EXPOSING THE POISON, STAUNCHING THE WOUND: APPLYING ABORIGINAL HEALING THEORY TO LITERARY ANALYSIS

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Abstract / Résumé

Considering the ongoing call for literary analysis that does not perform “a new act of colonization and conquest” but instead arises from inside the literature itself, the author examines how the Cree Medicine Wheel can be applied to a Cree authored text. Specifically, the author applies educator Herb Nabigon's interpretation of the wheel to playwright Tomson Highway's controversial play Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing. While acknowledging the primacy of the text itself and the need to accommodate other methodologies, the author points to the potential of applying traditional Native “ways of knowing” to literary analysis.

En tenant compte de l’appel courant en faveur d’une analyse littéraire qui ne soit pas « un nouvel acte de colonisation et de conquête », mais qui émerge plutôt de la littérature elle-même, l’auteur examine comment la roue médicinale crie peut s'appliquer aux textes d’un écrivain cri. En particulier, l’auteur applique l’interprétation de Herb Nabigon de la roue médicinale à la pièce de théâtre controversée de Tomson Highway intitulée Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing. Tout en reconnaissant la primauté du texte lui-même et la nécessité de tenir compte d'autres methodologies, l'auteur souligne le potentiel d'appliquer les « modes de connaissance » autochtones traditionnels à l'analyse littéraire.

Many years ago, during a Midewiwin spring ceremony, I happened to have the good fortune to meet the respected Anishinaabe Elder, Art Soloman, who in the course of our conversation told me about his involvement with the penal system and his battle to get Anishinaabe traditions accepted into the institutions by Corrections Canada. Knowing that Art himself had written a book of poetry, grounded in his own experiences as an Anishinaabe within Canadian society, I went away from our conversation with the insight that to be Anishinaabe is to see and express the world from an Anishinaabe perspective, which includes using our own ways of knowing and becoming actively involved for the betterment of the people in whatever form that may take. I mention this for two reasons; first, while reading The Native Critics Collective’s recent text *Reasoning Together,* I was struck by a rhetorical question from Creek scholar Craig Womack’s informative introductory essay “A Single Decade: Book-Length Native Literary Criticism between 1986 and 1997,” where he asks: “What of the goal of Native critics who might want to focus on their own communities for a change instead of making everybody else central to their efforts?” (65). Womack’s statement immediately reminded me of Neal McLeod’s essay “Coming Home Through Stories,” which I published in the 2001 collection *(Ad)dressing Our Words: Aboriginal Perspectives on Aboriginal Literatures* (and was later incorporated into his book *Cree Narrative Memory*). In it, McLeod focuses on locating the tradition of storytelling within Cree epistemology, including Cree language, in order to explore the concepts of narrative memory and imagination as Indigenous theory and the implications associated with it, namely, as an act of decolonization. Thinking about these and other recent texts by Native authors who have chosen to focus specifically on their own nations—and ostensibly the writers, storytellers and community leaders from these nations—through a theoretical lens, I was further reminded of the discussions over the past few years of the approach we might take in examining the relationship between western and Native intellectual history, between western theory and Native “ways of knowing.” Such questions are not new. Indeed, they have been raised with reoccurring frequency by Native writers and scholars since the so-called “Native literary renaissance” of the 1970s and have been reiterated in a myriad of texts.

It is with this in mind, then, that I find myself returning to a couple of observations that have held resonance for me. The first was made some forty years ago by Kiowa scholar and novelist N. Scott Momaday, in his seminal and much cited essay “The Man Made of Words.” Here he tells us that “Storytelling...is an act by which man strives to realize his capacity for wonder, meaning and delight. It is also a process in which
man invests and preserves himself in the context of ideas. Man tells stories in order to understand his experience, whatever it may be” (168). Pointing to an intersection where the realm of aesthetics joins a didactic role, this observation is profound in its far reaching implications in that mankind’s capacity to both reason and imagine are deemed integral to a peoples’ survival. As Lisa Brooks has recently put it, “We know the power of words. N. Scott Momaday reminds us...‘we are all’ people ‘made of words’” (225). And although Thomas King explained to us some twenty years ago, in his introductory essay to All My Relations, that we do not yet have a definition of Native literature (x), we are now beginning to recognize that its preoccupation with themes of survival and (re)affirmation are providing demarcation. Consequently, Native literature is not merely an aesthetic “game”—though it can appear to be— but a strategy, a gesture, for imparting knowledge and tradition, or, conversely, for upsetting and challenging the status quo (read colonizer). Referring to what now appears to be a commonplace observation, contemporary Native scholars have reiterated time and again that “Contemporary Indigenous writers manipulate the English language and its literary traditions to narrate Indigenous experiences under colonialism in an effort to heal themselves and their audiences from the colonial trauma” (Episkenew 12). Whether this is a function of nationalism, tribalism, humanism, or perhaps what Jace Weaver terms “communitism,” is a provocative and on-going debate and a topic in and of itself.

