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Closure or Connection? Healing from Trauma in Richard Van Camp's *The Lesser Blessed*

LAUREN VEDAL

RICHARD VAN CAMP'S 1996 novel *The Lesser Blessed* contributes to a literature that testifies to the effects of Canadian residential schools on First Nations people. There has been scant criticism on the novel despite its salience for conceptualizing the legacy of residential schools and its educational potential as young adult fiction. The narrator, Larry Sole, is the son of two residential school survivors, and he suffers from the long-lasting effects of that legacy. Sexually abused by his father, Larry relives his traumatic past in classically psychoanalytic terms: through a fragmented narrative, the return of the repressed, acting out. While the novel focuses on his healing process, in other ways it is a classic coming-of-age novel. *The Lesser Blessed* is driven by his developing friendship with the new kid and bad boy at school, Johnny Beck, and his longing for Juliet, a peer who is branded the school "whore." The novel culminates in Larry feeling healed after telling his story to other teenagers and after reclaiming his sexuality through sex with Juliet.

From the perspective of individual recovery, Van Camp details Larry's psychological process of becoming whole. However, there is a broader, systemic rupture that remains unresolved — that of Canada's historical violence toward as well as continuing unjust treatment of First Nations peoples. I read the novel's tension between individual recovery and national healing through the lens of dominant and Indigenous views of reconciliation. I argue that *The Lesser Blessed* is a double-edged story of healing through which we can understand Canada-First Nations relations as ongoing, ambiguous negotiations. The double-edged story relies on an enduring relationship between past injury and the present as well as a relationship between parties whose identities and attitudes are inherently tied to that past. At the heart of these relationships are a willingness to connect through ongoing change and an openness to ambigu-

ity. In the novel, healing is messy; tension and negotiation coexist in a way that the dominant view would interdict.

Apology and Reconciliation: Closing the Chapter or Opening into Pain?

On 11 June 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper formally apologized for the system of residential schools in Canada, saying that “the treatment of children in these schools is a sad chapter in our history” (Government of Canada, “Statement of Apology”). This apology is only one component of the official effort at reconciliation between the federal government and First Nations peoples, described by the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, which included establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, payments to former residential school students, and commemoration (Government of Canada, “Fact Sheet”). As such, the apology is a highly visible representation of what Jennifer Henderson and Pauline Wakeham call “the political terrain of redress” (16). Scholars have begun to debate the rubric of reconciliation, asking what it means and what it delimits, what it requires of each constituency, and what kind of future it allows.

Founded upon the idea of “closing the chapter,” Harper’s apology suggests both a written, static history of trauma and a forgetting of that history by metaphorically turning the page. In their introduction to *Reconciling Canada: Critical Perspectives on the Culture of Redress*, Henderson and Wakeham argue that “the [Canadian] state’s attempts to impose closure upon ‘historical’ injuries” demonstrate “preoccupation with haste, the deflection of liability, and the public relations of ‘saving face’” (7). They further describe “the hegemonic deployment of tropes of historiography, focusing on acts of narrative closure (‘turning the page’ or ‘closing a dark chapter’)” (14-15).¹ Harper’s apology neatly illustrates how the concept of reconciliation can be deployed to do the work of nation-building while minimizing further claims of injury or demands for redress.

Apology, and reconciliation more broadly, can be deployed in the state’s interest, saving Canada’s multicultural “brand,” containing demands for restitution and structural change, and maintaining a colonial relationship between Canada and First Nations peoples. Appealing to apology and reconciliation does powerful ideological work to shore up the state’s moral position. As Eva Mackey argues, the linguistic conven-

tions of apology work to relegate injury to the past, thereby benefiting the apologizer far more than the recipients of the apology:

In part through a choreographed ritual of regret, over two hundred years of colonial violence, momentarily brought to the foreground through the apology process, become contained in the past so that the nation may move forward into a unified future. Michel Rolph Touillot argues that apologies “necessarily create pastness,” a demarcation between the pre-apology past and the present in which the crime or transgression is absent. (49)

Official apologies such as Harper’s represent the wrongdoing as separate from, rather than integral to, the nation and its present. The ideological work of relegating injury to the past is not limited to the act of apology. In his analysis of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s mandate, Dale Turner writes of the “so we never have to speak of the subject approach” to testimony, arguing that it is based on the Christian logic that the truth “shall set us free” (109). Such an approach, which appears to wipe the slate clean, ignores current injustices and denies the possibility of First Nations self-government or nation-to-nation relationships between Canada and the First Nations. Moreover, by limiting the apology, testimony, and commemoration to residential schools, the state contains and limits the terms of injury and the scope of redress, bypassing the underlying issues of colonialism and cultural genocide.²

