place their own forms of spirituality, centered on a deep connection with the earth, and so the mission soon changed to one of conversion.¹¹⁰ The residential schools continued this practice by teaching Native children the foundations of Christian religion. Yet beyond the Christian curriculum, school administrators believed that discrediting Aboriginal spiritual beliefs was a vital step in the assimilation process. Therefore not only were children being forced to learn and submit to a foreign religion, they were simultaneously taught that the spiritual values of their own culture were immoral and wrong. The following examples from the texts examine the school's negative comparison of Native religion with European religion, and the effect of this curriculum on the students.

The Christian conception of religion is both unfamiliar and not relatable for Jeremiah in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. In his first grade classroom Sister Saint-Antoine shows the children a large illustrated drawing of heaven populated with “beautiful blond men with feathery wings and flowing white dresses.”¹¹¹ Yet as Jeremiah studies the image he “tried to spot one Indian person but could not.”¹¹² This experience illustrates how Aboriginal children were being taught to accept a religion in which their own people had no part. Later Jeremiah believes that he finds the role of Natives in Christianity, when Father Lafleur shows an image of Hell which portrays “Skinny, slimy creatures with blackish-brownish scaly skin, long, pointy tails, and horns on their heads.”¹¹³ An impressionable Jeremiah responds to this picture, “Aha! This is where the Indians are, thought Champion-Jeremiah, relieved that they were accounted for on this great chart. These people reveled shamelessly in various fun-looking activities.”¹¹⁴ Therefore the curriculum made Jeremiah associate the concept of Hell, where people go when they are bad, directly to his own Aboriginal heritage. The racist message would have a long-lasting impression on Jeremiah, and he evokes this image later in life when looking into the bars of downtown Winnipeg: “He leaned forward to see if he could catch a glimpse, beyond the swinging doors, of horned creatures with three-pronged forks, laughing as they pitched Indian after Indian into the flames.”¹¹⁵

In *My Name is Seepetza* Martha describes the straightforward teaching style of her catechism class, in which she was taught about the varying types of sins. The nuns bluntly told the children that they all committed sins everyday, and that if they did not

¹¹¹ Highway, 59.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Highway, 60.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Highway, 105.

confess their sins, they would go to Hell when they died. In the story, the nuns also employ religion as a twisted form of control. In order to keep the children in their beds at night, Sister Maura told the girls that there were devils under their beds that would drag them to hell if they got up in the middle of the night. To this Martha replied, “When she turned the lights off I was scared to move, even to breathe.”¹¹⁶ The threat had scarring and long-term effects on the young girl, instilling an irrational fear in her that often kept her awake all night: “I feel like I’m falling into a huge black hole where the devils are waiting, laughing [...] I take tiny breaths so they won’t hear me. They stay under my bed all night waiting for me to make a mistake or breathe too loud.”¹¹⁷ Rather than using religion in a positive format to encourage moral behavior, this residential school used it as a scare tactic to keep the student fearfully obedient.

Louise Halfe described a different purpose for religion in residential schools, one that created a competitive environment. In the poem *Returning*, she writes, “I grew up behind those walls. Six years. I knelt each morning in the chapel, up at dawn to pray to Jesus to save my soul. I hoped that I would win an award for being the most pious, most committed at the end of the year.”¹¹⁸ Rather than having a true understanding and personal commitment to Christianity, many children blindly followed the strict rules of the religion out of fear or naivety. This ignorance is evidenced in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, as Gabriel recites the ‘Hail Mary’ in a series of nonsensical words: “‘Hello merry, mutter of cod, play for ussiness, now anat tee ower of ower beth, aw, men.’”¹¹⁹ Similarly, in *Porcupines and China Dolls*, Alexie writes of a prayer the student say three times a day

¹¹⁶ Sterling, 19.

¹¹⁷ Sterling, 86.

¹¹⁸ Halfe, 105.

¹¹⁹ Highway, 17.

before each meal for eight years: “They won’t know what it means until years later, but by then the meaning will be meaningless.”¹²⁰ The stories show that rather than being taught about the real meaning of Christian religion, many students simply tried to dutifully follow the rules to avoid punishment.

Three Day Road provides an example of how the residential schools enforced their religion by challenging the validity of Native spiritual tradition. Xavier remembered the words of Sister Magdalene, “‘The old Cree are heathen and anger God,’ she says. ‘The Cree are a backward people and God’s displeasure is shown in that He makes your rivers run backwards, to the north instead of the south like in the civilized world.’”¹²¹ Her assertion makes Xavier think that the Cree people were doing something wrong by not converting to Christianity. The effects of this assimilation process in the school are shown in Elijah’s response to Xavier’s request that they perform a traditional *wemistikoshiw* smudging ceremony: “Elijah laughs at me. No Indian religion for him. The only Indian Elijah wants to be is the Indians that know to hide and hunt.”¹²² For Elijah, the residential school successfully broke his connection with Aboriginal spirituality, and he views these Cree traditions as silly.

The losses described in the section were part of an attempt to completely discredit and destroy the lives that the children had led before residential school. This created an identity struggle for Aboriginal children when they went home or when they finished school. Suddenly students were thrown back into a lifestyle and culture that they had been taught was immoral and backwards. For many survivors, these cultural losses would create a lifelong identity crisis as persons stuck between two worlds. Yet for survivors of

¹²⁰ Alexie, 28.

¹²¹ Boyden 51.

¹²² Boyden, 127.

residential schools the loss of language, culture, and familial bonds, seemed little in comparison to the immediate personal loss experienced as a direct result of the abuse that occurred within the walls of many residential schools.

V. Loss of Innocence

The mental, physical, and sexual abuse experienced by Aboriginal children in residential schools would have one of the largest and most enduring impacts on the Aboriginal community. Appropriately, harrowing examples of abuse and its emotional impact are discussed in almost every fictional work addressed in this paper. The stories provide vivid imagery and symbolism, which can only begin to portray the feelings of pain, anger, and shame associated with the abuse. Though the reasons behind each case of abuse can never be known, the ill-training and poor quality of the staff, the dehumanization process, as discussed earlier, combined with feelings of racial superiority, were the driving forces behind it. This section will address three sorts of abuse: verbal, physical and finally sexual abuse.

1. Verbal / Emotional Abuse

Verbal humiliation, often with racial undertones, is cited often in the survivor stories. Direct verbal abuse is described in *My Name is Seepetza* as Martha states that Sister Theo, “calls us ungrateful wretches and sly-puss, boy crazy amathons.”¹²³ The racial slurs show the nun’s feeling of superiority as she tells the Stone girls that she’s “going to take you down a peg or two,”¹²⁴ and subjects them specifically to tasks such as cleaning the toilets. In the poem *Thieves*, Halfe describes how when a child talked about

¹²³ Sterling, 82.

¹²⁴ Sterling, 42.

her life at home, in the “boosh,” the teachers would laugh and publically humiliate her by making her stand in the corner.¹²⁵

Similarly, public humiliation was used as a punishment in *My Name is Seepetza*. As discussed earlier, Martha feared leaving her bed in the middle of the night because she was told devils hid beneath it. This led Martha to wet her bed rather than go to the bathroom. While the experience was personally humiliating, Martha was also forced to wear a sign to the dining room that read, “I am a dirty wetbed.”¹²⁶ In another instance Martha’s punishment was to “wear my wet sheet over my head in front of everybody.”¹²⁷ She was further disciplined by not being allowed to drink anything after five in the evening, which led her to consider that “sometimes even the water in the toilet tank looks tempting.”¹²⁸ Martha also describes two boys caught running away, who were punished by having their heads shaved and being forced to wear dresses. The children had to kneel in the dining room and watch the other students eat, with the intended goal that everyone would laugh at them.

Once again, similarities can be seen in *In Search of April Raintree* between the foster care system and the residential schools, due to the underlying racism in both institutions. When April is first removed from her home and staying at an orphanage, she is told, “Don’t gulp your food down like a little animal.” The verbal harassment increases when she is placed with the DeRosier family. In April’s first encounter with her foster parent, Mrs. DeRosier tells her, “I know you half-breeds love to wallow in filth. You step

¹²⁵ Halfe, 61.

¹²⁶ Sterling, 19.

¹²⁷ Sterling, 84.

¹²⁸ Sterling, 21.

out of line once, only once, and that strap will do the rest of the talking.”¹²⁹ The DeRosier children are equally abusive, as shown by the son’s reaction when he first meets April: “‘Is that the half-bred girl we’re getting? She doesn’t look like the last squaw we had.’ The girl giggled at his comment.”¹³⁰ While living with this foster family, April, who is Métis, is constantly referred to by the derogatory term “half-breed”, and the family taunts her by calling her parents drunkards. The verbal abuse causes April to question her own self-worth and feel shame about her Native heritage.

2. *Physical Abuse*

Physical violence in residential schools played a large role in maintaining total control of the students. The process of assimilation and re-socialization is inherently violent, and the often-untrained teachers were instructed to use physical discipline to maintain obedience. Some administrators even argued that physical discipline was necessary in order to reverse the “permissive home-life” of Native families.¹³¹

As a result of these factors, corporal punishment was deemed an acceptable form of discipline until the 1960s.¹³² The Department of Indian Affairs did have some guidelines, such as only the principal should whip the children, and never on the head. Still, these were often disregarded. The abuse was also hard to regulate, as visits from federal inspectors were rare and they were scheduled.¹³³ Despite the fact that the government did not favor physical punishment, inspectors also took little action, in terms of charges, against schools where abuse was cited.

¹²⁹ Mosionier, 38.

¹³⁰ Mosionier, 39.

¹³¹ Milloy, 43.

¹³² Miller, 322.

¹³³ Milloy, 45.

Most of the physical violence depicted in the fiction served as a form of punishment, though the extremity of some of the acts shows underlying racial anger. *My Name is Seepeetza* highlights the fact that the air of violence was always present in the school. Martha explains, “Sister Superior carries the strap in her sleeve all the time.”¹³⁴ Sometimes physical punishments were in direct response to breaking, even slight, school rules. Martha noted that she was strapped for forgetting her towel downstairs when she went to the shower. Gabriel in *Kiss of the Fur Queen* was lashed because the priest heard him singing the Cree song “Kimoosoon Chimasoo” and “he was already seven tokens in the red.”¹³⁵

Martha also described a more serious act of violence that she witnessed when the girls were waiting to be told to go downstairs for breakfast: “Sister Adela got mad and started shoving and pushing the girls to make them hurry. That’s when she kicked Cookie. Lucky she fell on some girls who were running ahead of her.”¹³⁶ This illustrates the absurdity of the abuse, in that a child was kicked down the stairs not for breaking the rules, but for following them.

Another example of irrational violence is addressed in Halfe’s poem *Nitotem* [Relative], the title referring the idea that the abuse could have happened to anyone. The poem described an unidentified young boy:

He was tired of having his ears pulled,/ squeezed and slapped/ by Sister Superior. They bled and/ swelled, scabbed and scaled like the brick wall. / Often he didn’t hear the Sister shouting/ and clapping her orders at him/ or the rest of the little boys. / The others, when they could, / would nudge him so he could lip-read Sister’s words.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Sterling, 18.

¹³⁵ Highway, 85.

¹³⁶ Sterling, 70.

¹³⁷ Halfe, 75.

In this case, the child was continually being punished for not hearing the instructions, which was a direct result of the previous abuse.

Equally absurd physical punishments are described in *Three Day Road*. Elijah had come to residential school shortly after his mother died, when he was still dealing with the trauma of her loss. He was unable to accept that she was dead, and therefore would speak to her as if she was there. “The nuns who watched over him at the residential school grew angry at his behavior, and began to punish him whenever he and his mother talked. So he did it more and more until often his body ached badly from their paddling and whippings.”¹³⁸ It is ironic that the Christian nuns did not use their power to help Elijah cope with the death of his mother, and instead beat him for suffering.

In other instances, physical violence in the schools was more random and without cause. *My Name is Seepeetza* provides several startling examples. One day Martha is looking out the window at the snow, longing to be outside in nature. When a Sister saw her, “She grabbed the back of my tunic and pushed me all the way across the dorm, down the hall and into the broom closet and shoved me at the mops. She said, ‘Don’t let me catch you day dreaming again, you lazy amathon.’” In this instance the physical violence is both unnecessary and racially motivated. Martha described another experience of random violence: “That time I caught the flu Sister Theo yelled at me and kept punching me on the back until I almost fell.”¹³⁹

In *Three Day Road*, a nun responds to a childish infraction with extreme measures. Elijah, who is learning English, writes the word “poop” on his paper and is

¹³⁸ Boyden, 306.

¹³⁹ Sterling, 64.

caught by Sister Magdalene. In response the Sister punishes both Elijah and Xavier, who was sitting beside him. Xavier described,

She began shaking, then dragged both of us from the room by our ears. I was sure mine was partially torn off from my head. Outside of the schoolroom, in full view of the children in it, she tore a thin branch from a tamarack and pulled down our pants so that we stood exposed. First she forced me to bend over and struck me until I cried out in pain. She continued the switching until I fell over in a ball, tears falling onto the dirt.¹⁴⁰

In this instance, the nun uses violent and humiliating punishment to instill in the children that such bad words will not be tolerated. The action also has racist undertones as Sister Magdalene repeats over and over, while whipping the boys on the ground, “I will strike the heathen from thee.”¹⁴¹ An additional example of random violence is depicted in the novel when Xavier is paddling Sister Magdalene around the river in a canoe. Whenever the young child got tired and took a break, the nun would smack him on his head with her canoe paddle.¹⁴²

For Aboriginal children who had rarely, if ever, experienced physical discipline in their home life prior to residential schools, this type of punishment must have been both emotionally and physically painful. It also created a confusing social order as the nuns and priests who were supposed to be taking care of the children were also abusing them. This led to interesting and disturbing rationalizations of the physical violence. In *My Name is Seepeetza*, Martha explained that her parents never hit her and she hated Sister Theo for strapping her. “Then Dorothy told me all those things that Sister has to do. She said Sisters have to get up at five o’clock in the morning to say prayers. I wasn’t mad

¹⁴⁰ Boyden, 141.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Boyden, 200.

anymore.”¹⁴³ These types of excuses, which justified the abuse, would often instill in the children the idea that physical violence is sometimes necessary. For other children, continued physical abuse had the effect of building up a large reserve of anger. These long-term effects, which were often transferred onto survivor’s children, will be explored later.

3. *Sexual Abuse*

While verbal abuse can be attributed to racism, and physical violence can be viewed as means to achieve obedience, it is nearly impossible to account for the widespread cases of sexual abuse and molestation that occurred in the residential schools. While one can only speculate, the high levels of sexual abuse can be attributed to the combination of the unbalanced power structure in the schools and the abundance of poor quality and deranged staff. In the system, the children were alone, without their family, and completely powerless. This created a twisted power structure, in which the priests were seen not only as authority figures, but almost god-like. Yet, this hierarchical structure alone did not cause sexual abuse to occur. The second factor was the inferior staff. The lack of desirability of working in the schools, due to remote locations and poor pay, often drew in mentally unhinged staff that had been rejected in other areas of the Church. The fusion of these factors would produce tragic conditions in which sexual abuse was not only present, but in some schools, common. The commonality of sexual abuse is addressed in the texts, and supported by sheer number of abusive accounts found in the stories.

Depictions of abuse vary among the selected fiction, depending on the authors themselves, their intended message, and the suggested age of the reader. Therefore *My*

¹⁴³ Sterling, 83.

Name is Seepeetza, an elementary novel, first refers only indirectly to the existence of sexual abuse in the school. Martha explains, “Last year some boys ran away from school because one of the priests was doing something bad to them. The boys were caught and whipped.”¹⁴⁴ Martha makes another subtle reference to some type of sexual inappropriateness when the female students are watching the boys swimming: “Sister Delores was watching them too, from one of our dorm windows. Some of the girls snickered about that. A nun watching boys.”¹⁴⁵ Later in the story, a more definitive reference to sexual abuse is made. While describing her uncle’s drinking and disdain for the missionaries, Martha says, “Uncles Willy hates priests since the time that one tried to do something wicked to him.”¹⁴⁶ The novel’s descriptions of abuse remain age appropriate for the reader, but also clearly send the message that sexual abuse did occur.

Bear Bones and Feathers includes more graphic descriptions of sexual abuse at the schools. In the poem *Nitotem*, the author describes how privacy was not respected at the schools, which was emotionally damaging for young children. “He was embarrassed to undress in front of all the boys/ and especially Sister. / At home he always looked out the window/ when someone was undressing. Here everyone looked/ and laughed at your private parts. / Soon they were no longer private.”¹⁴⁷ A similar situation is described in *Porcupines and China Dolls*, when Louise is told to undress before going to the shower room. “She is ashamed of what they are doing to her, but there’s nothing she can do

¹⁴⁴ Sterling, 13.

¹⁴⁵ Sterling, 88.

¹⁴⁶ Sterling, 117.