The second observation I want to reference here was made almost some twenty years ago by Ojibwa scholar and poet Kimberly Blaeser, who positions herself against the imposition of western criticism on Aboriginal literatures. In her oft-quoted article “Native Literature: Seeking A Critical Centre,” Blaeser goes so far as to call “reading Aboriginal literature by way of Western theory...a new act of colonization and conquest” (Blaeser 55). What she calls for in the article is a “working from within the literature or tradition to discover appropriate tools or to form an appropriate language of discourse” (Blaeser 56). To understand what Blaeser is getting at, we must first acknowledge the pitfalls of generalizing about Native literature, though to some extent inescapable, and try as best as we can to move towards cultural and textual specificity; second, we must also acknowledge that Blaeser’s call is cautionary and not separatist, not a complete turning away from western critical theory, not “a rejection of a dialogue with the Western Academy” (American Indian 104), a claim even many “American Indian literary nationalists” do not altogether condone.

With this in mind, then, I would like to propose reconsidering the role of specific cultural traditions from which a particular literature arises
in order to explore both the strengths and shortcomings of the approach as we come to some understanding of that literature. Although I have in the past referred to insider/outsider perspectives (Ruffo, in Armstrong 163) and we know, as Womack points out in *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* that “post-modernists might laugh at claims of prioritizing insider status” (8), we also know that whatever authority we might claim from our Native status, premised on the concept of “Aboriginal consciousness” (Adams 5), must arise from our traditions—from language, spirituality, ceremony, story, etc.,—that we, and those before us, continue to doggedly hold on to despite incredible odds.

Therefore, what I propose is to briefly illustrate my position by examining Cree writer Tomson Highway’s canonized yet controversial play *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* in the context of a culturally specific methodology based on the Cree Medicine Wheel. It is my contention that while the manner of the telling—and hence the aesthetics of the literature—is unique to the individual author who produces it, its practical application is essentially a didactic function and grows out of a larger communal experience and space. Further, I maintain that the didactic function of Native literature can be used to provide insight into the trauma of colonialism and that a traditional teaching methodology, like the Medicine Wheel, can enable the reader, healer or critic to deconstruct and analyze it from a culturally appropriate perspective. This perspective on the literature, I suggest, also serves to return it from the classrooms of academia to the Native communities themselves where the literature may actually speak to the people and make a “real” difference in someone’s life. In other words, I see my task here as trying to untie our literature from the “post” by using a methodology that is grounded in a Native way of knowing, and if not freeing it completely from western theory and rhetoric, then at least illustrating that traditional methodologies can provide an analysis which by its nature and function serves to clarify, rather than obfuscate. Therefore, the call for a “critical centre” (Blaeser 56) can be answered, at least partially, by applying such traditional methodologies of analysis, which in turn can serve as an effective vehicle for locating a culturally appropriate language of critical discourse for the literature.

I might add that western theorists might argue that the use of the Medicine Wheel is none other than a variant of structuralism. To respond to such a claim, one might consider the general imposition of western thinking and the tendency of it to subsume everything under its own rubric. Thomas King makes this very point in his much quoted essay “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial,” where he says that “the idea of post-colonial writing effectively cuts us off from our traditions, traditions that were
in place before colonialism ever became a question” (185). To put it another way, Michael Hart, in his book *Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin*, relates an incident where he tried to explain the Cree concept “of how Aboriginal people see the relationship between individuals, families, communities and nations” to a professor who immediately “interrupted with, ‘Oh, the ecological approach’” (23). The point here is that Indigenous peoples have their own, long-standing “ways of knowing” and to simply categorize them in western terms is to dismiss thousands of years of traditional knowledge and indeed to perform a new act of colonization and conquest. Hart goes on to say that “when someone...interprets one of our basic long standing teachings as the ecological approach, a newborn Amer-European perspective, I am disheartened and left wondering what it will take in order for our ways to be respected as our ways” (Hart 23). At the risk of being charged with essentialism, I will add that the “world-view” from which Native traditions arise is profoundly sacred as well. And, with due respect to the tradition of philosophical rationalism from which much of western literary theory arises, this is a marked difference. As a caveat, I will add that the Medicine Wheel as Native theory is but one model, which can certainly be augmented by other approaches.