Official government statements, such as the 2008 apology, reflect trends in non-Aboriginal Canadians’ attitudes toward confronting the guilty past and the uncomfortable present with regard to First Nations peoples. When talking about reconciliation, non-Aboriginal Canadians focus on closure and distancing the past from the present. These attitudes apply to political and economic negotiations as well as to the collective memory of trauma. According to an Angus Reid poll taken in May 2007, while sixty-eight percent of Canadians believed that the government should speed up resolution of existing land claims disputes, fifty-six percent believed that First Nations protest actions, such as railway blockades, were unjustified (“Aboriginal Rail Protests”). This seems to indicate that, while Canadians express some support for First Nations land claims in Canada, they want to relegate these conflicts and negotiations to the past. Indeed, Tony Penikett observes the widespread Canadian perception that “settler governments have long since paid for earlier sins by providing free housing, education, and medical

care for Aboriginal people, plus billions in welfare payments. It is time for Natives to forget the past, proponents of this view say, to move on, join the mainstream, assimilate, and prosper" (90). In the dominant view, the history of violence and the politics of land claims are best left in the past. The more quickly we can find a solution that "turns the page," the better.

The concept of reconciliation exists at the intersection of politics and memory, and it reveals a stark divide between the perspectives of non-Aboriginal Canadians and First Nations people. Of course, neither the state (nor non-Aboriginal Canadians for that matter) nor First Nations peoples are monolithic groups with unified, coherent, static views. Nevertheless, literature on reconciliation shows a significant divide between the perspectives of the state and First Nations groups. In "Reconsidering the B.C. Treaty Process," political scientist James Tully explains that for the Canadian government "'reconciliation' is understood . . . as a 'full and final settlement' of outstanding Aboriginal rights" (13). This settlement would provide certainty and definitively establish the boundaries between Crown lands and lands belonging to the First Nations (typically awarding First Nations groups about five percent of their traditional lands).³ In contrast, First Nations people see treaty-making as a process of negotiating land sharing, and they

acknowledge the Crown has title to the same lands and that it has rights of self-government as well. . . . [T]he problem the treaty process should address is, given that the titles to land overlap and the exercise of the powers of governments overlap, how do we *share* land and political powers in fair and honourable partnerships that respect equality and co-existence of the partners. The purpose of treaties then is to work out relations of *mutual sharing* among equal and co-existing partners. (10)

In short, according to Tully, for First Nations people, reconciliation through treaty-making is about establishing and regularizing relationships and connections between equal parties rather than finalizing firm boundaries between a dominant government and a subordinate minority. In addition, for First Nations people, "reconciliation is an ongoing activity, a continuous process of cross-cultural dialogue over time, between partners over matters of their shared concern. . . . That is, the treaty process never ends" (13). Rather than a final settlement, reconciliation is a commitment to mutual engagement.

Tully's assessment of this divide is further elaborated by other scholars. Mackey argues that the Crown view of reconciliation "assumes that the legal sovereignty of the state always supersedes Aboriginal rights, and implies that Indigenous people must reconcile themselves to inferiority" (52). Moreover, the Crown's investment in reconciliation serves the needs of the Canadian state, in which diverse populations are to be managed by official multiculturalism and neoliberal conceptions of individuality and freedom are prized (Jennifer Henderson; James). In contrast, scholars identify a set of different themes as being central to First Nations groups. National sovereignty is key, as is the related concept of mutual sovereignty. This means recognizing that a nation-to-nation relationship between equal parties, rather than a dominant/subordinate relationship, is crucial to reconciliation (Alfred; James Henderson; Mackey; Turner). Again, as Tully asserts, ongoing negotiation rather than closure is desired (see also James Henderson; Mackey). This negotiation goes beyond political wrangling and is deeply existential, concerning fundamentally our identities and ethical relationships with one another (Simon 137). Finally, material redistribution and restitution of land and resources are necessary for reconciliation (Alfred; Mackey). Importantly, in this view, redistribution must increase the wealth of communities rather than being one-time settlements to individuals. As such, redistribution strengthens First Nations communities instead of imposing the notion that neoliberal individualism is the measure of, and the means to, empowerment. Indigenous views of reconciliation are illustrated by Brian Egan, who explains that, for the people of the Hul'qumi'num territory, reconciliation is predicated on compensation for past injustices as well as resource-sharing negotiations between equal nations ("Sharing the Colonial Burden").