¹⁴⁷ Halfe, 75.

about it.”¹⁴⁸ The passage describes the child’s feeling of powerlessness, and shows how the inconsiderate school policies led children to associate sexuality with shame.

In the poem *Nitotem*, Halfe also graphically illustrates an incident of abuse that evokes feelings of confusion and shame.

He suffered in silence/ in the dark. A hand muffled his mouth/ while the
other snaked his weiner. He had no/ other name, knew no other word.
Soon it was no/ longer just the hand but the push, just a gentle/ push at
first, pushing, pushing. Inside the/ blanket he sweated and felt the wings/
of pleasure, inside his chest the breath burst/ pain, pleasure, shame.
Shame.¹⁴⁹

The stanzas convey the complicated emotions associated with sexual abuse. As human instinct the child feels pleasure, while simultaneously feeling shame, as he has been taught in school that sexual acts are sins. The child feels alone, and has no one to tell about these mixed emotions, or the extreme violation that occurred. Sadly, in many cases the hierarchical structure of the school made some students believe, or at least accept, that these types of incidents were normal.

Equally graphic descriptions of sexual abuse are seen in *Three Day Road*. Elijah’s abuse is first referenced indirectly, when he explains why he took the nun’s gun when he ran away from Residential School. “I will use this gun far more and far better than her. It is small payment for her always wanting to bathe me.”¹⁵⁰ His brief and vague mention of the incident is representative of the shame and pain associated with the experience. Years later, when the boys are fifteen, Elijah opens up to Xavier while the two are hunting in the woods. Xavier described:

Without planning it or wanting to, Elijah tells me the story of the nun,
Magdalene, who liked to bathe him each week when he was a boy. He

¹⁴⁸ Alexie, 26-7.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Boyden,

tells me of how she would rub her soapy hands over him, how Elijah would get an erection, how she would scold him and then take his erection in her hands and rub him until his taut penis thumped against his lower belly in a spasm.¹⁵¹

When this occurred Elijah was scared and confused, and thought something was wrong with him. When the nun screamed at him, he thought he was in trouble and that she was going to drown him.

The description of the incident again shows the mixed messages that children experienced while being abused. Beyond being sexually violated, Elijah is completely unfamiliar with what is happening, and no explanation is given. Instead the Nun reprimands Elijah for a natural bodily function, while also taking part in the sexual act. This experience confuses Elijah as to whether sexuality is a good or bad thing, which will affect the rest of his life.

Porcupines and China Dolls also begins with indirect references to abuse, which are exposed via James' nightmares. "*Mission schools! Residential schools! Hostels! Hellholes! Shitholes!* He closed his eyes and hung his head. *Dark rooms! Hairy hands! False Promises! Little boys! Shower rooms!*"¹⁵² Yet over the course of the novel, as the adult men in the town begin to open up about their abuse at the hands of Tom Kinney, the description of the sexual abuse becomes more graphic in nature. During the process of disclosures, the former students admit to being sodomized and forced to perform oral sex.

Author Tomson Highway takes a fascinating approach when addressing the topic of sexual abuse in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. Rather than using graphic descriptions, Highway employs metaphorical imagery to create an equally horrifying portrayal of abuse. The allusions to sexual abuse are first seen when Jeremiah arrives at the school.

¹⁵¹ Boyden, 314.

¹⁵² Alexie, 133.

“Father Lafleur placed a hand on Champion’s thigh and, like some large, furry animal, purred at him. ‘There, there. You’ll be happy with us.’”¹⁵³ Though no direct mention is made, the words allude to the sexual atmosphere of the encounter. The first definitive incident of abuse depicted in the story is Gabriel being molested by Father Lafleur in the middle of the night. The child’s bewilderment and naivety are evident in his reaction. “He didn’t dare open his eyes fully for fear the priest would get angry; he simply assumed, after a few seconds of confusion that this was what happened at schools, merely another reason why he had been brought here, that this was the right of holy men.”¹⁵⁴ Gabriel, who is just learning the hierarchy of the schools, in which the priest is the ruler, tries to rationalize this unfathomable incident.

In the next bed over, Jeremiah powerlessly watches the event, which brings back a flood of painful memories, “The bedspread was pulsating, rippling from the centre. No, Jeremiah wailed to himself, *please*. Not him again.”¹⁵⁵ Traumatized, Jeremiah cannot speak or react, though he desperately wants to help and protect his younger brother. His reaction also shows that he is aware that the Priest’s actions are wrong and inappropriate. Yet because he had no power Jeremiah fell into denial. He questions: “Had this really happened before? Or had it not? But some deep chamber deep inside his mind slammed permanently shut. It happened to nobody. He had not seen what he was seeing.”¹⁵⁶

In *Porcupines and China Dolls* the many male characters that suffered sexual abuse at the schools experience similar feelings of confusion and denial. After seeing his abuser on television, Jake wants to open up about his abuse, which he has fought for so

¹⁵³ Highway, 54.

¹⁵⁴ Highway, 78/

¹⁵⁵ Highway, 79.

¹⁵⁶ Highway, 80.

long to repress. “Jake thought about what happened in that dark room a million years ago when he was boy. *Or did it happen? Maybe it was just a dream?* He’d pushed it so far back in his memory that it was nothing more than a dream. But it was real and he knew it.”¹⁵⁷ While discussing his abuse, Jake’s shame and innocence are evident, as he tearfully admits, “‘I didn’ know things like ‘at happen. I didn’ know what he was doin’. I thought he was jus’ playin’.’”¹⁵⁸ And when another character, David, finally shares his abuse with his wife, thirty years after it happened, he explains his reluctance to speak out. “For a while I thought it was jus’ me and I thought no one would believe me. Or they wouldn’ understan’. Or they would jus’ laugh ‘n ridicule me.”¹⁵⁹

Kiss of the Fur Queen also explores the idea that students kept silent about their abuse because they didn’t think anyone would help them. When Gabriel’s suggests they tell their parents, “Jeremiah’s words, in English, were as cold as drops from a melting block of ice. ‘Even if we told them, they would side with Father Lafleur.’”¹⁶⁰ Unable to share their experiences, even with each other, the Okimasis brothers chose to blame themselves for the abuse. They believed they were apologizing when they were continually forced to recite: “*mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.*” Highway explains, “Under these circumstances, however –yards enclosed by steel fences, sleeping quarters patrolled nightly by priests and brothers –they had also independently concluded that it was best to accept the blame; it was their most grievous fault.”¹⁶¹ This passage shows that the boys felt shame and responsibility for something beyond their control. It

¹⁵⁷ Alexie, 96.

¹⁵⁸ Alexie, 117.

¹⁵⁹ Alexie, 152.

¹⁶⁰ Highway, 92.

¹⁶¹ Highway, 81.

also shows the way in which the abuse caused them to associate sexuality with something negative and wrong, which would greatly affect their conception of sexual norms.

Kiss of the Fur Queen also makes reference to the commonality of abuse, in Gabriel's chilling words:

From his last encounter, two months earlier, he could still feel the old priest's meaty breath, could still taste the sweet honey, the hard, naked, silver body of the Son of God. Of the four hundred boys who had passed through Birch Lake during his nine years there, who couldn't smell that smell, who couldn't taste that taste?¹⁶²

The novel also addresses one of the most disturbing elements of sexual abuse, the use of rewards to keep children both quiet and compliant. After Father Lafleur gets Jeremiah out of bed in the middle of the night and rapes him, Jeremiah questions, "Back in bed, it was too dark to see what kind of chocolate bar it was. Sweet Marie? Coffee Crisp? Mr. Big?"¹⁶³

Due to the irrationality of the abuse, Highway removed the concept from the European framework in which it is often placed, and translated it into a Cree context. Therefore the brothers refer to Father Lafleur not as a sexual predator, a concept they would have been unfamiliar with, but as the terrifying 'Weetigo,' who in Cree mythology is a spirit associated with the human cannibalism. Highway parallels this with the priest's 'consumption' or molestation of the boys.¹⁶⁴ Therefore when Jeremiah sees Father Lafleur molesting his brother, he reacts, "Visible only in silhouette, for all Jeremiah knew it might have been a bear devouring a honey comb, or the Weetigo feasting on human

¹⁶² Highway, 109.

¹⁶³ Highway, 287.

¹⁶⁴ Sam McKegney. *Magic Weapons: Aboriginals Writers Remaking Community after Residential School* (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2007), 161.

flesh.”¹⁶⁵ Highway’s method of depicting abuse is interesting because it uses this negative experience as a vehicle to offer the reader knowledge of Cree heritage.

As shown in the above examples, sexual abuse overall had a thoroughly negative effect on all children who were violated. Children were exposed to sexuality, in a variety of forms, at an age that was completely inappropriate. Students were often frightened and could not conceptualize the abuse they were enduring. Sexual violation in turn completely destroyed the ability for children to develop healthy sexual norms as they got older. Additionally, being abused by people in power made children feel like sexual objects. The result of sexual abuse often led to survivors to either equate sexual behavior with sin and shame, leading them to reject their own sexuality, or it made them associate sex with power, thus leading them to be highly sexualized. And without anyone or any method to cope with their abuse, survivors often turned to unhealthy alternatives. These long-term effects will be explored later.

The three types of abuse described above would have life-long repercussions on the students who attended Residential Schools. Verbal abuse and racism affected children’s self-esteem and identity as a Native person. Physical discipline instilled the normalcy of violence and created angry individuals. Finally, many survivors tried to deal with the pain and shame associated with sexual abuse by turning to drugs, alcohol, or in extreme cases taking their own life. Yet, the negative influence of the residential schools did not end when students were finally sent home. Survivors returned to their communities where the losses and abuses that they had suffered were passed on to subsequent generations. These cyclical effects will be explored in the next section.

¹⁶⁵ Highway, 79.

VI. Long-Term Losses and Effects on the Community

The first category of long-term losses that survivors experienced after residential school were a direct result of the children being separated from their families and communities for up to ten years. The residential school's assimilation process, combined with this prolonged absence, led directly to the loss of Native culture for the Aboriginal students. This loss of culture had a tiered effect. When survivors returned home without traditional knowledge, they felt isolated from their families and communities. In instances where survivors did not relearn their Native language and/or heritage, their losses were then transferred onto their own children. And thus the legacy of the residential school continued.

1. Loss of Connection to Family

Ideally, one would assume that when students returned home, after being literally trapped in residential schools for up to a decade, they would be elated to see their family and eager to rejoin their community. Unfortunately this was not always the case. Students, especially those who experienced abuse, often felt abandoned and let down by their families and community. With nowhere else to place the blame, survivors often placed fault on their parents for allowing them to be taken to an environment where such injustices could occur. Tragically, in some cases the residential schools created an estrangement between families at home and the returning students, which could never be repaired.

For Jeremiah and Gabriel in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, the disconnect between themselves and their parents became evident the moment they finished school and returned home. The Okimasis parents sent their children to residential school not only

because it was required, but also because they thought it would better their children's lives and afford them opportunities. Oblivious to the sexual and mental abuse Jeremiah experienced, his father, Abraham, makes the suggestion that Jeremiah could become a priest and play the organ, now that he is done with school. Unable to share the truth with his parents, Jeremiah realizes that he cannot stay at home and decides to move south to Winnipeg. The language barrier further complicates the distance between the two generations. Jeremiah tries to explain his future plans to his parents, "'How do you say...?' English, today, tasted like metal to Jeremiah. 'How do you say 'university'? in Cree?'"¹⁶⁶

Gabriel experiences a similar epiphany when he returns home to after residential school. When Abraham asks Gabriel if he will miss the Birch Lake School, Gabriel is angry with his father for even asking the question, but at the same time cannot share the truth of his abuse. His reaction illustrates this dilemma: "Gabriel looked into his father's laughing eyes –was he joking? Who could ever tell? –and wished desperately to ask 'Why would I miss that place?' Instead, his mouth said, quietly, '*Mawch.*' No."¹⁶⁷ While Gabriel is disgusted with the Catholic Church due to his abusive experiences, his naïve parents are of the opposite opinion. Abraham even praises Christianity, saying, "The Catholic Church saved our people. Without it, we wouldn't be here today."¹⁶⁸ The gap between father and son is startling. "It was at that moment that Gabriel Okimasis understood that there was no place for him in Eemanapiteepitat or the north. Suddenly he would join Jeremiah in the south. He could not wait!"¹⁶⁹ Sadly, the residential schools

¹⁶⁶ Highway, 191.

¹⁶⁷ Highway, 108.

¹⁶⁸ Highway, 109.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

forged a permanent divide between the Okimasis parents and their sons. Since the parents were completely unaware of their children's abuse, and Jeremiah and Gabriel were not ready to share it, the family could not return to what it was prior to residential school.

Years later, when Jeremiah visits the village, the lack of understanding between parent and child is evident. Jeremiah, now an accomplished pianist, refuses to help unload crates of fish, a traditional task. "Bad for his hands?" frowned Abraham, and toiled deep in thought. The signs had not escaped him: visit by visit, word by word, these sons were splintering from their subarctic roots, their Cree beginnings."¹⁷⁰ And thus, due to the residential schools Abraham and Mariesis Okimasis lost their two sons not only for their childhood, but indefinitely. This distance between generations is also briefly referenced in *Ravensong*, when discussing Stacey's cousin Stella, who attends residential school. "Stella was at one with her peers but divorced from her elders and her parents."¹⁷¹

In some cases, the loss of family was the result of the bitter resentment felt by former students. In *Porcupines and China Dolls*, James returns home after nine years at residential school. The narrator despondently states, "For as long he lives, he's never going to forgive his parents for sending him away. He's never going to forgive his grandparents for allowing his parents to send him away."¹⁷² The assertion shows the confusion and hurt the character feels that his parents allowed him to go to a place where he was horribly abused.

The foster care system in *In Search of April Raintree* also leads April to be resentful and angry toward her parents. When they miss a family meeting, April reflects, "I couldn't forget that look on Cheryl's face when I had to leave her. I felt anger towards

¹⁷⁰ Highway, 193.

¹⁷¹ Maracle, 140.

¹⁷² Alexie, 15.

my mother and father because they were responsible. They were responsible for me being in this foster home.”¹⁷³ Her parents, products of the residential school, were alcoholics and deemed unfit to care for their children. When April realizes this fact, she is extremely ashamed of her parents and blames them for her terrible living situation. Her entire childhood and family becomes a façade. April bitterly reflects on her parents’ promises to bring the girls home, “Well, you lied to us. You never intended to get better. You never cared about us. You made Cheryl cry and you don’t even care. And because of you, I’m stuck here. I hate you both for lying to us. I hope I never see you again.”¹⁷⁴ As she grows up April denies any connection to her mother and father, and tells her classmates that her parents are dead.

Beyond losing their parents, the Raintree sisters are also separated when they enter the foster care system, because, as a social worker explained, “‘you’re no good for each other.”¹⁷⁵ Thus at a young age the girls lose any type of connection to their family or Native heritage. The loss of a real and intimate family connection would have long-term effects on April. She enjoys being at boarding school because there, “‘there were no hassles about belonging to a family all the time.”¹⁷⁶ Her lack of parents or supportive role models causes April to be unable to form close relationships as an adult. She explained, “‘I had instincts only for self-preservation, pushing anyone away from me who might hurt me. I was a loner.”¹⁷⁷ While April did not experience residential school directly, the negative effects of the institution are residually passed on to her through her parents, or lack thereof.

¹⁷³ Mosionier, 47.

¹⁷⁴ Mosionier, 46.

¹⁷⁵ Mosionier, 63.

¹⁷⁶ Mosionier, 85.

¹⁷⁷ Mosionier, 201.

2. *Loss of Native Language*

Kiss of the Fur Queen provides a poignant example of the loss of Cree language that Jeremiah experiences after he finishes school and moves to Winnipeg. Gabriel, who follows in his brother's footsteps, traditionally greets Jeremiah, "Tansi"¹⁷⁸ [Hi, how are you doing?] The elder brother is struck by the Cree words. "Jeremiah stopped breathing. In the two years he had spent in this city so lonely that he regularly considered swallowing his current landlady's entire stock of angina pills, he had given up his native tongue to the roar of the traffic. 'Say that again?'"¹⁷⁹ Gabriel is shocked that his brother has forgotten the basics of the Cree language, and that Jeremiah does not use the language now that is no longer forbidden. He asks, "'Cree a crime here, too?'"¹⁸⁰

In *Porcupines and China Dolls* James experiences a similar personal shock over his loss of fluency, when he returns home from residential school. When he steps off the boat, his aunt calls out to him, but James does not understand. "It slowly dawns on him: he's forgotten the language. Or has he? The language is still there, but he's thinking in English and has to translate it. It's a long and difficult process."¹⁸¹

In *Three Day Road*, Elijah is described as having "gift for the *wemistikoshiw* language," which he learned in residential school could be used to tell lies and impress others. Therefore, years after he has left the school and joined the army, he continues to use English. "Elijah can out-talk even the officers with his nun's English and quick thinking. The others in our section are drawn to him and his endless stories."¹⁸² The extremity of Elijah's detachment from the Cree language is shown when he starts

¹⁷⁸ Highway, 113.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Alexie, 14.