As with traditional Anishinaabe teachings, Nehiyawak (or Cree) teachings confer on human beings an intimate connection to nature to the extent that we are part of nature. Central to this precept is the notion of balance, which all life forms must maintain in order to function harmoniously with the inner and outer environments. In the words of educator Herb Nabigon, “Mind, body emotions and spirit of an individual are not separate, and humans are not separate from the earth and everything on it” (“Aboriginal Theory” 19-21). It is a holistic approach to life in which the four primary components of an individual must be kept in balance if an individual is to be considered healthy and in harmony with the natural world. Once out of balance, serious repercussions occur. Undoubtedly, drastic and sudden population disruption and decline compounded with government policy intended to assimilate Aboriginal peoples into Euro-Canadian society (Miller 61) has had lasting negative effects. The Aboriginal Healing Foundation, in the context of the intergenerational impact of residential schools, goes so far to say that “[a]ll have experienced the traumatic, accumulated losses of extended family, culture, language and identity” (Chansonneuve 49). Whether implicit or explicit, much contemporary literature by Aboriginal writers appears to be a direct response to this breakdown of traditional societal checks and balances and the near social chaos that has resulted.

In the explicit epigraph to *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, Highway provides insight into the purpose of his work. He writes that,
“before the healing can take place, the poison must first be exposed” (6). How Native writers realize this process to “unveil the world of oppression and through praxis commit themselves to its transformation” (Freire 36) varies in as much as the writers themselves vary. The related question as to whether or not Native writing can assist to integrate mind, body and spirit with the aim of regaining balance, appears to be answered by both Native healers and western social workers alike. Plains Cree healer and storyteller Yvonne Dion Buffalo maintains that both written and oral storytelling have the ability to “correct negative behavior” (128) in that the client takes ownership of the narrative, regaining a sense of power and control over his or her life. Similarly, therapist Patricia Kelley contends that “Knowledge is power, and self-knowledge can empower

Figure 1

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people...we all ‘story’ our lives to make sense out of them” (463). In traditional Native healing practices, Cree counselor Michael Hart notes that “[o]ne technique that is frequently used...is storytelling. In many Aboriginal societies, stories are often used as the vehicle for true understanding and to describe the way of healing, health and wholeness” (56).

In articulating an Indigenous theory for healing, Herb Nabigon illustrates our human potential through his interpretation of the Medicine Wheel teachings (The Hollow Tree 47). And although, as Hart points out, there is “no absolute version of the wheel,” it is commonly used among various nations like the Anishinaabe, Cree and Dakota and “reflects the cosmic order and the unity of all things in the universe” (39). Nabigon notes that “[a] way to present the Cree understanding of personality is by using a conceptual device called the hub. The hub consists of three circles, one inside the other. As seen in Fig. 1, the outer circle represents the negative or dark side of life. The second circle (the inner circle) represents the positive or light side, and the center circle represents the spiritual fire at the core of one’s being. The center circle has light and dark sides” (“Aboriginal Theory” 21). For the purposes of this paper, I will begin with the outer negative or dark side of the Medicine Wheel, indicating how the text illustrates this negativity, because much of the literature continues to work its way through major themes associated with this side, as Native people themselves continue to work their way through the repercussions of colonialism. Ideally, in any complete analysis, one would also consider the positive side of the wheel; therefore, I will end with reference to the inner positive or light side of the wheel so that the reader will go away with a sense of the ultimate goal of the Medicine Wheel methodology: to bring to light wholeness, balance, harmony and finally healing (Hart 39-44). According to Nabigon, “Where alcoholism, violence, abuse, or any kind of dysfunction exist, there is imbalance, the dark side dominates” (“Aboriginal Theory” 19). In Highway’s Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing these sicknesses are so pervasive and shocking that in some quarters the play has been disparagingly criticized because of them. For example, among the letters to the editor and reviews, readers and critics have gone so far as to charge the play and its playwright not only with “misrepresentation” but “misogyny” itself (Lundy 102). Others, like theater critic Alan Filewood, argue that the play lets the colonizer off the hook by “permitting the colonizer to assume the posture of the colonized” and therefore not only erases culpability but Native peoples themselves (as cited in Lundy 104). As Randy Lundy points out in “Erasing The Invisible,” “all these critics argue that the play reinscribes, rather than challenges, the domi-
nant White and patriarchal ideologies" (105). I refer to the above criticisms because in turning to a Native methodology, the question arises whether or not it can give us insight into such a complex work of literature and, accordingly, provide an alternative way of seeing the play that may address such criticisms.