According to the literature on reconciliation and redress, the state and First Nations peoples hold two profoundly different views of relationships, not only between parties, but also between the past and the present. For non-Aboriginals, land claims should be settled and not renegotiated. In this view, the First Nations are interest groups; once those interests are addressed, they can fade from the political scene. By the same token, trauma should be acknowledged and then fade into the past. In contrast, First Nations groups see reconciliation as a commitment to continued, shared engagement over the uses of land and political nation-to-nation relationships. Likewise, for First Nations people,

historical trauma requires an ongoing negotiation — with pain. The suffering has a long legacy, and simply testifying to the truth does not heal it. Such pain cannot be left in the past because its effects live in the present.

Literature has an important role in negotiating this divide. As Jo-Ann Episkew observes, Indigenous literature reaches multiple audiences and serves a different purpose for Indigenous people than it does for non-Indigenous readers. In broad terms, she argues that Indigenous literature serves the dual function of healing Indigenous readers and educating non-Indigenous readers. When speaking about injury, Indigenous literature takes on a truth-telling function. Testimony about injury, however, is constructed by social and narrative conventions. These conventions have the potential to heal but also the potential to silence (Emberley; Million; Simon). Richard Simon extends this line of thinking in considering how different audiences hear Indigenous testimony; he analyzes the different subject positions of listeners and the resulting possible misreadings and appropriations of what they hear. He argues, then, that it is not simply the stories we tell but also *how* we tell them that make change possible. He argues that “reconciliation lies not singularly in the transformation of a national narrative, but in the challenges of transforming a sense of civic responsibility and renewing relations of trust” (135). Furthermore, he advocates “narratives that provoke new ways of enacting civic responsibility and articulating an understanding of what such a responsibility means for a future Canada that might yet realize the name of a just society” (138).

In light of Simon’s call for stories that not only testify to the once forgotten history but also change how readers conceptualize their relationships with that history and each other, it is important to analyze Indigenous literature about colonial violence not simply as testimony but also as work that reconfigures readers’ relationships with that violence. I argue that Van Camp’s *The Lesser Blessed* does that kind of reconfiguring. In what follows, I examine the novel’s engagement with the tension between closure and ongoing negotiation.

Psychic Healing: And They All Lived Happily Ever After?

The Lesser Blessed testifies to the ongoing traumatic effects of the residential schools. In the novel, these schools are visible only obliquely, but they are omnipresent. Larry’s present-day narration is shot through with

memories of his traumatic past. Larry remembers being forced to perform oral sex on his father as well as the day that he killed his father and burned down the house. His memory of the fire and his father's death is somewhat ambiguous. While the novel makes clear that Larry was sexually abused by his father and severely burned in a fire, his flashbacks about murdering his father and burning down the house are not corroborated elsewhere in the text. In fact, there is a contradictory scene in which Larry starts a fire when he and his cousins are sniffing gasoline. In any case, he is severely burned, and even after he has healed physically he is plagued by flashbacks. The novel documents experiences of Indigenous people in northern Canada and the lasting effects of colonial violence. Larry observes poverty, lack of resources, and inequality. For example, he notes that his English teacher sends his daughter to "private school down south" (74), like many of the teachers, because the northern school was "so far behind the system" (8). Moreover, the only two teachers whom he mentions teach English and French, suggesting how the education system reinforces a colonial relationship.⁴ This colonial context subtends the entire novel, but the trajectory focuses on sexual abuse, placing the residential schools at the forefront.

While it is Larry's father who directly perpetrates the abuse, his violence is clearly linked to the abuse that he suffered in one of these schools. In the novel's only explicit reference to residential schools, Larry describes a scene of sexual violence:

My dad stood over my mom. He had called me out of my room. He was holding the yellow broom. 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.

My mom was passed out on the couch. A couch like this one. This was back when she used to drink. She had gone to the 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 — (58)

The passage directly names residential schools and references the sexual and physical abuse perpetrated in them. Something "happened there" that surfaces only when Larry's father drinks. That he speaks French in this scene gestures to the culturally genocidal mission of the schools. To supplant Indigenous languages, residential school administrators forced children to learn the dominant language of English or French. In

this scene, memory of the language collides with memory of the abuse. Not only does Larry's father perpetuate a cycle of abuse, but he has also internalized the language and attitudes of the colonizer. Whatever happened to him as a child, he now performs violence with sadistic pleasure: "My father took the broomstick and started laughing." The novel does not dwell on the complexities of Larry's father as a character. He appears solely as an abuser; he physically and sexually abuses Larry's mother and aunt as well as Larry himself. As such, Larry's father serves a figurative role, embodying the continued impact of violence long after the event. He is not the only representative of this legacy. Larry's mother, also a residential school survivor, plays her own role in passing down injury from the schools. The novel shows her to be complicit in the rape of Larry's aunt (88). This might well imply that she was complicit in Larry's abuse too. In one of his "stories," Larry describes a mother who is to blame for her son's death. The story implies either that his mother was complicit in his abuse or that she punished him for challenging her complicity in his aunt's rape (99). Both Larry's mother and father pass on the violence of the schools, demonstrating how the schools left psychic scarring not just in the immediate victims but in their descendants as well.