¹⁸² Boyden, 60.

speaking with an English accent while on the frontlines in Europe. Xavier describes Elijah's transformation, "“He began talking this way to get others to laugh, but he likes it now. Makes him feel respectable. He told me there's a magic in it that protects him [...] He says he couldn't speak in his old voice if he wanted to now. It's gone somewhere far away.”¹⁸³

The generational loss of Native language is clearly evidenced in *My Name is Seepeetza*. As described earlier, Martha's parents knew the often violent repercussions associated with speaking Aboriginal languages in residential school, thus they choose not to pass on their language to their children. Yet while they are looking out for their children's welfare, they are continuing the cycle of loss by preventing their children from learning one of the most important pieces of their culture. This leads Martha to question the worth of her own heritage. In reference to her father, Martha explains, "He speaks lots of languages, but he won't teach us. Mum won't either. She says the nuns and priests will strap us. I wonder why it's bad"¹⁸⁴ Martha's longing to gain a connection to her culture is present in her description of her parents speaking in their native tongue: "It sounds soft and gentle, like the wind in pines."¹⁸⁵

This cycle of language loss often had an enormous impact on the community as a whole. In *Ravensong*, the villagers had experienced generations of children being taken away to residential school. This had almost entirely robbed the villagers of their Native fluency. Stacey describes, "the only elder still alive among them who had not been to residential school was Ella. The villagers who could wield the language in the fashion of

¹⁸³ Boyden, 127.

¹⁸⁴ Sterling, 36.

¹⁸⁵ Sterling, 89.

Ella were few and far between.”¹⁸⁶ This large-scale loss of language caused by residential schools is also addressed in *Porcupines and China Dolls*. Village elder Martin laments, “Our language will be gone in ‘nother generation. Once ‘at goes we’ll have nothin.’ *We’ll jus’ be ‘nother bunch ‘a Indians.*”¹⁸⁷ His words express the importance that language plays in validating a group’s identity.

The Lesser Blessed presents a more contemporary depiction of a town that is still experiencing the lingering effects of residential school. Larry, who has learned some of the local language and vernacular from his parents, is shocked that his classmate Johnny does not know any Dogrib terms. The loss of Aboriginal language is shown in the two boys interactions: “You bet!’ I called out. ‘I’ll do that. Sol later.’ “Sol Later” is Raven Talk. It’s ‘See you later’ said really fast. The correct response is “Sol” but Johnny didn’t say it.”¹⁸⁸ Larry tries to share some of his language, greeting a confused Johnny ““Edanat’e?”” Larry explains, “That means, How are you?”¹⁸⁹

The examples from *The Lesser Blessed* show how the persistence of language was often dependent solely upon a child’s parents. Larry’s parents, who went to residential school, choose to share parts of Dogrib language and culture with their son, while Johnny’s mother, who is an alcoholic, continued the pattern of lost language. By the third generation, parents often did not even know their Native language anymore, and thus could not pass it on to their children. Therefore a direct line can be drawn from a residential school survivor’s long-term loss of Native language to modern Aboriginal children who do not know a word of their own language.

¹⁸⁶ Mosionier, 140.

¹⁸⁷ Alexie, 164.

¹⁸⁸ Richard Van Camp, *The Lesser Blessed* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1996),14.

¹⁸⁹ Van Camp, 15.

3. *Loss of Native Customs and Skills*

Residential schools effectively stripped Aboriginal students of their Native skills, by removing them from the home during the key years when this kinesthetic learning took place. Therefore children returned home from school without the traditional Native skills needed for survival, and it was often too late for their elders to re-teach them all they needed to know. This had two effects. In some cases it made the survivor feel isolated and futile, thus driving them away from the community. The generational effect was that this lost Native knowledge could not be transferred on to the survivor's children, once again continuing the cyclical assimilation mission of the residential schools.

When Niska rescues Xavier from residential school in *Three Day Road*, she is shocked that he has little knowledge of hunting, trapping, and living in the woods. Yet under his aunt's guidance, the five-year-old quickly readapts to the woods. Elijah remains in the school longer, and thus when he leaves to live with Xavier, it is harder for him to regain his Native skills. "That first winter Elijah did not know how to act while hunting, he was noisy as he walked and spoke out-loud, scaring away the animals. He had to practice and relearn the ways of living in the bush."¹⁹⁰ Elijah's loss of cultural identity in the school is seen in his reaction to Xavier excitedly telling him that he can grow his hair long again. "I like it this way,' he said. 'Easy to take care of.'" Yet, the boys are able to regain the majority of their Cree survival skills because they have a teacher, Niska, who was able to escape from residential school at young age. She returned to the bush with her mother and learned the traditional knowledge that she later passes onto the boys.

In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, the brothers' decision not to return home after residential school exacerbated their loss of Native knowledge, as they were unable to

¹⁹⁰ Boyden 98-9.

rediscover Cree traditions in their village. Therefore when they, as adults, decide to attend an Ojibwa Pow Wow celebration, the men are unable to construct a tent or build a fire, to the amusement of Ojibwa bystanders. Also when Jeremiah attends an Ojibwa dance in Winnipeg, he is completely unfamiliar with the Native style and traditions. Ann-Adele Ghost rider laments to a puzzled Jeremiah, “‘You northern people,’ she sighed, as with nostalgia, ‘it’s too bad you lost all them dances, you know? All them beautiful songs? Thousands of years of ...’”¹⁹¹

My Name is Seepeetza also references the loss of traditional Native dances. At the school the girls are essentially exploited for their dancing skills, and made to dance at festivals to raise money for church committees and service clubs. Yet they are never taught or are allowed to perform Native dances. As Martha explains, “The older girls do a Ukrainian dance, a garland dance, the tarantella which is an Italian dance, a Mexican dance, a Danish dance, a Spanish dance, and other Irish dances.”¹⁹² The story also describes the connection between the schools and the loss of traditional skills. Martha explains, “Mum said her grandmother, Quaslametko, didn’t want her and her brothers and sisters to go to school, because school would turn them in to white people. They wouldn’t be able to hunt or fish or make baskets or anything useful anymore.”¹⁹³ From this passage it is evident that even before their children left, parents knew that their absence during the important years of instruction would make them unable to pass on the Native traditions.

Finally, Louise Halfe addresses a series of Aboriginal customs that were lost in previous generations in the poem *My Ledders*, which is purposely written in a oral

¹⁹¹ Highway, 175.

¹⁹² Sterling, 73.

¹⁹³ Sterling, 30.

vernacular: “years ago you stopped *nohkom* and *nimosom*/ from prayin da sweatlodge and sundance, / drummin, singin and dancing/ you even stopped dem from Indian speakin/ and storydellin.”¹⁹⁴ This passage depicts the long-term loss of Native spiritual and musical traditions, as well as language. All of the above examples from the fiction portray a direct link from the residential school to the loss of Native customs, skills, and knowledge. Sadly, often when these cultural losses occurred in one generation, they were lost forever, leaving both survivors and future generations without a solid foundation for their Aboriginal identity.

4. *Loss of Cultural Pride*

The residential school’s attack on students’ Aboriginal ethnicity and culture often left survivors shameful of their Native heritage. By associating Aboriginal society with immorality and backwardness, the Church taught many of its students to be critical of Native culture, and sometimes reject their background entirely. This loss is described in both survivor stories and in second generation accounts.

The loss of connection to one’s culture is evidenced in the character of Jeremiah in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. After leaving residential school, Jeremiah sees a poster for a Pow Wow depicting a man with buckskin leggings and beaded moccasins. His reaction shows his disdain, as influenced by the Catholic Church. “Jeremiah recoiled. There was something so ... pagan about the image, primitive –the word made his eyes sting – Satanic.”¹⁹⁵ His education had taught him to associate all things Native with immorality. For Stacey, in *Ravensong*, attending a White school leads her to believe that Christian morality is greater than Aboriginal customs. Thus when she finds out that her biological

¹⁹⁴ Halfe, 15.

¹⁹⁵ Highway, 162.

father is actually the brother of her father, an acceptable practice in her village, she judges it with Christian norms, “No wonder the priests think we are immoral. We are.”¹⁹⁶

Similarly the residential schools influence Elijah to assimilate and reject his Aboriginal heritage in *Three Day Road*. Elijah calls Xavier a ‘heathen’ for wearing moccasins, showing his judgment of Xavier’s use of traditional clothing. His shame of his Native heritage is also seen in his conversation with Xavier as they are preparing to go to war. Elijah instructs his friend to say, “I am a Cree Indian from Moose Factory, and I have come to kill Germans.”¹⁹⁷ When Xavier questions if people will like that, Elijah responds, “Better to let them know you’re an angry warrior than some fucking bush Indian.”¹⁹⁸

Shame of one’s Native heritage is most clearly illustrated in *In Search of April Raintree*, which is correlated with the fact that April is Métis and thus already conflicted over her background. Growing up in the foster care system and in racist homes, she associates Native with anything bad or illegal and reversely White with goodness and success. She explains her tragic view on ethnicity: “Being a half-breed meant being poor and dirty. It meant being weak and having to drink. It means being ugly and stupid. It meant living off white people. And giving your children to white people to look after.”¹⁹⁹ When Cheryl gives her sister a book on Louis Riel, a famous Métis figure, April refers to him as a “crazy half-breed.”²⁰⁰ She continues,

I had learned about the Indians and the various methods of tortures they had put the missionaries through. No wonder they were known as savages. So anything to do with Indians, I despised. And here, I was supposed to be

¹⁹⁶ Maracle, 102.

¹⁹⁷ Boyden, 54.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Mosionier, 46.

²⁰⁰ Mosionier, 43.

part Indian. I remember how relieved I was that no one in my class knew my heritage when we were going through that period in Canadian history.²⁰¹

This passage shows how April's education has influenced the image she holds for Native peoples. She further comments, "It seemed to be that what I'd read and what I'd heard indicated that Métis and Indians were inclined to be alcoholics. That's because they were a weak people. Oh, they were put down more than anyone else, but then, didn't they deserve it?"²⁰² Her upbringing in such a bigoted environment causes April to become racist. April even fantasizes as a child about changing her last name (Raintree) when she is older, to something 'less Indian' sounding. Additionally, April's pale complexion allows her to 'pass' for white, and interestingly she views this as an advantage over her darker-skinned sister, Cheryl. As an adult April tries to hide her Native ethnicity, which includes not introducing her sister to her white friends, because then they would know April was Native. And when her friend Roger nonchalantly asks April if she is Indian, she responds, "'No, I'm...a Métis.' I had to force those words out."²⁰³

²⁰¹ Mosionier, 43-4.

²⁰² Mosionier, 46.

²⁰³ Mosionier, 142.

Effects of Abuse

The emotional effects of physical, mental, and sexual abuse would have some the most devastating effects on residential school survivors. In addition to the aforementioned cultural losses, survivors sometimes turned to alcohol, drugs, and other destructive behaviors to cope with their painful memories of abuse. Survivors often showed symptoms similar to post traumatic stress disorder including: depression, insomnia, panic attacks, uncontrollable anger, substance abuse, eating disorders and sexual inadequacy or sexual addiction.²⁰⁴ Thus former students began to form a generation of Aboriginal people who suffered from addictions, who were unable to communicate properly and unable to form intimate relationships.²⁰⁵ These unhealthy habits and behaviors would then be transferred onto the children of this 'lost generation' and the cycle was continued.

The abuse suffered by former students contributed to two specific losses that often led survivors into destructive coping methods: the loss of self-esteem and the loss of power. In terms of sexual abuse, students who were treated solely as sexual objects often lost any concept of self-worth. And for students who endured abuse, their complete powerlessness in the situation would make them seek control in any form possible as adults.

A clear example of the loss of self-esteem is described in *In Search of April Raintree*. The verbal abuse and racist stereotypes drilled into April during her childhood in the foster care system cause her to lose her sense of self-value. When considering running away, she says, "I'd have to get some [money]. But how? Steal it? I'd been

²⁰⁴ Compilation of effects formed from: Fournier and Crey, 63 and Celia Haig-Brown. *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1996),16.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

accused of stealing already, so why not? That would be a justice of a sort. Oh, sure, April, and when you run out of money in the city, you can just sell your body.”²⁰⁶ In this example the ‘Native girl’ stereotype imparted to April appears to be a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The loss of power students experienced in residential school, especially those who were abused, cannot be overstated. In *Ravensong*, Stacey describes this loss of freedom in relation to white society. “Someone was always in charge in their world. There was someone constantly watching over your shoulder policing your every move. It seemed that you were always in danger of being punished every moment.”²⁰⁷ Similarly, in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Jeremiah reflects on his newfound autonomy after leaving Birch Lake School. “Free, at last, of steel-mesh fences and curfews that chained you to your bed by 9:00 P.M., free of tasteless institutional food, free of nuns and brothers –and priests – watching every move, every thought, every bodily secretion, free to talk to girls.”²⁰⁸ This passage makes reference to both the physical confinement of the school, and how sexual abuse caused Jeremiah to lose control of his own sexuality.

April refers to this total loss of freedom, in reference to foster care, in *In Search of April Raintree*. She calls her childhood, “Seven years of not having control of my own life.”²⁰⁹ Cheryl also experiences the powerlessness of the system. Her foster parent informs her, ““You are going to do exactly as they wish or else I’ll call your worker, have you moved, and then I’ll make sure you never see April again. Now, are you going to

²⁰⁶ Mosionier, 79.

²⁰⁷ Maracle, 152.

²⁰⁸ Highway, 102.

²⁰⁹ Mosionier, 50.

cooperate?’ Cheryl nodded meekly. The fight had gone out of her.”²¹⁰ Once an independent and opinionated child, Cheryl is transformed by the total institution into an adult who is both overly complacent and submissive.

For Elijah in *Three Day Road*, his abusive upbringing in residential school makes him crave freedom and power. This is one of the leading factors behind his decision to enter the army and fight in World War One. As a sniper, Elijah becomes obsessed with killing and explains to Xavier that the freedom to kill is unique and will be gone after the War. Elijah hopes that by becoming a great sniper, he will gain power and respect despite the fact that he is a Native person. “We will return home as heroes. I will become a great chief. I won’t let you or anyone else take that away.”²¹¹ His belief is dangerous because he is willing to go to extreme lengths to attain this reputation.

These types of personal losses, along with various others, contributed to the destructive paths many former students took after leaving the halls of residential school. While some survivors turned their quest for power into unsafe sexual practices, other turned to unhealthy outlets to deal with the painful memories of abuse.

Anger and Violence

As mentioned above, the inherently violent nature of the residential schools taught some survivors that abuse was normal, and that violence was a proper form of discipline. Repeated sexual and physical abuse also built up rage within some students. The combination of these factors often left to the emergence of extremely violent individuals, after they left residential school. This was often in conjunction with substances, as shown in *My Name is Seepeetza*. While describing one of the nuns at school, Martha comments

²¹⁰ Culleton, 54.

²¹¹ Boyden, 323.

on the violent nature of her father, who also was a product of residential school: “The way Sister Theo yells at us reminds me of my dad when he’s drinking. It scares me.”²¹²

Louise Halfe also provides a child’s perspective on the violent anger of his parents. In the poem *Returning* she describes children stacking wood to impress their parents. “We want to surprise them, but they never say a word. They too are children of the residential school. We know only how to show anger. We are always suspicious of one another. Watching, forever watching.”²¹³ Halfe further solidifies the connection between the residential schools and the father’s anger, as she writes, “I never know when the thunder will burst, never know when the lightning will strike. My memories roll inside my stomach. Mean little butterflies at home, and at residential school.”

The violent tendencies of residential school survivors are also depicted in *The Lesser Blessed*. Larry has flashbacks of his childhood that describe his father’s violent outbursts, which typically occurred when he was drinking. Similarly, the beginning of *In Search of April Raintree* explores the turbulent childhood of the Raintree sisters before they are removed from their home. In her early development years, April hears women being hit and violence from the living room where the adults party, as she hides in her room. “Later, they started their yelling, and even the women were angrily shouting. One woman was loudly wailing, and it sounded like she’d gotten smacked a few times.”²¹⁴ Domestic abuse was also referred to in *Ravensong*, in which the character Old Snake, a former residential school student, is perpetually drunk and beats his wife.

Drawing from her own life experience, Halfe also describes several incidents of domestic abuse in *Bear Bones and Feathers*. The poem *Loving Obscenities*, about an

²¹² Sterling, 63.

²¹³ Halfe, 105.

²¹⁴ Mosionier, 14.

unidentified woman, includes the line, “She always wore a black and blue shiner/every Friday and Saturday night. /Those stupid fist marks/ of his drama attacks.”²¹⁵ Another reference to abuse is included in the poem *Thieves*. Halfe writes, “Daddy lifts/ his fists and/ knocks it against/ mommy’s cheek.”²¹⁶ The more personal *Fog Inside Mama* depicts an abusive situation. “Oh Mama don’t, Papa hasn’t walked on that land, not for years. Not since the last time he crushed your ribs on that fridge. / He’s on skid row somewhere.”²¹⁷ Finally, Halfe includes a poem in her book entitled, *Bruises Are Part of Daddy’s Job*. The multiple references to domestic violence in the home show how the abuse was commonplace, and shaped children’s concept of functional relationships.