If we are to understand that “healing reconnects with our innermost self and our surroundings,” then we can assume that those who are sick are disconnected from themselves and their surroundings, which according to the outer circle east of the Medicine Wheel involves “feelings of inferiority and shame” (“Aboriginal Theory” 22). Considering these sicknesses in the context of gender, we see from the outset the dysfunction that exists between the sexes in the play. In fact, the very first line in *Dry Lips*, “Hey Bitch” (16), goes far to indicate the general tone of the play, and specifically Big Joey’s misogyny. However, as Lundy observes, despite his macho posturing, Big Joey’s exclamation indicates “that the men’s confusion, anger, general feelings of powerlessness, and dislocation from their people’s spiritual traditions arise from a lack of understanding of, or a rupture of the relationship with, women and feminine realities” (106). The Medicine Wheel teachings indicate that a sense of “inferiority” leads to a sense of “shame.” This point is both symbolically and literally emphasized at the crisis point in the play where Dickie Bird, born with fetal alcohol syndrome, rapes Nanabush/Patsy, and also emphasized later when the men ask Big Joey why he did not intervene: first, to stop Black Lady Halked from drinking while pregnant seventeen years ago, and, second, to stop the rape. Big Joey, in turn, responds by referring to his experience of defeat and shame at Wounded Knee, which subsequently leads to his recurring nightmare of castration and emasculation. In a perverse twist of logic and emotion, he admits his phallocentric attitude towards power, saying that he did not intervene because he hates them (women) for taking the power. According to the Medicine Wheel, such feelings of inferiority and shame can lead to “a sense of powerlessness, feelings of being trapped” (“Aboriginal Theory” 22). It seems to me that this is exactly what Big Joey expresses. He hates and fears women because of feelings of inferiority, shame and powerlessness. These negative emotions in turn pervert his understanding of the feminine principal. The obvious question here is why?

Turning now to the outer circle south of the Medicine Wheel, Nabigon tells us that “when a person feels inferior, he or she begins to envy other people. Envy can range from the material to the spiritual” (“Aboriginal Theory” 23). What is interesting about the play is that in the midst of the spiritual crisis on the reserve, the Native characters hold tenuously to what Lundy refers to as “Whiteness” (118). It is both the source of desire
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and conflict, the dichotomy overtly symbolized by references to Wounded Knee, the image of Marilyn Munroe and Christianity. Rather than strive to be who they are as Cree, the men live in the shadow of the dominant culture that simultaneously captivates and oppresses them. Regarding Big Joey’s oppression of women as a function of envy, we can consider Lundy’s observation that “Marilyn Munroe represents ‘Whiteness’ as desirable, while the conflict at Wounded Knee reveals Whiteness as a source of fear, death, loss and disempowerment” (118). Significantly, Big Joey envies the power that the dominant culture embodies which only serves to exacerbate his own emasculation. Envy, we are told, leads to feelings of “discontent, unhappiness and greed” (“Aboriginal Theory” 23), consequences evinced in the very first scene of the play, where Big Joey and Zachary are pitted against each other because they both want to open a business and emulate the success (and obtain a semblance of power) of “white people.” Big Joey remarks to Zachary that: “We work for the betterment and advancement of this community, don’t we?” (22). The question is obviously ironic. Highway sets up Big Joey’s statement to be contested. As the play progresses we quickly realize the superficiality of their goals. It becomes a given that Big Joey’s radio station is more about power than altruism, despite his claim that his radio station is “one sure way to get some pride” (23). As Zachary remarks: “Bullshit! You’re in it for yourself” (23), a remark that we realize over the course of the play rings true as Big Joey’s negative qualities become evident.

Moving to the outer circle west, we learn that “an envious person more often than not harbors resentment. Resentment means feeling unexpressed negative or dark feelings from the past” (“Aboriginal Theory” 23). Brimming with bitterness and hate, Big Joey’s resentment is palpable. In fact, it is his resentment that causes the three major crises in the play, the birth of his alcohol-damaged son Dickie Bird, the rape of Nanabush/Patsy, and the inadvertent death of Simon Starblanket. Joey’s inability to move towards the inner light area of the Medicine Wheel mires him in negativity, which has a direct causal relationship to the ensuing tragedies. Because hockey to him is “one of the last bastions of male authority and power” (Lundy 112), his negative attitude towards women is further deepened by their agency. “In their invasion of this phallocentric male sphere,” Lundy claims, “the women seize the initiative and assert their own agency, thereby holding a mirror up to the failure of the men’s agency” (119). According to the Medicine Wheel teachings, resentment is also closely associated to repression. As we have seen, it is only at the high point in the play, after the rape scene, that Big Joey finally reveals his repressed feelings in the context of his apparent emasculation. Lundy refers to the use and non-use of Aboriginal language being at the
core of the play and a means towards understanding the dynamic of the conflict between the sexes, the use of language becoming an issue of “power, of resistance and liberation” (111). Accordingly, repression in the play takes many forms, language being central in that it serves not only to develop and delineate character as illustrated in the play’s very first moment of dialogue “Hey Bitch,” (16) but it also signifies a causal relationship between the characters and their oppression.