In the above scene, the violence occurs on a "couch like this one." In other words, this flashback is firmly lodged in the present. It surfaces while Larry is at his friend Johnny's home. Larry's relationship with his past typifies the return of the repressed. It keeps emerging unbidden despite his desire to keep it a secret. Larry has uncontrolled, disturbing flashbacks that shape his reactions to events in the present, often in inappropriate ways. For example, he has a flashback of his father's abuse and then punches a peer who teases him (56). In addition, he cannot integrate these experiences of the past into his present, and he cannot maintain a coherent self. After a drug-induced hallucination, he notes, "I guess I spooked everyone 'cause it sure got quiet" (38). His present state is untenable; he must choose either self-destruction or recovery. The novel optimistically shows us the latter.

The novel takes seriously Larry's individual need for psychic healing, and it does so in a way that is attentive to his adolescent mind and an anticipated young reader. That *The Lesser Blessed* is a young adult novel matters. To take on the material of sexual violence, poverty, and racism in a way that speaks to youth is no small challenge. Furthermore,

the novel must, as Episkenew has asserted, play a dual role of healing for Indigenous readers and education for non-Indigenous readers. I contend that, in order to perform that balance, the novel's vision of violence and the possibility of healing are inextricable from Larry's teenage subjectivity. This is his most defining characteristic, and it shapes the narrative style of the novel, its contents, and its trajectory. The plot might lead to his healing from his father's abuse, but the narration on the whole emphasizes the everyday concerns of a teenage boy, including his obsession with doing it "doggy-style" (see pages 22, 25, 47, and 101, to name a few). His teenage voice is self-contradictory, full of bravado and insecurity. Larry is torn between childishness and adulthood. For example, he extols the virtues of Juliet's rear but then draws a heart in the snow that reads "'LARRY + JULIET T.I.D.' T.I.D. equaled 'True if Destroyed'" (29). He is torn between romance and cynicism, and he is torn sexually. Indeed, the novel implies homoerotic desire for Johnny in addition to his explicit desire for Juliet. In some ways, this is more a story about Larry's love for Johnny than for Juliet, who mediates their relationship.

Van Camp sensitively renders Larry's teenage voice to express vulnerability, wit, and narcissism. While presenting bleak circumstances, he foregrounds hope in Larry's voice. From his horrifying childhood experiences, Larry emerges at the end of the novel as a highly observant, creative, and thoughtful young person. He ends up as the embodiment of potential. In Larry, his mother, and her boyfriend Jed, we see characters who are more than their circumstances. Van Camp does not minimize their suffering in painting this picture, but he gives us characters whose sense of humour, grit, and capacity for introspection empower them to heal. But, as I explain below, there are limitations that result from representing empowerment in this way.

The healing trajectory is somewhat formulaic as well as normative. It follows a European therapeutic formula, as Larry must testify to his trauma before he can heal from it. In "Weesageechak Meets the Weetigo: Storytelling, Humour, and Trauma in the Fiction of Richard Van Camp, Tomson Highway, and Eden Robinson," Kristina Fagan notes that the notion of individual testimony as a way to heal from trauma follows a Western therapeutic model that is not in keeping with Aboriginal ethics and communication styles.⁵ In her reading of *The Lesser Blessed*, Larry uses humour and oblique references to trauma

through storytelling to heal from abuse. I would suggest that, while his communication style might more aptly express an Aboriginal perspective than explicit testimony might, his understanding of his own healing falls into an individualistic, masculinist formula that is itself at odds with “therapeutic approaches that emphasize community harmony and integration” (Fagan 205). Moreover, Larry’s story follows a masculinist coming-of-age formula structured by rivalry with, and betrayal by, male peers. This formula concludes with Larry losing his virginity to Juliet. In the end, he achieves emotional independence — from male peers as well as Juliet — and a restored sense of wholeness. Therein lies the primary problem of healing in the novel. The deep and in some ways irreparable damage done by the abuse is neatly and simply healed by a single sex act. Larry’s initiation into manhood, by way of sexual activity, renders irrelevant the long-lasting effects of the abuse and their connection to the legacy of colonialism, at least on the surface.