Alcohol and Drug Abuse

Several of the violent tendencies described above were connected to alcohol and drug abuse. Former students, feeling disconnected from their community and unable to trust their parents, did not disclose their abuse and instead buried their secrets deep within.²¹⁸ This led many to self-medicate with alcohol and drugs in order to forget their memories of abuse. Such was the case in *Porcupines and China Dolls*. Alcoholism is a vivid problem in the Teetl’it Gwich’in community, as spending the entire day at the local saloon is a common occurrence for James and many other people in the town. Alexie describes how James uses alcoholism as a coping method, “That’s all I ever do: drink to pass out. Where’s ‘a fun? I drink to get drunk. No, I drink to pass out. To get rid ‘a my dreams.”²¹⁹ James’ dreams were actually nightmares: flashbacks of residential school with thinly veiled allusions to sexual abuse. James’ dependence on alcohol is evident in

²¹⁵ Halfe, 31.

²¹⁶ Halfe, 61.

²¹⁷ Halfe, 44.

²¹⁸ Fournier and Crey, 62.

²¹⁹ Alexie, 115.

his reaction after waking up from a nightmare. “‘Oh fuck,’ he said, and fought to control his breathing. *Same ol’, same ol’*. He finally took a normal breath and heard Jake in the washroom. *Fuck, I need a drink.*”²²⁰

My Name is Seepetza also makes a direct link between sexual abuse at residential schools and alcohol abuse. Martha’s father and Uncle Willy, who were both abused by priests, often go on drinking binges. One night when missionaries come over to the family’s house for dinner, her father and uncle stay in the other room drinking all evening, and Martha later hears her father crying. She explains, “My dad won’t go inside a church. When he sees priests he spits. He doesn’t like priests. He says priests are not as holy as they like us to think.”²²¹

Her father’s drinking also upsets the family dynamic, and sets a poor example for Martha and the other children. When her father comes home with friends to drink whiskey and celebrate the New Year, Martha’s mother removes the children from the home. Martha naively explains, “Uncle told my mum we could stay as long as we like. I think we’ll stay a couple of days and then go home, when Dad’s finished partying.”²²²

Similarly in *The Lesser Blessed*, the connection between the residential school abuse and alcohol abuse is portrayed. In a flashback of one of his father’s violent tirades, Larry explains, “He was speaking French. He had learned it in the residential schools. He never talked about what had happened there, but he always talked French when he drank.”²²³

In *In Search of April Raintree*, the girl’s parents, who went to residential school, are also both alcoholics. As children, the girls believe that their parents are sick and that

²²⁰ Alexie, 48.

²²¹ Sterling, 122.

²²² Sterling, 50.

²²³ Van Camp, 57.

alcohol is their ‘medicine.’ April described how when the welfare check came, their parents “would take a lot of medicine and it always changed them [...] Mom, who was usually quiet and calm, would talk in a loud and obnoxious way, and Dad, who already talked and laughed a lot, just got clumsier. The times they took the medicine the most were the times when many other grown-ups would come over and drink it with them.”²²⁴ The girl’s parents are deemed unfit to care for them, and social services eventually remove the children from the home. Unfortunately, losing April and Cheryl causes their parents to drink more, and they are never able to take back their children.

An identical situation is present in *Three Day Road*, as Xavier’s mother, who had grown up in the residential schools, also loses her son due to her addiction. Niska explained to Xavier, “My sister Rabbit, your mother, still lived, but the talk was that she was a drinker of the *wemistikoshiw* rum and had abandoned her only son to be raised by the nuns in that residential school.” Though there are no direct reasons cited for Rabbit’s use of alcohol, it perpetuated the cycle, leading her son to also be raised by the Church.

In *Bear Bones and Feathers* the female character explains how she uses alcohol to make herself feel better. In the poem *Thieves*, Halfe writes, “I feel good with beer/ drink with the boys/ wear make-up/ and sexy clothes/ show off my legs.”²²⁵ These lines denote the use of alcohol as numbing substance, in order to make the woman feel comfortable around men.

Even Jeremiah in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, who was once a successful concert pianist, turns to alcohol to cure the “hangover that haunted him for six years.”²²⁶ After abandoning music Jeremiah begins to work at the Winnipeg Friendship Center where he

²²⁴ Mosionier, 11-12.

²²⁵ Halfe, 62.

²²⁶ Highway, 219.

comments on the large number of Native adults who suffer from alcoholism. In reference to the patrol van he drives, “Jeremiah had always thought the sign should include, “See a passed-out Indian? Call us first?”²²⁷ The community effects of alcoholism are also addressed in *Three Day Road*. Niska describes, “Unspoken law said Cree business remained Cree business and was not to be discussed with the *wemistikoshiw*. But rum is a sly and powerful weapon. I’ve watched it drown our people all my life.”²²⁸ And while none of the main characters in *Ravensong* abuse substances, Stacey explained the connotation alcohol had in her Native village. “Her own family didn’t like wine. ‘Not our way,’ Dominic has said. The few who did make wine generally drank it until it was gone. Sometimes it made them act crazy but generally the village was dry most of the year.”²²⁹

This connotation of Native alcoholism is seen in *The Lesser Blessed*, when a non-Native classmate, Jazz, mocks Larry, who is visibly Aboriginal. “Lysol Larry, I got some warm piss for you to drink. You Indians drink anything, doncha?”²³⁰ These negative stereotypes have a strong influence on the Native people who endure them, despite the fact that they did not drink alcohol. The prevalence of alcoholism in the community is clearly illustrated in the story. Larry explained, “Fort Simmer braces for two things in winter. The first is the cold. The second is Floaters. Floaters are the town drunks who stagger around the community at all hours of the night.”²³¹ And in *Porcupines and China Dolls*, the Native characters Mutt and Jeff who sell moonshine and

²²⁷ Highway, 221.

²²⁸ Boyden, 43.

²²⁹ Maracle, 151.

²³⁰ Van Camp, 46.

²³¹ Van Camp, 59.

hang out in the bar, are described as “town drunks, bums and lepers all rolled into one.”²³²

While most of the stories focus on alcohol abuse, several of them, such as *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and *The Lesser Blessed*, depicts a landscape in which Lysol cans litter the streets, alluding to the common practice of ‘huffing’²³³ the toxic substance to get high. Larry paints this tragic image of Fort Simmer. “I inhaled autumn. It was blazing along our path. The fireweed surrounding us sang with her brightest voice: purple, bloody, fresh. I almost didn’t see the empty Lysol bottles or the brown broken glass as we walked by.”²³⁴ The story also describes the stereotype that associates all Native people with this type of drug abuse. Jazz taunts Larry, “‘Hey Dogrib,’ he’d say [...] ‘They’re having a sale on Lysol down the street. I seen your mom passed out in a ditch. I fucked her for fifteen bucks.’”²³⁵

Three Day Road focuses heavily on drug addiction, though it is more difficult to connect Xavier and Elijah’s morphine use to residential schools, since it is more a product of their experiences in World War One. Yet, it can be speculated that a connection does exist, as Elijah joined the army to satisfy his desire for power and control, which was a direct result of residential school. Elijah then begins to use morphine to “wash away fear” in his quest to become the most famous Canadian Aboriginal sniper.²³⁶ At first unable to understand Elijah’s addiction, Xavier turns to the drugs after he loses both Elijah and his own leg on the battlefield. He then explains, “Now I understand his love for the medicine. It takes all of the badness away. The world

²³² Alexie, 36.

²³³ Slang term referring to the inhalation of toxic substances or chemical fumes as a way achieving a high.

²³⁴ Van Camp, 13.

²³⁵ Van Camp, 45-6.

²³⁶ Boyden, 135.

is warm and close with the medicine surrounding me.”²³⁷ So while in a different context, drugs are used in this story as both a coping and numbing method.

A direct correlation can be made between alcohol and drug addiction, and the negative experiences of the residential schools. While substance abuse cannot be generalized to all former students, the trend did increase in Aboriginal communities as evidenced in the fictional works above. Former students often used alcohol and drugs as a way to repress painful memories of abuse, or as a coping mechanism to deal with the distance they felt from their families, communities, and heritage. Sadly, these addictive behaviors would become imparted into future generations, which will be discussed later.

Suicide

In the most extreme cases, taking one's life was the only option for some residential schools survivors. Stripped of their power and enduring abuse, some students felt they had nowhere to turn and bottled their pain inside. When this became too much to handle, suicide often crossed one's mind, and in some cases, it was acted upon.

In *Porcupines and China Dolls*, one of the James and Jake's former classmates, Michael, committed suicide shortly after returning from residential schools. For the adults in the community, this came as a complete shock, but for other students who suffered abuse, the decision was relatable. Years later when others began to disclose their abuse, a suicide note surfaces that reveals that Michael was also abused at the residential school. “That's why he lived the way he did. That's why he went into the hills.”²³⁸ Suicide is also contemplated by several of the other survivors in the story, and the opening scene of novel features James holding a pistol in his mouth. Yet after the

²³⁷ Boyden, 343.

²³⁸ Alexie, 165.

community begins a series of abuse disclosure and healing workshops, James and the other men realize that death is not the only option. At the end of the novel James throws the gun he is holding against his head into the heavens and declares, “Some traditions were never meant to be. Some traditions are best laid to rest.”²³⁹

In *In Search of April Raintree*, the girls’ mother’s suicide can be derived to the residential schools through a series of steps. A former residential school student, who possibly suffered abuse, she began to drink heavily as an adult. This factor, combined with her lack of appropriate parenting skills, led the province to remove her two daughters from the home. This painful loss and her inability to get her children back ultimately led Mrs. Raintree to take her own life. Cheryl finds this out as an adult from her father, and traumatized, tells the story to April: “Mother, you know what happened to our poor, dear Mother? She jumped off the Louise Bridge, is what she did. Committed suicide. You know why she stopped seeing us? Because she couldn’t bear the pain. Yup, she committed suicide.”²⁴⁰ Cheryl’s bitter and almost sarcastic tone can be attributed to the extreme agony of having the image of her childhood crushed. Cheryl had never known the truth of her parent’s alcoholism, and had thought they were simply sick. Cheryl is unable to quantify how her mother could have felt more pain than she had, growing up in the foster care system.

Sadly, suicide becomes a cyclical pattern in the novel. Unable to cope with the truth about her parents, Cheryl turns to destructive behaviors and ends up giving up her own son, because she couldn’t care for him. Faced with the same situation as her mother, Cheryl is also unable to bear the pain of losing her child, and jumps off the same bridge

²³⁹ Alexie, 286.

²⁴⁰ Mosionier, 180.

where her mother took her own life. Thus, the residual effects of residential school continue and claim another life. An example of third generation suicide is addressed in *Ravensong*. When a White girl across the river commits suicide, both Stacey and the Native villagers are shocked, and wonder what could have been so bad. Yet in the epilogue of the novel, an adult Stacey explains that the entire story had been told in response to her son's question, "Why did little Jimmy shoot himself?" Her nephew had shot himself."²⁴¹ Tragedy had permeated the Native village.

An allusion to suicide is also found in *Bear Bones and Feathers*. In the poem *Tribal Warfare*, a former student, who now suffers from domestic violence, attempts to overdose: "Later/ in the psychiatric ward/ the doctor asked why/ she took so many pills."²⁴² Due to the relative anonymity of Halfe's poems, the reference to suicide may be signifying the prevalence of it in Aboriginal communities. The typecast of Native people committing suicide is seen from White society's perspective in *In Search of April Raintree*. A passerby who witnesses Cheryl jumping off the bridge says to police, "Those Indians are always killing themselves. If they aren't shooting each other on the reserves, it's this."²⁴³

Suicide, therefore, became a part of the Aboriginal community, often in conjunction with the depression, and alcohol and drug use, which were the product of residential school experiences. Though it had been almost unheard of before assimilation, the increased occurrence of suicide by Aboriginals, which today is three times higher than White Canadians, presents an argument for linking this action with residential schools and their long-term effects.

²⁴¹ Mosionier, 197.

²⁴² Halfe, 78.

²⁴³ Mosionier, 190.

Loss of Sexual Norms

The sexualized childhoods of former students also left many adult survivors without a clear understanding of appropriate sexual behaviors and/or norms. Popular historian Suzanne Fournier explains that adults who suffered sexual abuse as children often come to view themselves merely as sexual beings, which is “a devastating blow to their self-esteem expressed later in their lives through compulsive sexual behavior, promiscuity, sex addiction, prostitution, and an inability to found relationships on love rather than lust.”²⁴⁴ The effects that sexual abuse had on survivors were unique to each gender and individual.

In the case of males who were sexually abused in the schools, some dealt with their pain by asserting their masculinity as a way to regain control of their own sexuality—appropriately or not. This is clearly illustrated in *Porcupines and China Dolls*, in which the characters dialogue and interactions are overtly sexual. In the novel, James, and several of the other male characters, suffer from commitment issues and have sexual addictions. Alexie describes the former male students promiscuous behavior. “They told of how they became sluts to show they were men. Real men fucked their brains out, and that’s what they did. They fucked anything that moved. They lied about the women they fucked and took advantage of.”²⁴⁵ Thus the abused men used their adult sexuality as a way to prove both their masculinity and their heterosexuality.

Similar behavior is also discussed in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. In response to the sexual abuse Jeremiah suffered at the hands of Father Lafleur, Jeremiah is repulsed by homosexuality. This affects his relationship with Gabriel, as well as his own sexual

²⁴⁴ Fournier and Crey, 121.

²⁴⁵ Alexie 197.

behavior. When Jeremiah finds out that Gabriel is a homosexual, he asks, “How can you let someone do what that disgusting old priest did to you. How can you seek out people like that?”²⁴⁶ Jeremiah’s discomfort with Gabriel’s lifestyle is clearly connected to the sexual abuse he endured, which he negatively correlates with homosexuality.

Jeremiah believes that it is better to abstain from sexual intimacy than to give in to one’s natural desires, if they are homosexual. When he sees Gabriel kissing another man, Jeremiah reacts: “He clamped his eyes shut, swallowed hard, and willed his body dead. It existed no longer; from this day on, he was intellect –pure, undiluted, precise.”²⁴⁷ While the novel describes Gabriel’s highly sexualized lifestyle, few references are made to Jeremiah’s sexual activity. One encounter shows his disdain for homosexuality, which leads him to the opposite end of the spectrum. While in bed with Amanda, he is only aroused when he is watching a soap opera on television, in which a man and a woman are having a domestic dispute. When the show ends, “He couldn’t get erect. His sex was dead. The very thought made him sick, as with cancer. Somehow, misogynistic violence –watching it, thinking it –was relief.”²⁴⁸ While Jeremiah is not in favor of heterosexual violence, he likes it if only for the fact that it is not gay.

In contrast, rather than denying his sexuality, Gabriel freely exploits it as a form of power and control. Throughout the novel, Gabriel frequently has sex with strangers for money, even when he doesn’t need it. By selling his body, Gabriel is attempting to reclaim the power that he lost in residential school. His promiscuity has a devastating effect on his life, leading him to contract AIDS. Yet even after he finds out this news, he continues his risky behavior. Immediately after walking out of the clinic, Gabriel has sex

²⁴⁶ Highway, 207.

²⁴⁷ Highway, 205.

²⁴⁸ Highway, 260.

with a man he runs into. “Ten minutes later, he emerged from the alleyway behind the clinic, respirator in hand like a briefcase, a hundred bucks tucked away.”²⁴⁹ For Gabriel, sex is not something intimate or special, it is simply part of a game, which can be directly connected to the way in which he was sexually objectified as a child.

Similarly, the concept of sexuality as a source of regaining one’s power is also described in *Bear Bones and Feathers*. The poem *Nitotem* revolves around a young boy who was sexually molested in residential school. Describing his adult life, Halfe writes, “On the reserve he had already raped two/ women, the numbers didn’t matter. / Sister Superior was being punished. It was/ Father who said it was woman’s fault/ and that he would go to hell.”²⁵⁰ In this case, a male survivor is trying to reclaim his masculinity and heterosexuality through the horrific act of rape.

The improper sexual behavior of former students is also addressed in *The Lesser Blessed*. In a flashback, Larry describes a revolting memory that illustrates his father’s sexual dysfunction. “My mom was passed out on the couch. This was back when she used to drink. She had gone to residential schools, too. She was passed out, in her bathrobe. My father took the broomstick and started laughing. He spread her legs with the yellow broomstick—I shot awake. “‘Fuck fuck fuck,’ I said. ‘No!’”²⁵¹ This particular incident can be dually connected to residential schools, in terms of Larry’s father’s lack of appropriate sexual behavior, as well as alcoholism.