The misogynist language that Big Joey uses throughout the play is, however, ostensibly destabilized in the concluding scene of the play. During the hockey game, Big Joey speaks at length in his own Native language to reveal the possibility of an alternate ending, as overtly indicated in the diegetic level of the play by Zackary, Hera and their baby. The translation of Big Joey’s hockey commentary, rendered in Cree, reveals that he employs words like “beautiful, darling, death-defying…and graceful” (133) in describing the women hockey players. To analyze Big Joey’s relationship to the women at this point in the play necessarily leads us to examine his (and perhaps Highway’s) use of Native language in the context of moving from the “outer circle west” of the Medicine Wheel, the location of resentment, to the “inner circle west,” the location of respect. This movement inevitably raises questions of authorial intention as it pertains to language and its relationship to cultural integrity or wholeness.

Returning to Nabigon, “[t]he attitude of uncaring is represented in the north outer circle of the Medicine Wheel. Apathy and disregard for our well-being indicate an attitude of uncaring” (“Aboriginal Theory” 23). This is blatantly exemplified by Big Joey’s egotistical, self-serving grip on the community. Although, as noted, Big Joey’s dysfunction extends even further to his resentful and callous attitude towards women, and, in particular, to the mother of his son, Black Lady Halked and by extension to his son, Dickie Bird. In fact, it is only towards the end of the play with the rape of Nanabush/Patsy that Big Joey even acknowledges that Dickie Bird is his son. Unfortunately, this occurs after it is too late to save Dickie Bird from the cycle of abuse begun by his father – whose assimilation into the worst of “white” culture has led to devastating results. While it is important and necessary to help others, the Medicine Wheel teachings indicate that “real caring starts with the self. No one can really care about another until she or he has learned to care about self” (“Aboriginal Theory” 23). According to Nabigon, “many misunderstand this concept” (“Aboriginal Theory” 23). Caring for one’s self in the good way means simultaneously caring for others. Aside from perhaps Simon Starblanket, whose character is undermined when he grabs a bottle and a rifle and seeks revenge after the rape of Nanabush/Patsy
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(to be discussed later), there is no indication that any of the characters have learned to care about self and community. Epitomized by social disintegration, alcoholism, violence and misogyny, clearly, the dysfunction in the community is rampant. Even Zachary Keechigeesik, who apparently wants to build a bakery for the betterment of the community, is introduced waking up from an alcoholic binge with lipstick marks on his backside (supposedly from Big Joey’s girlfriend Gazelle Nataways), while his own wife Hera is pregnant. We also learn at the outset of the play that Zachary has spoken to the Chief and has tried to undermine Big Joey’s plans for a radio station in order to obtain the funding for himself.

We now come to the centre of the Medicine Wheel, the hub. Here we learn that “[t]here is no doubt that a person who feels inferior, envious, resentful, and uncaring harbors jealousies as well. Jealousy is represented as the negative side of the centre circle. A jealous person does not know how to listen to the self and cannot share self. This often leads to possessiveness and unfulfillment” (“Aboriginal Theory” 24). Again, such sickness is powerfully illustrated by Big Joey, who literally tries to possess those around him, most notably Creature Nataways and his wife Gazelle Nataways. Creature, himself, becomes a kind of “willing slave” to Big Joey. Emotionally twisted, he confesses to Spooky Lacroix: “I love him…I can’t understand it anymore” (107). And, selfish to a fault, Big Joey cannot even acknowledge his son – let alone share his life with him. In fact, by the time Big Joey does acknowledge Dickie Bird as his son, it is too late to save him from the systemic violence that engulfs the community. Not only a victim, Dickie Bird—like his father—becomes a perpetrator of violence.

The Medicine Wheel tells us that in extreme cases the inability to listen to self, to be in touch with one’s feelings, can lead to suicide. Although killed, Simon Starblanket’s suicide appears to be accidental. Ostensibly walking the “Red Road,” he is the closest of all the central characters to reclaiming his traditions. For example, he defends Rosie Ka-ka-petum, the medicine woman, from Spooky Lacroix, and he even goes so far as to challenge the use of English due to its power in undermining Native spirituality: “Stupid fucking language, fuck you, da Englesa,” he says (110). With complexity consistently a marker in Highway’s play, there are no simple answers as to why he later dies. Perhaps it is to emphasize that the path to self-determination and cultural renewal is marked by sacrifice and death, or illustrates the age-old adage that the individual who stands alone is ultimately weak and easily defeated – and unless Native people strive for their goals as a community their chances of success are unlikely. To use an image, one arrow snaps easily, a bundle is nearly impossible to break. What the Medicine
Wheel tells us is that unless the self is cared for, no one is immune to tragedy.

Because Highway’s play focuses on the dysfunction in the Wasaychigan Hill community—and arguably the negative, outer circle of the Medicine Wheel is most appropriate to our analysis of the play—I will proceed with an example of the positive, middle, circle of the Medicine Wheel to give some idea of its applicability. I will add though that in analyzing Simon Starblanket in the context of the positive side of the wheel, we can come to some understanding of his inevitable death by “gauging” the shortcomings of his character through the wheel. Continuing with the character of Simon, then, we begin with middle circle east, which represents a “number of positive aspects…such as good feelings, food, and vision in the sense of representing the mind. Both physical and spiritual food are represented here…. Appropriate sharing of feeling…. Awareness of the language of feeling” (“Aboriginal Theory” 24). In sum, the emphasis in the east, middle circle, appears to represent positive feelings in the context of sharing and vision. What is immediately apparent about Simon Starblanket is that he appears to be somewhat tortured by his “visions.” While he undoubtedly “feels” for his people and wants to bring them what is positive (namely, a return to traditional culture), his visions, on the contrary, are indicative of his troubled spirit. Sharing his vision with Zachary, he tells him that “this eagle says to me: ‘the baby is crying…my grand-child is crying to hear the drum again.’…There’s this noise all around us…and a woman’s voice somewhere singing something about angels and god” (45). Highway evidently gives us the impression that Simon’s positive feelings are lost or at least entangled in the torment of his conflicting visions of Christianity and Native spirituality. So, although Simon strongly advocates a “return to the drum” and, like Spooky Lacroix (The Cross) even goes so far as to proselytize his faith, he is not altogether unmarked by the influence of Christianity.

The middle circle south indicates that “good feeling within usually leads to good relationships with self and others” (“Aboriginal Theory” 24). Here we are taught to “relate” to our self and others through “patience.” We are told that “relationship with self and others requires an inner quietness and an inner peace that are gained by listening” (24). Simon certainly appears to be on good terms with everyone, and, as noted, Zachary is quick to point out to Big Joey that Simon is also ‘doing something’ for the community. In response, Big Joey simply ignores Zachary’s statement rather than try to refute it (22). In fact, upon first meeting Simon, we learn that he plans to marry his pregnant partner Patsy Pegahmagabow and, by following the Red Road, bring back the customs and traditions of his community. Presumably all appears well.
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with him. However, patience is the key to the Medicine Wheel's middle circle south door, and Simon's actions also indicate that he lacks elements of this quality; one way or another he is going to do what he wants, as illustrated when he says, "I'm gonna go out there and I'm gonna bring that drum back if it kills me" (52). With this in mind, we might even go so far as to consider the foreshadowing of Simon's death in the context of his lack of patience—and therefore understanding—being the element that serves to undermine his good relationship with himself and others. In the scenes leading up to his death, he hastily grabs a rifle with the intention of killing the mentally deficient Dickie Bird, whom one can easily argue is just as much a victim of colonialism as is Patsy Pegahmagahbow, the woman he rapes. Rather than use the traditional teachings, like the Medicine Wheel, to help him process and understand what has just occurred, for all intents and purposes, he forgets the teachings and goes off on a rant of revenge. Lundy points out that "throughout the play Simon had been carrying the bustle as if unsure what to do with it" (117). If, as Lundy observes, Simon does not know what to do with the bustle, then he undoubtedly has not fully embraced the teachings (as symbolized by his precarious relationship with it) and hence has not found "balance." It is only upon his death that "we see Simon, wearing his powwow bustle. Simon Starblanket is dancing in the moon (grandmother, Nokomis)," the one place he ironically did not want to go (120, 113).