Larry also describes a grotesque scene where he witnessed his father violating his wife’s sister, Verna, while she was passed out on the couch. Larry explained, “He was on top of her and he had her shirt up and everything. I wanted to scream [...] I was crying so

²⁴⁹ Highway, 295.

²⁵⁰ Halfe, 75.

²⁵¹ Van Camp, 57-8.

hard my legs shook. My aunt came over the next day and said, ‘I feel like someone’s been inside me, ‘but my mom talked her out of it. My mom fuckin’ knew!’”²⁵² Larry is scarred by both witnessing the act, and by his mother’s knowing denial. A young April is also scarred in *In Search of April Raintree*, when she gets up to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, and sees her mother naked, kissing a man who is not her father. Back in bed, April expresses, “I tried to figure everything out, but I couldn’t.”²⁵³

As seen in the texts, the twisted and sexualized childhoods of residential school students who experienced abuse led many to have a complete lack of sexual appropriateness. Some former students acted promiscuous in attempt to gain control, or because they had no concept of self-worth. Others were scarred by their early introduction to sexuality, and thus rejected or feared sexual intimacy. And in some extreme cases, sexual abuse deeply disturbed some former students to the point where they had no concept of sexual correctness, thus engaging in deviant behavior. Sadly, the sexuality abnormality of former students would be witnessed by their own children, leading to the second generation effects that are explored in the next section.

²⁵² Van Camp, 88.

²⁵³ Mosionier, 14.

Second Generation Effects

While this 'second generation' would be liberated from the physical confinement of residential schools, they would not be free of its legacy.²⁵⁴ Many residential school survivors lacked both the proper parenting and discipline skills necessary to raise children successfully. Yet life in Aboriginal communities went on as former residential school students began to form their own families. In some cases, the negative coping behaviors would be passed on from parent to child, thus perpetuating a cycle of anger, violence, and alcohol and drug abuse.

Rather than creating solutions for the problems which the residential schools had essentially created, the government's response was to once again step in and remove Aboriginal children from their 'unfit' parents and communities. Stó:lô Education Manager Gwendolyn Point explained the cyclical nature of Canadian Aboriginal history, "Ever since the Europeans first came, our children were stolen from our embrace. First the priests took our children away, to churches, to schools, even back to Europe. Then the residential schools took three or four generations away; then the social workers took our children and put them in non-native foster homes."²⁵⁵ Several of the second generation accounts provide powerful contemporary examples of the how the residential schools continued to wreak havoc, even after they were gone.

Loss of Parenting Skills

The lack of family structure in the schools left survivors without appropriate parenting skills, in terms of discipline, intimacy, and openness. Non-fiction writer Constance Deiter lists these 'lost' skills as: "loss of identity; loss of self-esteem; the

²⁵⁴ Alexie, 17.

²⁵⁵ Fournier and Crey, 7-8.

inability to think independently; the lack of unity within families and communities; the loss of language, culture, and respect for self; and finally the loss of [Aboriginal] spiritual values.”²⁵⁶ The impact of this loss is described in *Porcupines and China Dolls*. “They lacked one of the most important and fundamental skills needed to preserve the family unit. This skill cannot be taught, it can only be learned. This skill was parenting. A recipe for disaster was in the making, but no one knew it at the time.”²⁵⁷

Also, in the twisted childhood of residential school abuse survivors, their de-facto parents were also their sexual partners. Thus, mimicking the abuse exhibited in residential schools, incest, sexual abuse, and child abuse became rampant in Aboriginal communities where it was previously unheard of. John Milloy illustrated this shocking trend when he wrote, “A 1989 study sponsored by the Native Women’s Association of the Northwest Territories found that eight out of ten girls under the age of eight were sexually abused, and fifty percent of boys the same age had been sexually molested.”²⁵⁸ The sexualized childhoods of former students left many adult survivors without a clear understanding of appropriate sexual behavior and age boundaries, which was transferred to their children. And so the pattern of abuse continued.

The image of a dysfunctional Aboriginal family is described in *Bear Bones and Feathers*. In the poem *Landscape*, Halfe writes, “A young girl, a two-year-old boy cry with coyotes, / their mother’s bones mending in the hospital, / their father selling horses and cattle for wine. / I see them running along the creek, two young coyotes/ yelping.”²⁵⁹ This passage creates the image of two young children on their own, because their father is

²⁵⁶ Constance Deiter. *From Our Mother’s Arms* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1999), 78.

²⁵⁷ Alexie, 17.

²⁵⁸ Milloy, 298.

²⁵⁹ Halfe, 115.

an alcoholic and an abuser, who has put their mother in the hospital. The children lack proper parenting figures, denoted by the metaphor of wild coyotes: “Coyote pups now roam that creek, sniffing/ for their parents. They run side by side, hungry.”²⁶⁰

The portrait of children raising themselves, due to unfit parents, is also described in *In Search of April Raintree*. As a young child, April was forced to take on a mothering role for her younger sister Cheryl. She described, “Cheryl and I always woke before our parents, so I would tend to Cheryl’s needs. I would feed her whatever was available, then wash her, and dress her in clean clothes. Weather permitting, we would then go off to the park.”²⁶¹ April’s parents were irresponsible and unable to take care of their children’s most basic needs due to their alcohol abuse and frequent partying.

A startling image of child neglect is also portrayed in *Bear Bones and Feathers*, in the poem, *Diaper Boy*. Halfe writes of a tragic childhood, “I was a kid my diapers full, / my legs chapped, lying against the slop pail. / They found me mosquito-bitten, snot all over/ my face, flies dancing free. / I was a naked starving mouse. / I was alone in the log shack, my mother and father at the beer parlour. Somebody walked by and heard/ my cry.”²⁶² Here the neglect of the child is once again directly connected to the parent’s alcoholism.

The Lesser Blessed provides some of the most compelling examples of the family dysfunction present in contemporary northern Aboriginal communities. Johnny, a high school student, is practically raising his younger brother Donny. While Johnny is discussing his brother’s poor school performance, Larry questions, ‘What does your mom

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Mosionier, 13.

²⁶² Halfe, 89.

think?’ He receives a curt reply, “‘Mom doesn’t give a shit,’ Johnny answered.”²⁶³ Larry describes his initial reaction when he first goes to Johnny’s apartment at Spruce Manor, a notoriously slum-like residence: “Johnny had done a motherload of dishes. They were stacked right and there were still more to be do. Ashtrays on the kitchen table were overflowing. There were about three sets of cards, all of which looked overused. There was a crib board there too, but I didn’t know how to play.”²⁶⁴ The description shows how Johnny’s home environment is a party house where there is likely gambling occurring. Larry further explains how the apartment completely lacks a feeling of home or safety:

The apartment was barren. I mean, there was nothing on the walls except for a Canadian flag that reached from one end of the room to the other, covering the windows completely. There was a TV, but it was piled on some old milk crates. I noticed the linoleum was peppered with burns where people had dropped their cigarettes and matches. The holes look like charred, blurred eyes staring at the ceiling.²⁶⁵

Many times violence was present in these broken homes. As previously mentioned, sometimes this abuse was between spouses and sometimes it was directed at the children. This is seen in *Bear Bones and Feathers*, as Halfe describes in the poem *Womanchild*: “Dragging blankets through the woods, /you asked me not to breathe, / not to whimper, not to cry. / He’s drunk again, you whispered, / as you made a bed of spruce boughs. There you sat while the moonlight walked/ and the night hawk whistled by.”²⁶⁶ In this passage it is evident that the mother is scared for both her own safety, as well as that of her children. The power and impact of the poem’s words come from the child’s perspective on the adult violence between her parents. The theme of inherent violence in

²⁶³ Van Camp, 49.

²⁶⁴ Van Camp, 15.

²⁶⁵ Van Camp, 16.

²⁶⁶ Halfe, 38.

the homes of former residential school students, especially in connection with drinking, overlaps with the examples of domestic violence already cited.

The final and most devastating consequence of the lack of parenting skills and sexual norms created by the schools was sexual abuse. Incest is first cited in *Ravensong*, in the case of the character Old Snake, an alcoholic and residential school survivor. His wife, Madeline, and their children, live with his physical abuse for many years without seeking help. Thus when his wife shoots the Snake one day, the village is shocked and alarmed. Soon, Stacey and others find out the truth: “The snake had violated his daughter, his own daughter. Everyone in the room was shocked and disgusted.”²⁶⁷ This act, unheard of and revolting to the villagers, caused them to expel the Snake, who is one of their own people, while allowing his wife, an outsider, to stay.

The connection between incest and drinking is also seen in *In Search of April Raintree*. April explained, “Drinking always seemed to be behind it. Nancy had been raped by her drunken father. Cheryl remarked that people called it incest, but Nancy insisted it was rape.”²⁶⁸ Incest is again referenced in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. While working with Native children at the Winnipeg Friendship Center, Jeremiah has a troubling moment with a student. After telling the children a story about the Cree mythological man-eating monster, Weetigo, young Willie Joe comes up to Jeremiah, burying his face in the man’s crotch and states, “A weetigo ate me.”²⁶⁹ The close interaction with the child reminds Jeremiah of his own past, and he is scared and horrified. Jeremiah later finds out that Willie Joe’s stepfather had sexually abused him.

²⁶⁷ Maracle, 162.

²⁶⁸ Mosionier, 97.

²⁶⁹ Highway, 271.

Finally, *The Lesser Blessed* addresses incest directly as it affected the main character, Larry. When Larry is knocked unconscious during a fight with Jazz, the pain leads him to have flashbacks of painful memories from his childhood. The reader learns indirectly that Larry started a house fire, which killed his father. The following passage explains the tragic circumstances that led Larry to the act of arson:

I wanted to take it away, the sin and the dirt and the cum and the blood in my mouth. I couldn't breath. My eye's were crying. My lips were split. I wanted to sew stitches through my lips. I thought he wanted me to pray when he said kneel down. I couldn't breathe. I wanted stitches. I though, Oh God, why is he feeding me mushroom juice? I couldn't breathe. He jammed it in so far I couldn't. I couldn't. I couldn't breathe. I wanted to sew stitches through my lips so he could never fuck me there again. Mother. The flame light. The flame rush. You stand there frozen.²⁷⁰

The chilling description illustrates the pain, confusion, anger, and humiliation Larry experienced when his own father molested him. It also provides some form of justification for why Larry started a fire as a last resort to stop the abuse. The fact that Larry's father attended residential school where male priests abused him can be seen as one of the factors behind his decision to abuse his own son. His lack of normative sexual behaviors and standards, combined with his alcohol abuse, created a situation in which the cycle of sexual abuse was continued.

Broken Communities

The selected fiction also addresses the continued negative effects of the residential schools in the Aboriginal community at large. The lack of proper role models and the lack of supervision in the home left many Aboriginal children free to indulge in the negative behaviors exhibited by their parents. Though this point should not be over-generalized, the fact that many examples of broken homes and communities are

²⁷⁰ Van Camp, 78-9.

addressed in the fiction provides evidence that the current situation of the Aboriginal community is bleak.

Statistics reinforce this observation. A Statistics Canada report on Aboriginal people living in metropolitan areas from 2001 found that Aboriginal children are far more likely than non-Aboriginals to live in one-parent homes. Specifically in the western cities of Winnipeg, Regina, and Saskatoon over half of Aboriginal children lived with only one parent. This is compared to 17% to 19% of non-Aboriginal children in the same areas.²⁷¹ A 2006 Census survey on Aboriginal children reported that Aboriginal people are more likely to have children at a younger age. The survey found that 27% of off-reserve First Nations children under the age of six had mothers aged fifteen to twenty-four. This is compared to the 8% of Non-Aboriginal children who had parents of the same age bracket. Additionally 57% percent of First Nations children, 45% of Inuit children and 42% percent of Métis children, under the age of six, were living in low-income families. This is compared to 18% of non-Aboriginal children.²⁷² These statistics show that the current home life of many Aboriginal youth is continually challenging, despite the fact that residential schools are now considered a part of the past.

The Aboriginal community as a whole also has higher than average rates of depression, drug and alcohol abuse, crime, and suicide, as well as lower than average health ratings and life expectancy. A 2001 study on the well-being of non-reserve Aboriginal peoples found that 7% percent of the Aboriginal population has diabetes,

²⁷¹ *Aboriginal people living in metropolitan areas*. Statistics Canada. June 23, 2005.
<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/050623/dq050623b-eng.htm>

²⁷² *Aboriginal Children's Survey, 2006: Family, Community and Child Care*. Statistics Canada.
<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-634-x/89-634-x2008001-eng.htm>

versus 2.9 % of non-Aboriginal Canadians.²⁷³ Poor health is connected to unhealthy behaviors, which were assessed in a 2001 community health survey of off-reserve Aboriginal peoples over the age of fifteen. People who considered themselves to be daily smokers accounted for 27.2 % of the Aboriginal population, as opposed to 12.6% of non-Aboriginals. Obesity rates are also higher for Aboriginals, accounting for 24.7% of the population, versus the non-Aboriginal average of 14%. Aboriginals are also more likely to be heavy drinkers, accounting for 22.6% of the population, as opposed to 16.1% of Canadian non-Aboriginals.²⁷⁴ Finally, a study by the National Native Association of Treatment Directors estimated that 80 percent of Aboriginal people in Canada are touched by alcoholism, either via personal addiction or through the addiction of a family member.²⁷⁵

A 2004 report by the Canadian Centre for Justice studies found that Aboriginals are more likely to suffer from domestic abuse (21% overall, 24% for women) than non-Aboriginals (6%). Incarceration statistics also reflect poorly on Canadian Aboriginals. From 2003-2004, Aboriginals accounted for 21% of persons admitted to provincial prisons, while representing around 3.8% of the total population. In Saskatchewan, Aboriginals made up 80% of the prison population, while accounting for only 10% of the adult population of the province.²⁷⁶

Finally suicide among Aboriginal people is three times more likely than for non-Aboriginals.²⁷⁷ A shocking 2000 Health Canada report found that suicide was the cause

²⁷³ Vivian O'Donnell and Heather Tait. *Aboriginal Peoples Survey 2001 - Initial Findings: Well-being of the Non-reserve Aboriginal Population*. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/>

²⁷⁴ Michael Tjepkema. *The health of the off-reserve Aboriginal Population*. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca>

²⁷⁵ Fournier and Crey, 174.

²⁷⁶ *2004 Report from Canadian Centre for Justice Studies*. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca>

²⁷⁷ Nancy Miller Chenier. *Suicide among Aboriginal people: Royal Commission Report*. <http://www.parl.gc.ca/information/library/prbpubs/mr131-e.htm>

of death for 22% of the youth Aboriginal population (10-19 years old).²⁷⁸ These types of problems, which are plaguing contemporary Aboriginal society, are referred to repeatedly in the fiction.

A negative depiction of urban Native people, specifically women, is illustrated in *In Search of April Raintree*. At a young age, a social worker tells the girls about “Native girl syndrome,” insinuating that they are headed in that direction. The general trajectory includes fighting, running away, pregnancy, unemployment, alcohol and drugs, prostitution, and finally jail. The worker explains, ““you’ll end up like your parents, living off society.””²⁷⁹ Sadly, some of these racist stereotypes ring true in the novel. When April returns to Winnipeg for a second summer, she comments that of the friends she had made the previous year, some had had gone to jail, and one was pregnant and on welfare.²⁸⁰ April refers to the girls whom Cheryl brings home from the Winnipeg Urban Friendship Center as a generalized type, “strays.” In reference to seventeen-year-old Nancy, April explains, “The story of her family life was similar to that of other native girls Cheryl met [...] Both Nancy and her mother prostituted themselves. Sometimes for money, sometimes for a cheap bottle of wine.”²⁸¹

As she begins to drink more heavily, Cheryl explains that she begins to “see more of what April sees, broken people with broken houses and broken furniture. The ones I see on Main Street, the one who give us our public image, the ones I see puking all over the public sidewalks, battling it out with each other, their blood smearing on city-owned

²⁷⁸ Health Canada. *Acting On What We Know: Preventing Youth Suicide in First Nations*. http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fnihah-spnia/pubs/promotion/_suicide/prev_youth-jeunes/index-eng.php

²⁷⁹ Mosionier, 62.

²⁸⁰ Mosionier, 88.