Moving across to the middle circle west, we are told that the west door represents "respect," which literally means "to look twice" ("Aboriginal Theory" 24). Whether Simon Starblanket respects his community is unclear; what we do is that he recognizes its dysfunction and hence his reason for wanting to "bring the drum back." We also know from Zachary's statement to Big Joey—"he's doing something"—and that Zachary appears to respect him, while others, like Pierre St. Pierre, who refers to Simon as "that drum-bangin' young whippersnapper" (31), simply dismiss him. Also indicative of respect, or rather lack of it, are the various conversations between characters which veer off so that dialogues become monologues and characters end up talking to themselves. For example, in a "conversation" between Zachary, Simon and Pierre, Zachary's sole concern is his bakery and the folly of waking up with Gazelle Nataways, while Simon continues to go on about bringing the drum back and his future wife Patsy Pegahmagahbow, and Pierre continually talks about the formation of the woman's hockey team and his refereeing for them (46). In other words, rather than talking to each other, the characters talk at each other. Because listening is one of the key ingredients of "respect" for both self and others, we are led to ask if
the characters really do respect themselves and each other. Certainly other factors related to the dysfunction in the community, as noted above, also function to undermine the element of “respect.” Lastly, we are also told that “the power of reason is placed in the west door” (“Aboriginal Theory” 24). In regard to Simon Starblanket, we can assume that it is his “power of reason” that makes him realize that “brining the drum back” will help heal the community. By the same token, we also see that he manifestly loses his power of reason when he grabs a rifle and begins “wailing in complete and in utter agony,” “half-crazed...drunk out of his skull,” searching to kill the handicapped Dickie Bird (101, 110). Interestingly, it is at this point that Simon resorts to “broken English,” saying “fuck you, da Englesa” (110), provoking the reader to understand the larger colonial implications of their (self) destructive, “tongue-tied” existence. So while Simon’s reasoning is skewed in his attempt to murder one of his own people (a handicapped person no less), his understanding of what has happened to him and his people remains. As Lundy notes, “the play clearly shows that issues of language and spirituality are intimately related” (119).

Moving to middle circle north representing “caring,” we are told it is “more than a feeling. It is action” (“Aboriginal Theory” 25). As Nabigon continues, “[c]aring can be defined by our level of interaction, within family, school, community, and nation. In the north door, the person builds on his or her understanding of the ways his or her behavior affects the family and community” (31). Applying this concept to Simon Starblanket we see that, unlike Big Joey, he truly “feels” for his community. Before we even see him on stage, Zachary refers to Simon as someone who has “the get-up-and-go to do something” (22). Later, in referring to his reoccurring dream, Simon tells Zachary, “it’s driving me crazy, this dream where Indian people are just dropping off like flies” (42). By all indications, Simon does care about his community and does want to do something positive for it. Carrying a bustle, chanting, learning to dance, he represents a return to traditional values, a characteristic deliberately emphasized when he says that “the drum has to come back, mistigwushkeek (the drum)...the medicine...the power, this has to come back. We’ve got to learn to dance again” (43). However, things go awry for Simon. For example, the bustle may be seen as a symbol for his uncertainty, his inability to fully adopt the traditional values that he espouses, which comes to a head with the rape of his wife and his violent response. The question becomes whether Simon’s “caring” is powerful enough to save himself from his own hand. What the Medicine Wheel teaches is that “caring” involves “persistence” and that one must also care for self before one can care for others. It is in this light that we can also consider
Simon’s demise, his violence no less than a disregard for his own well-being and, by extension, that of his community.

Moving finally to the centre circle light side of the hub, we learn “that the spiritual fire is symbolized in the centre circle” and that “compassion flows freely from the spiritual fire if all is in balance” (“Aboriginal Theory” 25). Just prior to his death, Simon has a vision of Nanabush/Patsy where he witnesses “the blood stain on her panties” and then “he and Nanabush/Patsy dance” (113). What we witness here is Simon’s deliberate move away from the misogyny demonstrated throughout the play. Trying to understand a gendered Christian God in the context of his genderless Cree language, Simon asks: “If God, you are a woman/man in Cree but only a man in da Englesa, then how come you still got a cun...” (113). Significantly, Nanabush/Patsy intervenes to correct him: “a womb,” she says. It is at this point that Simon truly sheds his gender biased “English,” returning the power to the women, whom Spooky Lacroix finally acknowledges “always had it” (120). As the stage directions indicate, “She then finally takes off the prosthetic that is her huge bum.... And Nanabush/Patsy holds an eagle feather up in the air, ready to dance. Simon stomps on the ground, rhythmically and sings” (113).

Turning away from the trope of “white” sexuality and seduction—as symbolized by the Marilyn Munroe poster—they emotionally “embrace” before death, a gesture that again foreshadows what is to come: “I love you to death,” he says, about to touch her hand, his final words none other than, “Patsy. I gotta go see Patsy” (114). According to the Medicine Wheel teachings, “Compassion flows freely from the spiritual fire if all is in balance because love flows through one’s whole nature” (“Aboriginal Theory” 25).