²⁸¹ Mosionier, 97.

property, women selling what's left of themselves for a cheap bottle of wine."²⁸² Cheryl comments on the negative affects of alcohol on the Aboriginal community, "If alcohol didn't have such a destructive force on us, we'd be a fabulous people."²⁸³

Throughout the novel *Porcupines and China Dolls*, the devastating effects of alcohol abuse, as a causal result of the schools, are also referred to. James sullenly describes the town bar, "The Saloon would never make the list of the ten best places to be. It was an Indian bar. People came here to drink, to look for possibilities and to bitch, whine or cry in their drinks—in that order. They also came to beg, borrow, whine, cry or demand a beer, smoke or the means from anyone and everyone. But that was normal. It was a fucking Indian bar."²⁸⁴ The Saloon represents a monotonous cycle in the story, where the majority of the community spends their entire day, if they are without work. James explains, "they walked into the Saloon like they'd done a million times before. They stood and waited until their eyes adjusted to the light or lack thereof, then looked to see who was in and who wasn't. *Same fuckin' people.*"²⁸⁵ When James and Jake arrive at the bar in the morning they check the board to see who was barred the previous night. James checks his watch and reflects, "quarter to eleven. *Fourteen 'n three-quarter hours till closin' time.*"²⁸⁶

A similar illustration of a troubled Aboriginal community is presented in *The Lesser Blessed*. Larry describes the fictional northern town of Fort Simmer as being, "okay, not much to do if you're not into booze or sports."²⁸⁷ He further explains the youth

²⁸² Mosionier, 196.

²⁸³ Mosionier, 152.

²⁸⁴ Alexie, 34-35.

²⁸⁵ Alexie, 51.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Van Camp, 3.

population of the town, when describing his crush Juliet; “Like 98 percent of the school population, she was into drugs and alcohol.”²⁸⁸ The problem of alcohol use by teens is so extreme in the town that Larry is one of the few that doesn’t drink, though he begins to over the course of the story. He explains, “I had a bet going with my dad that I wouldn’t touch a drop of liquor until I turned eighteen. He said he’d give me a hundred bucks if I make it.”²⁸⁹ The fact that his father made this bet implies that he knew the serious problem with drinking in the town, while the use of ‘if’ shows the lack of conviction in the wager.

Youth drug use is also a major problem in Fort Simmer. The practice of “hot knifing” in which baby plasticines (hash) are heated and the smoke is inhaled is a popular pastime for many of the teens.²⁹⁰ Larry tries it for the first time to fit in with his new friends, and over the course of a few weeks begins using it recreationally and regularly. The extremity of drug use by children is expressed in a comment by Larry’s mother’s boyfriend. “You know, I had to cut through the elementary playground today. Kids in the elementary are already starting to chew snuff.”²⁹¹ The increasingly early age of drug use in also addressed in *In Search of April Raintree*. April described, “Everyone in Nancy’s family drank, even the younger kids. Or the new rage was sniffing glue.”²⁹²

In *The Lesser Blessed*, Larry also describes how he started using drugs at a young age, directly in response to the traumatic events of his childhood. He describes an experience at Lake Rae with his cousins. “We used to play in the sand way down the beach. We’d take some toys down and build houses. We’d also sniff gas. I wasn’t too

²⁸⁸ Van Camp, 29.

²⁸⁹ Van Camp, 52.

²⁹⁰ Van Camp, 36.

²⁹¹ Van Camp, 102.

²⁹² Mosionier, 97.

crazy about it at first, but after seeing my dad do the bad thing to my aunt, it took the shakes away.”²⁹³ Like former residential school students, Larry’s drug use is also an attempt to repress painful memories.

In Search of April Raintree also addresses the issue of cyclical drug and alcohol abuse, passed on from parents to child. As an adult Cheryl finds out that her parents were alcoholics, and this was the reason the girls were sent into foster care. This truth, from which she has always been hidden, upsets her entire life. Lost and depressed, Cheryl turns to alcohol. She explains, “Gratefully, I swallow some beer. Disgust, hatred, shame... yes, for the first time in my life, I feel shame. How do I describe the feeling? I swallow more beer.”²⁹⁴ The shame strips Cheryl’s of her self-esteem, which is further perpetuated by alcohol.

I walk along Main Street. This is where I belong. With the other gutter-creatures. I’m my father’s daughter. My body aches. I enter a hotel. I don’t know which one. The word ‘Beverage’ is all I see. I need a drink. A couple drinks. The depression is bitterly deep. The booze doesn’t help this time. I’m back on the street. I’m drunk. I want to run in front of a car.²⁹⁵

Cheryl becomes an alcoholic, turns to prostitution, and puts up with an abusive boyfriend. She even tries to justify his actions to April. “He looks tough but he’s okay. When he laid into me, he was drunk, and I pretty well asked for it.”²⁹⁶ Her alcoholism also causes Cheryl to lose her own son, Henry, as previously mentioned. She explains, “Nancy’s mom is keeping Henry Lee for good now. Do I feel guilty? Only when I’m sober. And I try very hard to see that doesn’t happen.”²⁹⁷

²⁹³ Van Camp, 58.

²⁹⁴ Mosionier, 188.

²⁹⁵ Mosionier, 205.

²⁹⁶ Mosionier, 126.

²⁹⁷ Mosionier, 202.

This loss is one of the factors behind Cheryl's suicide at the end of the story. Completely distraught, April smashes a bottle of whiskey, and expresses her anger at alcohol, which has robbed her of her entire family. "My tears came flooding out and I continued screaming, 'I hate you for what you've done to my sister! I hate you for what you've done to my parents! I hate you for what you've done to my people!'"²⁹⁸ April had once generalized the problem of alcoholism with the entirety of the Aboriginal community—separate from herself. Yet at this moment, April, by using the words "my people," shows her acceptance of her Aboriginal identity.

Unsafe sexual behaviors and practices were also passed down generationally in many Aboriginal families and communities, as evidenced in *Bear Bones and Feathers*. In *Valentine*, the lack of parenting and emotional skills of the parents, who were former residential school students, directly affects the woman in the poem. Written in an oral vernacular, the woman places blame on her parents, "It's mudder's fault/ never told me right from wrong/ Fadder's fault/ always say mudder a slut./ Guess I should be one too. / Guess I showed dem."²⁹⁹ The passage shows how the negative images of women, constructed by her parents, caused the woman to lose her self worth and play into the stereotype.

The poem *Diaper Boy* addresses generational sexual problems from the male perspective. The child's lack of parenting has left him, as an adult, with a void for a mother figure that he needs to fill. He does this in a sexually irresponsible way, as Halfe writes, "See my long black, black braids? / I grease them with bear fat and gloss them. /

²⁹⁸ Mosionier, 194.

²⁹⁹ Halfe, 54.

Put on my Stetson/ Tie a red bandana around my neck/ charm the woman with beer and cigarettes/ and fill them with babies. / I make the women hold me.”³⁰⁰

The Lesser Blessed presents a different image, one of a complete lack of sexual knowledge in the community. After Johnny has sex with Juliet without using a condom, Larry recalls, “I remembered sex education and what the doctor had said: Fort Simmer is the STD capital of the territories. He said that a shower would get rid of some of the bacteria.”³⁰¹ This shows an absence of accurate sexual information, which is being passed on from adult educators to young students. It is evident that Johnny, and many of the other youth, don’t take sex seriously or consider the weight and responsibility of their actions. Thus when Juliet becomes pregnant, Johnny ignores her and won’t speak to her. He explains to Larry, “‘I’m just a kid, Lare,’ he whispered. ‘I want to be beautiful just a little bit longer.’”³⁰² Johnny’s lack of sexual norms can be derived from his mother’s irresponsible behavior. Larry described a conversation with Johnny: “‘Larry,’ he said, ‘if I have to listen to my mom fuck one more guy, I don’t know what I’m gonna do.’”³⁰³

Throughout the novel *Porcupines and China Dolls*, Alexie addresses various problems of the present Gwich’in community including sexual promiscuity, incest, sexually transmitted diseases, teen pregnancy, and rape. The sexual activity, language, and insinuations of the characters are almost endless in the novel. Yet, the prevalence of sexual diseases, and the lack of concern surrounding them, is evidenced by James’ reaction to Angie. “James wondered how many times he’d caught the clap from her [...] Still, when he was high she looked good enough to eat. If she’d asked him for a quickie,

³⁰⁰ Halfe, 89.

³⁰¹ Van Camp, 44.

³⁰² Van Camp, 117.

³⁰³ Van Camp, 52.

he might have done it. He knew there was no “might” about it. He would’ve.”³⁰⁴ Though Angie is considered promiscuous and looked down upon by most of the community, almost everyone is unaware of the tragic events of her past. “What only three people knew was that Angie had been raped as a teenager. The two men who repeatedly took turns with her took her virginity, her dignity and her future.”³⁰⁵ This passage begins to explain Angie’s lack of self-worth, her loose and unsafe sexual behaviors, and her alcoholism.

Kiss of the Fur Queen also addresses the contemporary problem of Native women being raped and murdered. Highway uses exquisite yet horrific language as he describes the slain women: “Madeline Jeanette Lavoix, erstwhile daughter of Mistik Lake, skewered in sex by fifty-six thrusts of a red-handled Phillips screwdriver [...] Evelyn Rose McCraw, long-lost daughter of Mistik Lake, her womb crammed with broken beer bottles.”³⁰⁶ Interestingly, the exact same imagery is seen in *Bear Bones and Feathers*. In the poem *Sister*, Halfe writes of an Aboriginal woman who was raped and killed, “In the morgue *e-pimisik*,/ on a steel table. / Scarred face/ crushed. / Work boots/ trampled her in./ Her arm crooked/ limp by her side/ vagina raw, bleeding/ stuffed with a beer bottle.”³⁰⁷ These representations are meant to reflect on the connection between rape and alcohol.

In Search of April Raintree also explores the problem of rape in the Aboriginal community. When April is abducted on the street, the inherent racism of her attackers is evident, ““So you’re a real fighting squaw, huh? That’s good because I like my fucking

³⁰⁴ Alexie, 38.

³⁰⁵ Alexie, 79.

³⁰⁶ Highway, 215-16.

³⁰⁷ Halfe, 93.

rough.' He laughed at that."³⁰⁸ Despite her traumatic victimization, April expects, as a Métis person, that the police will be suspicious of her accusations. "When the RCMP came, I expected that they would insinuate I had somehow provoked the rape."³⁰⁹

Incest, suicide, alcohol and drug use, sexual assault, rape, promiscuity, sexually transmitted diseases, teen pregnancy, child neglect; these are the chronic problems of the present Aboriginal community. The prevalence of these themes in the fiction reflects the deep, intractable nature of these problems. In an effort to combat these unhealthy social behaviors, Aboriginal writers are exploring these problems and their roots. Yet while it may be relatively easy for authors to list and describe these problems, it is much harder to provide resolution. The final section will look at how these works of fiction are valuable as healing and teaching tools, and how the stories themselves are part of the answer.

³⁰⁸ Mosionier, 128.

³⁰⁹ Mosionier, 134.

VII. Healing and Teaching

Leaders of the Aboriginal healing movement agree that repairing the connection with one's culture is a vital part of the recovery process for survivors of the residential school system.³¹⁰ Thus, for Aboriginal people to deal with the experiences and effects of the schools, they must, like their elders, find a way to tell their story, and in doing so reclaim their past. An author's personal healing experience is often reflected in the characters in the story, thus the books offer a message to the reader. For example, "getting back to one's roots" is a constant healing theme found in the stories.

The plotline of *Kiss of the Fur Queen* is loosely based on the experiences of Tomson Highway and his brother, René, who endured physical, mental, and sexual abuse while attending the Guy Hill Indian Residential School, in Manitoba. Both openly gay, René was a dancer and choreographer who died of AIDS in 1990.³¹¹ Writing the book after René's death, Highway admitted the novel served as a coping method, saying, "If I couldn't have written it, I would have killed myself."³¹² For Highway, writing served as a channel to release demons. He explained, "I had to write this book. It came screaming out because this story needed desperately to be told. Writing it hit me hard in terms of my health. So I went to a medicine man, who helped me defeat the monster. We lanced the boil and cured the illness."³¹³

For Highway, writing was a positive, creative outlet for his pain and he imparts this on the characters in the novel. Jeremiah turns to classical piano and Gabriel to classical ballet, as artistic forms of healing and expression. While talented, both brothers

³¹⁰ Fournier and Crey, 139.

³¹¹ Athabasca University Center for Language and Literature, "Canadian Writers: Tomson Highway." Athabasca University, <http://www.athabasca.ca/writers/thighway.html>

³¹² McKegney, 50.

³¹³ Suzanne Methot. "The universe of Tomson Highway." *Quill and Quire*. November 2008. http://www.quillandquire.com/authors/profile.cfm?article_id=1216

are unable to find widespread acclaim or fulfillment in the traditionally White artistic genres. It isn't until the characters reclaim their Cree identity and incorporate their heritage into their contemporary art that Jeremiah and Gabriel find both solace and success. Highway describes the groundbreaking performance,

“And, suddenly, the piano was a pow wow drum propelling a Cree Round Dance with the clangour and dissonance of the twentieth century. Gabriel knew that his magic had worked, for the audience was speaking to some space inside themselves, some void that needed filling, some depthless sky; and this sky was responding”³¹⁴

As author Suzanne Fournier explains, “Rather than being consumed by past trauma Jeremiah channels his anguish into creative work that will not only aid his personal healing, but will provide the cultural materials for a broader Indigenous empowerment.”³¹⁵

Though his personal opinions on residential schools are complicated (Highway has said the school helped him to get to where he is today),³¹⁶ *Kiss of the Fur Queen's* most simplistic message is that residential school survivors need to relearn their cultural traditions and heritage. With this knowledge, individuals can positively reshape their identities and lifestyles. It can also be applied to constructive and healthy forms of coping, such as the arts.³¹⁷ In the novel Highway provides an example of this positive behavior when describing Jeremiah's volunteer work at the Muskoosis Club, a community center that promotes the teaching of Cree tradition to urban Aboriginal youth.³¹⁸

³¹⁴ Highway, 267.

³¹⁵ Fournier and Crey, 171.

³¹⁶ Methot, 1.

³¹⁷ McKegney, 151.

³¹⁸ Highway, 269.

Highway also employs fiction for a second function: political activism. The novel highlights the urban plight of many Aboriginal peoples in the city of Winnipeg. In doing this Highway draws the focus away from the historical tragedy of residential schools and towards the modern oppression and racism facing urban Aboriginal people. Three Aboriginal women are raped and murdered in the story, and alcoholism is present in Highway's descriptions of a "dark" and drunken downtown Winnipeg.³¹⁹ The fictional aspect of the story gives Highway both the emotional distance to describe his abusive experiences, and the freedom to discuss the ongoing struggle of the Aboriginal community, making the novel much more than a 'story about abuse.'

My Name is Seepeetza is also based on the experiences of author Shirley Sterling (given name Seepeetza), a member of the Salish Nation of British Columbia. The book's front and back cover feature pictures of the author at the Kamloops Indian Residential School in the late 1950s.³²⁰ The story is fictional because Sterling could not recount the exact details of each day to fit the diary format.³²¹ The author explained, "The brown parcel is real. Martha Stone is real. The voice is mine."³²²

At first, Sterling had no intentions of writing a book about residential school, as she explained, "I could not and did not want to remember school."³²³ The format of the novel, and its aim at children, comes from the fact that it was written for a children's literature creative writing course. Upon completion, Sterling was wary of publication, "It was too close to me. People knowing all those awful things: Welcome to the tub room

³¹⁹ Highway, 105.

³²⁰ Gavin Wilson. "Grad reveals wisdom in elders' storytelling." *UBC Reports*. University of British Columbia. November 1997. <http://www.publicaffairs.ubc.ca/ubcreports/1997/97nov13/gradgw.html>

³²¹ Shirley Sterling. "Seepeetza Revisited: An Introduction to Six Voices." *Educational Insights*. Centre for the Study of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of British Columbia, <http://www.ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/archives/v03n01/sterling.html>

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Ibid.

where a supervisor tries to bully an eight-year-old into undressing completely.”³²⁴

Publishing the book as fiction provided some emotional distance for the author, while still teaching youth about the experiences of their elders. The novel won the British Columbia Book Award for Children's Literature, and is featured on reading lists ranging from fourth grade to university. Sterling has also received feedback from other survivors who relate to the emotions of the experience, as well as Aboriginal youth who ask her about topics like racism and suicide. Sterling's personal message for healing focuses on sharing and storytelling, and staying connected to one's heritage.

This belief is supported by the narrative in *My Name is Seepeetza*. Martha uses writing to record and rationalize negative events, and also to reflect and remember positive memories. When she returns home for the summer at the end of the book, Martha seeks to reestablish the relationship with her culture. The last words of the novel express the convergence of new and old. “If Yah-yah is in the mountains where we go to pick berries, I'll ask her to make a buckskin cover for it [her journal]. I'll ask her to bead fireweed flowers on it.”³²⁵ Sterling herself often felt disconnected from her culture because she didn't believe she was raised traditionally enough. The process of writing inspired her to learn about the stories, customs, and Native skills of her elders. She describes this journey in the book's dedication:

May you recover the treasure that has been lost, the name that gives your life meaning, the mythology by which you can pick up and rebuild the shattered pieces of the past, your own ancient language speaking of ice ages and hairy mammoths, perhaps a little cabin on a grassy hill at the edge of a forest where a grandmother sang a lullaby and made you gloves, or a proud father carved you a whistle out of willow sticks.³²⁶

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Sterling, 126.

³²⁶ Sterling, 2.

For Robert Arthur Alexie, the writing process was clearly a method of healing. A survivor of the residential school system, the author wrote *Porcupines and China* while in rehab for alcoholism treatment. This fact provides some background for the novel's focus on the long-term effects of abuse on former students, and the realistic portrayal of the current state of the North West Territories Teetl'it Gwich'in community. As shown in the novel, Alexie attributes these problems to locking one's memories inside, and attempting to repress them with drugs, sex, and alcohol.

Therefore Alexie provides a two part healing process: First, sharing, and second, embracing Native values and customs. In the novel, Jake breaks the silence about his own abuse, which inspires similar declarations by other male survivors in the community. In the disclosure sessions, Jake picks up the once forgotten Talking Stick and declares that while he shall run no more, "healing is a journey—there is no end."³²⁷ Alexie champions the idea that the acknowledgement of abuse is the only way to constructively and successfully deal with the pain. As elder Bertha explains to Jake, "It's getting' rid of it through talkin' 'n cryin' that's gonna help you. If you don't get rid of it, it'll kill you...like it's done to so many of our People."³²⁸

After over fifty people disclose their experience of abuse at the residential school, the community begins to reject European values and look back to Native traditions. After days of healing workshops the community holds a ceremony for Michael, the former student who committed suicide. Alexie describes the scene, "Without a word, Old Pierre brought out the drums, and for the first time in fifty years, the People sang the Old Songs in the mountain for the caribou. They sang loud and lifted their voices to the heavens. All

³²⁷ Alexie, 188.

³²⁸ Alexie, 100.

those who could understand the words stood around the fires and joined in. Even those who couldn't still joined in."³²⁹ The symbolic conclusion describes the community's decision to disregard White norms by exhuming Michael's body and bringing it into the Blue Hills, to perform the traditional Gwich'in burial ceremony.

The message within Louise Halfe's *Bear Bones and Feathers* is less straightforward. The themes of family and domestic violence and alcohol abuse addressed in the poems are drawn from Halfe's own life. Thus the author used her childhood memories as "healing arts." Halfe was born on the Saddle Lake Reserve in Alberta in 1953, and at age seven she was sent to the Blue Quills Residential School. At sixteen, Halfe left the school and parted ways with her abusive family, continuing her education at public school.³³⁰ Today, the poet, who has a degree in social work, is also certified in addiction counseling.

The process of returning to traditional Native ways underlies the theme of healing in the book. Several of the latter poems are written in the words of the Pope, as a series of apologies. In *I'm So Sorry* the 'Pope' suggests reclaiming traditional Aboriginal spiritual values and practices. "Maybe I could build healing churches/ chapels full of sweetgrass and drums/ chase the spirits out and fill sweatlodges/ full of armed angels."³³¹ Halfe also expresses outrage that white spectators are now exploiting Native rituals, such as sweatlodges, which were once forbidden by the government.³³² Halfe writes about the importance of Native people taking back their customs, without having to ask for permission from the Church or White society.

³²⁹ Alexie, 224.

³³⁰ Halfe, biography.

³³¹ Halfe, 98.

³³² Halfe, 103.

Halfe also addresses ways to stop the cycle of violence in the Aboriginal community. In her poems Halfe depicts a Native woman being raped, impregnated, and later aborting the baby. In contrast, Halfe describes her own pregnancy and her decision to stop the cycle of violence. In *Returning* she writes, “Yet, when the life in my belly kicked and milk trickled down my breasts the mountains called. The sweet sweetgrass smoke and the sweatlodge rocks woke my spirit. I knew then where I was cradled.”³³³ Halfe again highlights the importance of embracing one’s heritage in the process of stopping cyclical problems.

Like several of the other survivor stories, *Bear Bones and Feathers* also advocates the tradition of storytelling as healing technique. In the afterword, *Comfortable in My Bones*, Halfe explained that writing poetry was a therapy in which she could release her emotions and thoughts, no matter how trivial.

I bore feelings that needed song. I often suffered the rash of shame bursting through the thin layers of skin. Yet my spirit demanded the spring of clear blood. I saw no need to run. The land, the Spirit doesn’t betray you. I was learning to cry with the Spirit. I was safe to tear, to lick, to strip the stories from my bones and to offer them to the universe.³³⁴

Though Halfe immersed herself in Native traditions, such as sweatgrass and tobacco offerings, she recognized the potential of combining the tradition of oral storytelling with the modern medium of writing. Like Highway, the words came fluidly, as she explained, “The stories inside me demanded face. They became my medicine, creating themselves in the form of poetry.”³³⁵

While Cree writer Larry Loyie took a vastly different approach to depicting the residential school experience in the children’s story *As Long as the Rivers Flow*, penning

³³³ Halfe, 206.

³³⁴ Halfe, 126.

³³⁵ Halfe, 127.

the semi-autobiographical book was nevertheless therapeutic for the author. Loyie used writing as an outlet for dealing with his own experience at St. Bernard's Mission. The preface to the story reads, "In 1944, Larry Loyie, who was then known as Lawrence, was ten years old and living with his family near Slave Lake in northern Alberta, Canada. This is his story."³³⁶ Loyie chose the medium because he felt Aboriginal children lacked children's stories that were representative of their culture. In addition, a children's book about residential school can introduce the topic to children in an age-appropriate way.

The fictional element of the book makes it possible for Loyie to add larger symbolic meaning to the story. Lawrence and his siblings care for an orphaned owl 'Ooh-Hoo,' which serves as a metaphor for children in residential schools who didn't have parents to teach them necessary and traditional skills. Yet Lawrence cares for the owl and eventually it learns how to fly on its own. For Aboriginal children Ooh-Hoo's journey is a story of survival in the face of oppression, very much like their own. While children's books often tell simple stories, they are equally as important as more politically charged literature because they encourage and inspire children to increase their knowledge, so that they can tell stories of their own.

Authors of second generation accounts also draw heavily on their own personal experiences and the Aboriginal communities around them. Like the main character in *The Lesser Blessed*, author Richard Van Camp is a member of the Dogrib nation who grew up in Fort Smith, Northwest Territories (the town is fictionalized as Fort Simmer in the novel). As a youth, Van Camp loved reading and writing, but felt that no one was telling his story. This void inspired him to write *The Lesser Blessed*. He explained, "Nobody was writing about the beauty and the challenges of growing up in the NWT. [...] So

³³⁶ Larry Loyie. *As Long as the Rivers Flow* (Toronto: Douglas & McIntyre, 2002.)

when I was 19 I remember it was a very conscious decision I said I am going to tell the world about how beautiful it is up here in the NWT. I'm going to tell my truth, I'm going to tell my stories, I'm going to tell the stories of my family, my cousins, my friends.”³³⁷

Despite the dark undertones of the novel, Van Camp believes that the message of the story at the end is one of hope. Much like the author himself, Larry learns the beauty and importance of storytelling. As the first published Dogrib writer, Van Camp explained the power of written word. “I think writers can be more effective sometimes than politicians because again, what you are doing is planting seeds of light and I don't just write for the Dogrib Indians I write for everybody.”³³⁸ The author also believes in the blending of tradition with modernity, specifically in reference to his writing style. “When I write now, I braid the oral tradition I grew up with and combine it with what I see today.”³³⁹

In the novel, Larry finds comfort and peace by releasing the demons of his past through storytelling. When opening up to Johnny and Juliet about his heritage, his abusive childhood, and about the fire that killed his father, Larry is able to forge real human connections for the first time in his life. He also learns that with a good story he can make even the glib Johnny quiet.³⁴⁰ After telling Johnny the Dogrib creation story Johnny remarks, “You're a storyteller, man. Your voice even changed when you

³³⁷ Jordan Wilson. “An interview with Richard Van Camp.” Canadian Literature. December 2008.
<http://www.canlit.ca/interviews.php?interview=6>

³³⁸ Ibid.

³³⁹ Liz Mavor. “Interview with Richard Van Camp.” Kegedonce Press. December 9, 2004.
http://www.kegedonce.com/authors_richard.php

³⁴⁰ Van Camp, 92.

talked.””³⁴¹ The comment resonates with Larry, ““Yeah?’ I asked, proud of the moment and the revelation. This was the first time I had told the story and I liked how it felt.””³⁴²

For Beatrice Culleton Mosionier, *In Search of April Raintree* is a much more personal story. As an Métis person who grew up in the foster care system in Winnipeg, the author’s own background inspired her writing. Mosionier’s own parents suffered from alcoholism, and she was separated from her siblings, one brother and two sisters, in foster care. Yet in Mosionier’s own life she had loving and accepting foster parents. She fictionalized this aspect of the novel to represent the racist and dysfunctional foster homes that existed, but that she did not experience directly. Parallel to April’s experience in the novel, Mosionier’s two sisters, as well as her nephew, committed suicide. Writing the semi-autobiographical novel was a coping technique for the author.³⁴³

Addressing and accepting one’s past is a similar vehicle for healing in the novel. The book opens with April’s words, “I always felt most of my memories were better avoided, but now I think it’s best to go back in my life before I go forward.””³⁴⁴ As a result of her upbringing, April spent most of her life rejecting her Native heritage and denying this part of her identity. Yet, the end of the novel, when Cheryl commits suicide and April has lost her entire family to alcohol, marks the moment when April finally embraces her Aboriginal heritage. April had often denied her relation to Cheryl, as it would inversely confirm her own Native identity. Yet, when she goes to the bridge where Cheryl took her own life, and a witness is generalizing Cheryl’s actions, April reacts,

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Moisionier, 248.

³⁴⁴ Moisionier, 9.

“She was my sister, mister,’ I said. What did he know? Someday, maybe, I could explain to people like him why they did it.”³⁴⁵

Though devastated by her sister’s death, the tragedy is a catalyst for April’s final acceptance of her Métis heritage. She asserts, “‘Well, you cut down my sister, my parents, my people. But no more. I’ll see to it. Somehow. Some way.’”³⁴⁶ Soon after, April finds out her sister had a son, who she had given up because she was unable to raise him. April realizes the opportunity to stop the cycle of child-loss and regain her family. The epiphany is similar to that of Jeremiah’s in *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. April relates her reaction to seeing her kin:

As I stared at Henry Lee, I remembered that during the night I had used the words ‘MY PEOPLE, OUR PEOPLE’ and meant them. The denial had been lifted from my spirit. It was tragic that it had taken Cheryl’s death to bring me to accept my identity. But no, Cheryl had once said, ‘all life dies to give new life.’ Cheryl had died. But for Henry Lee and me, there would be a tomorrow. And it would be better. I would strive for it. For my sister and her son. For my parents. For my people.³⁴⁷

In *Ravensong* the literal and figurative means of healing the disease plaguing the village is through the sharing of knowledge. This message is representative of the author’s personal belief in the power of education. A member of the Stó:lo Nation, Lee Maracle is of Salish and Cree ancestry. Growing up poor in North Vancouver, she attended public school and was plagued with a feeling of disconnect from her Native heritage. She dropped out of school and worked for years, until political activism inspired her return to her Native culture, and academia. This journey is reflected in the novel. While the story advocates Native people “getting back to their roots,” it also provides a second and more controversial message: taking these Native beliefs and ideas and sharing

³⁴⁵ Moisonier, 190.

³⁴⁶ Moisonier, 195.

³⁴⁷ Moisonier, 207.

them with White society. This message comes through the mythological Raven character in the novel. “Raven could power up the image she needed to end the drought which seemed to plague the people. It was a drought of thought. They had not retreated for some time to the place of sacred thought.”³⁴⁸ This passage, and the underlying meaning of the novel, represents Maracle’s view that the central project for Aboriginal people in the twenty-first century is “reclaiming ourselves.” She further explains, “I think we have to find a way to live as Aboriginal people and as Canadians, which means dealing with patriarchy and misogyny at the personal level.”³⁴⁹

This point is representative of the theme of the novel, the struggle between traditional Native life and the modern White world. This identity crisis had been troubling for Stacey, but towards the end of the story she appears to have found a compromise. Stacey wishes to educate her own people, the youth of the village, in their own setting, thus ending the cycle of child removal from the village. She explained, “Indian Affairs had a new policy—Indian Day Schools on reserve. She wanted to start her own school, right here in the village.”³⁵⁰ The other villagers were wholly supportive of this plan, and her mother believed it would “alter the course of their history forever.”³⁵¹ Still, Stacey would first have to leave her village to go out into White society and share her Aboriginal knowledge with the world. On the day she leaves the village, “Raven brought Gramma’s voice to Stacey’s ears: ‘We will never escape the sickness until we learn how it is we are to live with these people. We will always die until the

³⁴⁸ Maracle, 23.

³⁴⁹ “Distinguished Visitor in Women's Studies 2007 Lee Maracle.” University of Windsor. <http://www.uwindsor.ca/units/womensstudies/speakers.nsf/SubCategoryFlyOut/1F18F5684ABAA59585256D6C00824B83>

³⁵⁰ Maracle 59.

³⁵¹ Maracle, 58.

mystery of their being is altered.”³⁵² Stacey agrees with these words and decides, “She would go forth, collect the magic words of white town and bring them home.”³⁵³

The author does not conclude the book with such a fairy tale ending. In the prologue she writes that when Stacey returned to the village, the government wouldn't allow her to build the school. Thus her dreams and the potential for healing the village are crushed. And so the continued loss of children and community continue in Stacey's village. This leads up to the revelation that Stacey's nephew committed suicide, which was the impetus for the story to be told. Stacey explained how her son's naïve question unraveled the past. “In trying to answer the question with a story she felt the necessity to recapture the lost sense of community that lay wounded in the shape of Jimmy's suicide. It took all winter for Celia, Stacey, Momma and Rena to recount that summer. Young Jacob sat in silence listening to the women.”³⁵⁴

The child's death translates into Maracle's message of the importance of storytelling as a coping technique. In her own life, Maracle had a deep seeded love for stories. “Maracle wrote her first poem the day she learned to read and knew at the age of 10 that she wanted to recreate myths.”³⁵⁵ Throughout the novel, stories were viewed as a means to learn about other people. They also serve as a way for Stacey and her mother to open up to each other. Yet the divide is evident between Stacey's mother, who is illiterate and uses oral storytelling, and Stacey, who adopts the modern medium of written word. In this example, Maracle respects the beauty of oral tradition but pushes for

³⁵² Maracle, 192.

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Maracle, 197.

³⁵⁵ “Distinguished Visitor in Women's Studies 2007 Lee Maracle.” University of Windsor. <http://www.uwindsor.ca/units/womensstudies/speakers.nsf/SubCategoryFlyOut/1F18F5684ABAA59585256D6C00824B83>

the education of Native people and the embracing of the modern medium. She explained that in her life, writing has allowed her to “create a new place of belonging by going back to aboriginal stories and re-creating them in a modern, personal context.”³⁵⁶

In *Three Day Road*, healing constitutes both a real and symbolic journey back into nature and traditional Cree life. This voyage is reflective of the path of author Joseph Boyden’s own life. The author is of Scottish, Irish, and Métis (Ojibwe) heritage. His father was a successful doctor, and Boyden grew up in an Irish Catholic family in 1980s Toronto. Yet, Boyden was enchanted by his uncle Erl, who, unlike his father had returned to a traditional Ojibwe lifestyle in Northern Ontario, after World War One. The author explained his complex identity, “My heart is part Irish, part Ojibwe. I’m a Canadian in America. I’m grounded by history, and I am inspired by legend. I’m part my father, part my uncle.”³⁵⁷ After moving to the United States for university, Boyden felt a strong pull back to his roots in the Canadian north. He returned to Ontario and explained, “Over the last ten years this gateway to the last great wilderness has become my muse and obsession.”³⁵⁸ Boyden draws from his own personal experiences, as well as those of his father and uncle, in *Three Day Road*. He continues to draw from his ‘muse,’ the dangerous yet beautiful Canadian north, in his latest novel, *Through Black Spruce*.

In the *Three Day Road*, Xavier undergoes a similar loss of identity and heritage while he is fighting in World War One. The all-encompassing violence and destruction of the war strip the soldier of his emotions, and his injuries lead him to develop a serious morphine addiction. Unfamiliar with white drugs, Xavier’s aunt is at first unsure how to heal her nephew. Yet during the symbolic three-day paddle up the river, she employs

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

³⁵⁷ “Joseph Boyden.” Biography. Penguin Group. 2008. <http://www.josephboyden.com/bio.htm>

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

storytelling and Native spiritual healing techniques in an attempt to save Xavier. While telling Xavier about his father, the last great talker of the clan, she explains the importance of storytelling during bad times, “His words forming invisible nets that he cast over us on the long winter nights, capturing us and pulling us in closer together so that we all collected each other’s warmth. And sometimes his stories were all we had to keep us alive.”³⁵⁹ When Xavier’s cries out in pain, Niska is forced to go back to painful memories of her own past in order to help Xavier. She explains, “It is the story of my childhood. Now I tell it to you, Xavier, to keep you alive.”³⁶⁰ She hopes that through her storytelling “some of the poison that courses through him might be released.”³⁶¹ The stories themselves become a form of nourishment for Xavier when he will not eat food. Niska described, “I feed him with my story instead.”³⁶² Though she has no medicine to cure her nephew, she believes in the calming power of stories and memories.