Has Simon found “balance” in the end? We can say that he certainly has found love which is essential to “compassion” and finally ends up “dancing in the moon” (120), for—among all of the characters (at least in the intradi digetic level of the play)—he certainly comes closest to re/connecting with the feminine principal inherent in the Cree language and culture. Michael Hart reminds us that “[b]alance involves more than just paying attention to each part of the medicine wheel. Balance includes giving attention to what connects each part of the medicine wheel. This brings us to the foundational concept of connection: the relationship between all the parts” (41). In this regard, we can certainly say from analyzing Simon’s character in consideration of the whole hub that he does lack certain qualities indicative of the positive, light side of the wheel. By grabbing the rifle and bottle of whiskey and setting out to kill Dickie Bird, he demonstrates that he is just as much a victim of “the violence of colonial genocide” (Lundy 121) as any of the other charac-
ters. As we have seen, to become whole and balanced—to find true harmony—as illustrated by the medicine wheel, takes many qualities, including persistence and patience. Highway gives no pat answers to deal with the tentacles of colonialism that have spread throughout Native families and communities and that, of course, speaks to the complexity of his play. As the play’s epigraph indicates, what he does do is unconditionally expose the poison so that the healing can begin. So as not to end in despondence, the play closes with the diegetic level, and we are back with a naked and vulnerable Zachary, holding up his newborn, his wife Hera at his side, the Marilyn Munro poster covered by the bustle, and it is here that we are left with a glimmer of hope.

In my discussion of Tomson Highway’s *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* in the context of Cree/Nehiyawak Medicine Wheel teachings, I have necessarily chosen to focus primarily on the outer circle of the Medicine Wheel, the negative side, and those attributes of the inner circle, the positive side, that the characters lack. My decision to a large extent has also been dictated by the work I have chosen to analyze and the two characters whom I have focused on. I might add that for a complete study of a text one would put all the major characters on the wheel. I will also add that in referencing the Medicine Wheel teachings, I have focused on the didactic function of Native literature in the context of the call for a “critical centre” (Blaeser 60). I have not to any extent considered the aesthetics of the literature discussed, the capacity to “delight” (Momaday 168) as an organizing principle. In this regard, other methodologies could certainly be applied in conjunction with the Medicine Wheel teachings. What I have proposed is a methodology of literary analysis based on a traditional model of Native theory normally assigned to social work. In proposing a methodology that gives credence to a practical application, I am not saying that this application is suitable for all literature written by Native people. On the contrary, I have strived to be as culturally specific as possible. What I am saying is that traditional methodologies, grounded in our own philosophies, should be explored and advanced.

In her text, *Indigenous Storywork*, Jo-ann Archibald/Q’um Q’um Xiiem notes that each Indigenous group has developed its own cultural content for the holistic circle symbol; however, a common goal has been to attain mutual balance and harmony among animals, people, elements of nature, and the Spirit World. To attain this goal, ways of acquiring knowledge and codes of behavior are essential and are embedded in cultural practices; one practice that plays a key role in the oral tradition
is storytelling. (11)
From the oral tradition to life-writing, poetry, fiction and drama, our sto-
ries continue to evolve as we Native peoples continue to evolve and
adapt to changing circumstances. As Archibald points out, it is storytelling
that has traditionally been a repository for Indigenous knowledge, for
understanding who we are, how we are, and where we come from, and,
it is story, as understood through our own ways of knowing, through our
own theoretical lenses, that will inevitably help us to heal the “violence
of colonialism.”

May the stories continue.

Armand Garnet Ruffo’s work is strongly influenced by his Ojibway heri-
tage. He is the author of two volumes of poetry, Opening In the Sky and
At Geronimo’s Grave, winner of the 2002 Archibald Lampman Award for
Poetry, and the creative biography, Grey Owl: the Mystery of Archie
Bleaney. His recent work includes directing a 2009 feature film adapta-
tion of his CBC Showcase award-winning play “A Windigo Tale” and
completing a book on the acclaimed Anishnaabe artist Norval Morrisseau.
He recently saw a poem of his featured on the subway in Toronto and
had to sit down.

Notes

1. Editors’ note: Nabigon dictated this version to Anne-Marie Mawhiney
in their collaboratively-written article, “Aboriginal Theory: A Cree
Medicine Wheel Guide For Healing First Nations.” Since the knowl-
edge comes from Nabigon, only he is cited. This was by direction of
the author.

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