The second form of healing in the novel is the proverbial returning to one’s roots. At first, Xavier is unable to talk to Niska about the horrors of war and what happened to Elijah. Yet, these demons are killing him more than the morphine. At the end of the journey, Niska builds a *matatosowin* [sweatlodge], and she brings a dying Xavier inside it. The mythical quality of the *matatosowin* helps to release Xavier’s grief. She describes, “The pain that Nephew has carried inside of himself for so long is leaving his body and swirling around in this place.”³⁶³ Then in a climactic moment of divining, the stone splits in half from the weight of the heat, “and the presence is gone.”³⁶⁴ Xavier is set free from

³⁵⁹ Boyden, 33.

³⁶⁰ Boyden, 33.

³⁶¹ Boyden, 82.

³⁶² Boyden, 120.

³⁶³ Boyden, 348-9.

³⁶⁴ Boyden, 349.

the guilt he feels from his mistranslation of Niska's letter, which he believed said that it was OK to kill Elijah. Xavier knows that he is at peace with his brother, who was lost and spiritually dead even before his death. The story ends with Niska's positive vision of the future, one of happiness, where two young boys are playing on a lake.

The second valuable aspect of fiction is its teaching capabilities. The previous examples described how many Aboriginal authors advocate learning about one's heritage as a vital part of the healing process. Fiction offers a medium through which this knowledge can be channeled, and then digested by readers. All of the authors addressed in this paper use fiction as a way to pass along mythology, culture, customs and/or language, respective to their Aboriginal heritage, in an attempt to inform and inspire readers.

One of the most prevalent types of traditional knowledge transferred through the texts is mythology. In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Highway mixes White and Cree legends to create the Fur Queen character. The trickster-like figure first appears at a northern beauty queen pageant, and during the story transforms into an Arctic white fox. Similarly, in *Ravensong*, the mischievous Raven is a central, though looming character, who keeps a watchful eye over the village.

Highway also incorporates a common Cree creation story into the novel's plot. It is referenced to describe the birth of Gabriel. Highway illustrates the journey of birth in enchanting language. "This was the tale of newborn babies falling from beyond the stars, rousing cantankerous, hibernating bears, magnanimous lyric-poet rabbits and such."³⁶⁵ The myth is also used to show how Gabriel, as a young child, makes sense of an incomprehensible event like birth. A creation story is also told in *The Lesser Blessed*.

³⁶⁵ Highway, 32.

Larry tells the story of the Dogrib tribe that he learned from his mother's boyfriend. A woman in the tribe gave birth to six puppies, and she moved out into the woods to raise them. One day they all escaped from the hut and turned into children. When their mother returned, "They all make a run for the bag she used to leave them in. Three make it and turn back to pups. A girl and two boys don't. She catches them. They stay human and they're the first Dogribs. She raised them to be beautiful hunters with strong medicine."³⁶⁶

Finally, In *Porcupines and China Dolls*, the narrator shares both the legend behind the Blue People, as well as some of their customs. "It is said that the Creator took some red soil from one of the valley's in the Blue Mountains and created the Old People from whom all Blue People have descended. It was because of this that the People brought their dead to the mountains to be burned in the belief that their bodies would return to the land and their souls would continue on to the Old People, who still lived in the mountains."³⁶⁷

Several other Cree mythological characters are described in the *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, such as Chacagathoo, the evil woman, whose name is never spoken in the village. Her spirit is associated with the concept of *machipoowamoowin* [bad dream power]. The inclusion of this Cree concept is poignant, because the Okimasis brothers use it as an explanation for the sexual abuse they experience at school.³⁶⁸ The stories of the Cree *Weesageechak* and *Weetigo* characters are also described in novel, and they are similarly applied to White concepts. The *Weetigo*, a cannibal spirit, is used to rationalize the

³⁶⁶ Van Camp, 52.

³⁶⁷ Alexie, 6.

³⁶⁸ Jeremiah later finds out that Chacagathoo was the last female shaman in his village, who was imprisoned by the missionaries. He tries to correct this misinformation by writing a play on the medicine woman.

disturbing “flesh-eating” tendencies of the molesting priest. In Louise Halfe’s *Bear Bones and Feathers*, the stories of some of Cree mythological figures (with different spellings) *Wisahkecahk* and *Wihtikow*, are also weaved into the poetry. Interestingly, in *Three Day Road* Elijah’s last name is Whiskeyjack, which is an English verbatim translation of his original name, Weesageechak, the Cree trickster figure.

In *Three Day Road*, Niska tells the story of the *windigo*, a variation of the *Weetigo* evil cannibal spirit. She passes on to Xavier the story of a young couple who went into the woods in search of food one winter. When the husband died, his wife and her baby ate his flesh to survive. When she returned to the village in spring, everyone knew what had happened. “Micah’s wife and baby were turning *windigo*,” and the villagers feared they would turn into wild beasts that feasted on humans. The elders were forced to make the decision to kill both Micah and her baby for the safety of the entire village. This act is performed by Niska’s father who was a ‘*windigo* killer.’³⁶⁹

In a similar fashion to *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Boyden applies the traditional concepts of the *windigo* and ‘*windigo* killer’ to a modern context. When Elijah becomes obsessed with killing during the war and starts collecting the scalps of his victims, Xavier believes that Elijah has become *windigo*. His fear is confirmed when Elijah explains that while on burial duty, he opens the eyes of the dead and looks into them. “Elijah, he says the spark fills his belly when it gnaws for food.”³⁷⁰ When humans become sustenance for Elijah, Xavier decides that he must fill his ancestral role as a ‘*windigo* killer’ and stop Elijah while he still can.

³⁶⁹ Boyden, 42.

³⁷⁰ Boyden, 184.

Mythology is also shared in *My Name is Seepeetza*. When describing her people's tradition of basket making, Martha tells the story of her grandmother. "She said a long time ago it was Skokki the Spider who traveled to the moon and learned from the sky dwellers how to weave. That's why our people have baskets."³⁷¹ In *Ravensong*, mythological stories are used by elders as teaching tools, such as when Ella tells Stacey the "Story of the Snot Woman" in order to teach the young girl to forgive her mother for lying to her.³⁷² In the novel, mythology is also used explain the occurrence of rain at the time of Stacey's departure, which ends the symbolic drought in the village. Maracle eloquently personifies the rain. "She came softly at first, a woman weeping, delighted at her ability to shed tears at last for her lost children. She wept steadily throughout the night, gathering strength. She wept long for the lost ones."³⁷³ In the story Stacey also realizes the value of mythology, which she uses to explain the complexity of the written English language to her illiterate mother. "She concocted a story about a family named Alphabet, gave them names and work to do. She even threw in trickster behavior for those moments when none of the Alphabets would do the right work."³⁷⁴ This example shows how mythology and storytelling are not a simply parts of Aboriginal history; they can be applied to a modern world.

Native songs are also shared in the stories. In *Porcupines and China Dolls*, Alexie explains that the Creator gave the People the Old Songs, from which sprung animals, such as the caribou.³⁷⁵ In *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, Highway includes the Scottish-Cree jig, 'Kimoosoom Chimasoo,' and the caribou hunting chant, 'Ateek, ateeek, astum, astum'

³⁷¹ Sterling, 79.

³⁷² Maracle, 105.

³⁷³ Maracle, 190

³⁷⁴ Maracle, 195.

³⁷⁵ Alexie, 6.

[Caribou. caribou, come to me, come to me].³⁷⁶ In the novel Jeremiah is able to incorporate the traditional songs of his childhood into a modern context. He describes the transformation in his masterpiece play, *Ulysses Thunderchild*. “The quintet of circling dancers launched into a pentatonic chant, ‘Ateek, ateek, astum, astum, yoah ho-ho!’ And, suddenly, the piano was pow wow drum propelling a Cree Round Dance with the clangour and dissonance of the twentieth century.”³⁷⁷ The importance of teaching Aboriginal youth about their heritage is highlighted by the character’s actions in the novel. Jeremiah volunteers at Native Friendship Center, which emphasizes providing urban Indian children with “REC: recreation, education, culture.”³⁷⁸

The fiction also teaches readers about Native traditions and customs. In *My Name is Seepeetza* knowledge is seamlessly incorporated into Martha’s journal. She describes in detail traditional work and chores, methods of hunting and cooking and even a potlatch ceremony, thereby teaching the reader while telling her story. She also shares information about medicinal herbs and roots, when talking about her mother’s upbringing. In the story, Martha describes how her elders passed this traditional information on to her. “The old people like Yay-yah smile at you and tell you something about the trail you’re following or how to cover your berries with leaves so they stay fresh.”³⁷⁹ By including this information in the book, Sterling is attempting to pass it on to contemporary youth. Similarly, Joseph Boyden details traditional Cree skills, explaining the materials needed and the process of building a camp and constructing a small tepee. And in one exciting

³⁷⁶ Highway, 17, 23.

³⁷⁷ Highway, 267.

³⁷⁸ Highway, 269.

³⁷⁹ Sterling, 91.

scene, Boyden chronicles Elijah and Jeremiah hunting caribou, and how they successfully trapped the animals using a traditional smoke method.³⁸⁰

Halfe also shares traditional knowledge via her poems in *Bear Bones and Feathers*. She describes gathering traditional foods, such as chokecherries, hunting techniques, and traditional clothing. Halfe also describes Cree spiritual rituals, like the sweatlodge and Ghost Dance, as well of the power of song and dance. “Swaying bodies/in the beat of rawhide/in the beat of drum/the breathing Native lung.”³⁸¹ Cree death rituals are also described, such as a when deer grease and peppered roots are customarily applied to a dying woman. *Three Day Road* describes a different burial custom, where a body is wrapped and put in a tree so the spirit will be free.³⁸² And at the culmination of the novel when Xavier is healed, Boyden provided a detailed description of how to build a sweatlodge.³⁸³

Several other traditional Cree customs are shared in *Three Day Road*. One rite of passage described in the text was the “Strawberry ceremony,” which celebrated a girl’s first menstruation.³⁸⁴ Boyden also explained in detail the ceremonial ritual of skinning a bear and salvaging every part of the animal for use. The most important spiritual custom described in the novel is “divining,” the common gift shared by Niska, her father, and Xavier. The exhausting yet powerful ceremony is performed only in times of need, to help hunters find game.

Traditional medicine is also addressed in several of the stories. Halfe’s poem *Nohkom, Medicine Bear*, about a grandmother who is a medicine woman, cites traditional

³⁸⁰ Boyden, 106.

³⁸¹ Halfe, 7.

³⁸² Boyden, 197.

³⁸³ Boyden 324.

³⁸⁴ Boyden, 34.

healing herbs such as a carrot roots, yarrow, chamomile, rat-root, and cacamosikan.³⁸⁵

The healing powers of natural herbs are also explained in *Ravensong*, when Stacey goes up into the hills with elder women to collect comfrey and echinacea. Similarly, the medicinal use of rat root for stomach or head pain is described in *The Lesser Blessed*, as it is administered to Larry after he gets in a fight. The story also provides detailed instructions on how to prepare bannock, a traditional Indian bread, interspersing the ingredients and methodical directions into a scene in which Larry is conversing with his mother. She tells him, “In the olden days, the Dogrib used to put fish eggs in their bannock.”³⁸⁶ From this unique addition of knowledge into the story, a reader could theoretically prepare bannock.

In *As Long as the River Flows*, Larry Loyie teaches the beauty and self-reliance of traditional Native life.³⁸⁷ The children’s story uses text and colorful illustrations to describe traditional life in the bush and details Cree skills such as building a lean-to, beaver trapping, picking berries, fishing, and the use of medicinal plants. Loyie uses the story as a vessel to share knowledge with contemporary Aboriginal youth about a lifestyle that is fading, and to encourage children to reconnect with the land.

While *In Search of April Raintree* does not go into detail about Aboriginal traditions, it does impart knowledge about Métis history and heritage through its characters. For history class, Cheryl proudly does a report on Louis Riel and his role as an Métis hero. Learning a much different story about Riel in her White school, April views him as a wild and violent rebel. Yet despite April initial negative reaction, the

³⁸⁵ Halfe, 13.

³⁸⁶ Van Camp, 7.

³⁸⁷ Loyie, 34.

readers are intended to learn about Riel's role in Canadian Aboriginal history—and that history can be easily distorted by those who tell it.

Many of the authors incorporate Aboriginal language into their stories, in attempt to share, if not teach, their respective languages. *Kiss of the Fur Queen* uses Cree terms throughout the story, which are translated into English in a four-page glossary at the end of the book. This forces readers to look up terms to understand the text, thus learning some Cree. For the same purpose, *Bear Bones and Feathers* also includes a glossary of 50 words and 11 phrases at the back of the book, to define Cree terms used throughout the poems. Though the spelling differs, common terms seen in the glossaries include: *achcahk* [spirit], *Manitou*, *K'si Mantou* [creator], *matatosowin* [sweatlodge], *Moniyas*, *wemistikoshiw* [white people], *Wihtikow*, *Weetigo*, *Windigo* [cannibal being], and *Wishkecahk*, *Weesageechak* [Cree trickster].³⁸⁸

Cree terms, with English translations, are used as chapter titles in *Three Day Road*. Several Cree words are also used in *My Name is Seepeetza*, and their meanings are described in the text. These include *moweesh* [communal summer mountain camp] and *Shee-eesht-kin* [an underground winter house].³⁸⁹ *The Lesser Blessed* incorporates some contemporary local vernacular of the Northwest Territories, as previously addressed. Additionally some common Dogrib terms, such as *Mahsi* [thank you], are used throughout the novel.

The transfer of Aboriginal knowledge, traditions, mythology, and language is one of the most important aspects of the selected Aboriginal fiction. Without the inclusion of

³⁸⁸ These words are taken from *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, *Bear Bones and Feathers*, and *Three Day Road*.

³⁸⁹ Sterling, 91.

this material, the books could simply be stories of abuse or of broken communities. With it, they become accessible teaching tools for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readers.

Conclusion

'Healing' has taken a variety of forms for survivors of the residential school system and its abuses. Some are 'western,' such as therapy and activism while others are 'traditional' such as sweat lodges, shamans, and spirituality. A more recent style of healing has taken the form of literature. Aboriginal adults have found empowerment in their newfound ability to let their voices be heard, and through this expression turn their tragedy into art. For authors of survivor stories, this often meant dealing with the losses and abuses one suffered in residential school. At the same time, fiction allowed a level of anonymity, such that readers would not definitively know that everything that happened in the story happened to the author. For authors of second generation accounts, fictional writing often served as a forum to address the current problems of the Aboriginal community, as well as a way to express the traumatic incidents of their own lives.

The emphasis on healing in the selected fiction reveals the common urge of the authors to find a resolution for the horrors of the past and the current problems of the Aboriginal community. The bleak depiction of the present Aboriginal community in the stories suggests that the government's present system of monetary compensation³⁹⁰ is not enough to heal survivors, nor the Aboriginal community at large. More self-driven approaches to healing, such as storytelling via the modern medium of written word, are needed. Thus these works of fiction aim to be part of this community healing process, by providing readers with an accessible and relatable format to absorb and process the many horrors of the residential schools, while simultaneously transferring Aboriginal knowledge.

³⁹⁰ For more information on the redress of the Canadian government and the United Church of Canada, and the complex system of financial compensation for survivors of residential school abuse see: Katherine O'Neill, "Graphic list of abuse to settle claims," *Globe and Mail*, 25 March 2008, sec. A12

And these stories carry powerful historical truth. The authors addressed in this thesis have made significant contributions to history, as well as literature, by creating essential and heartbreaking depictions of the tragic legacy of residential schools. The sad multitude of residential school losses and abuses catalogued in this paper include the loss of home, loss of family, loss of language, loss of traditional spiritual values, loss of hair, loss of name, and the loss of innocence. Long-term losses experienced by survivors include the loss of customs and native skills, loss of pride of one's heritage, loss of familial connection, loss of power, loss of self esteem, loss of behavioral and/or sexual norms, and the loss of communication and parenting skills. These losses were transferred to following generations, contributing to the current situation of the Aboriginal community in Canada, which is plagued with abnormally high rates of alcoholism, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, prostitution, domestic abuse, incest, and suicide. The fiction addressed in this paper provides powerful and emotional accounts that reflect these disheartening statistics of the Aboriginal population.

This is the horrendous legacy of the Canadian residential school experience as revealed in the selected works of fictions. So prevalent, so repetitious are these themes that, although taken from fiction, the sheer weight of the material confirms the simple truth and hard fact of the horrific experience that was the residential school system. In this sense, these works are essentially "primary sources": produced by authors who experienced these events yet found it more palatable to fictionalize the trauma of the schools than to personalize it in a more direct means of expression. Such "fictional" works are valid, and indeed, tremendously valuable historical sources to be used for the study of modern Canadian Aboriginal life.

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