The resolution of the novel reflects the dominant perspective on healing — one that focuses on closure at the expense of justice. Healing from this perspective is isolated, individual, and fixed. At the end of the novel, Larry’s father the abuser is dead. In his telling, Larry enacted revenge himself. His mother is recovering from her own traumatic experiences and taking control of her life. She has stopped drinking and has devoted herself to succeeding; she has returned to school with the goal of becoming a teacher. And Larry feels healed. His sexual encounter has allowed him to move from believing that “I am already buried” (1) to exclaiming that “I knew my life was still unwrapped” (119). All of these events are isolated from larger structures of domination, whether they are the ongoing denial of Native sovereignty, unresolved land claims, inequitable distribution and control of resources, poverty, or discrimination. In the novel, the source of violence, and thus the need for redress, appear to be contained within a single person, and the solution seems to be located in individuals’ choices to move beyond the past.

Such isolating and individualizing logic underlies Larry’s perception of his own healing. Not only are these signs of closure separated from any systemic cause, but they are also separated from each other. Larry’s healing trajectory seems to be completely divorced from that of his mother. In fact, at the beginning of the novel, she is already a good student and is working to improve her relationship with Jed (3). Toward the end of the novel and Larry’s apparent healing, Larry tells us, “I was

avoiding my mom these days” (101). Moreover, in order to feel healed, he actively disconnects himself from the immediate source of his healing, Juliet. After they sleep together, Juliet tells him about her own traumatic experience, and Larry thinks to himself, “I knew I should feel bad, but I was holding a little piece of heaven in my heart” (116). His inability to empathize with Juliet suggests that his recovery is unrelated to her need to heal. His narcissistic reaction might be understandable, but I contend that it undermines the novel’s sense of closure, no matter how fulfilled Larry feels in that moment.

Not only is Larry separated from others who need to heal as much as he does, but also his individual healing is at odds with the violence and betrayal surrounding him, to say nothing of the poverty and racism. His description of his own healing echoes the logic of redress put forward by the Canadian state that individualizes and isolates injury by focusing restitution on the neoliberal citizen rather than on supporting Indigenous communities. At the end of the novel, nothing in the larger context has changed — that is a fixed reality. In the final scenes, Juliet is leaving town because she is pregnant by Johnny, and Johnny is being wrestled into a car by his neglectful father as his mother throws his clothing on the ground and yells “you fuckin’ kids” (118). In the context of the harsh present, one must question the role of individual psychic healing. It is not simply that each individual in the novel needs to heal. The violence and injustice are systemic, so individual healing provides insufficient closure.

This is a fundamental tension in the novel. Larry’s need to tell his story and create coherence for himself is paramount. The importance of finding a sense of wholeness through reclaiming his sexuality — reclaiming it not just from his father but also from the legacy of abuse handed down by Canadian policy — should not be disparaged or minimized. Nevertheless, Larry conceptualizes this process in problematic ways.

Evolving Relationships and Ambiguity: Where Do We Go from Here?

While Larry’s view of his own healing might be shortsighted in the context of the novel, it is also in keeping with the teenage subjectivity from which Larry speaks. He tells us, “I wanted [Jed] and my mom to get together. I really needed some stability. I know that sounds lame, but it’s true” (3). Stability and closure are what this narrator needs and

what he creates for himself. But the novel asks more of us. Indeed, it shows us more in the figure of Jed.

Jed exemplifies an alternative model of healing. In the novel, his importance as both a storyteller and a sufferer is second only to Larry's. Larry is the novel's narrator and main storyteller; however, many of his stories are in fact retellings of Jed's stories. Therefore, one cannot overstate the importance of Jed's perspective on suffering and healing in the novel's overall project. As I show below, Jed represents a way of healing by connecting with others and accepting ambiguity rather than finding certainty and separation. The tension between his and Larry's visions provides the novel's dynamic and double-edged vision of healing.

At this point, it is important to indicate that there is a potentially problematic analogy to be made: Larry is to Jed as non-Aboriginal Canadians are to First Nations people. This analogy is deeply flawed. First, to liken a set of cultural assumptions to an adolescent mind is both methodologically suspect and illiberal. Second, this analogy effaces the issues of power and injury. Larry is a victim of abuse, and his desire for closure is very different from the desires of those in dominant positions — those who would like to put the past behind them, who feel that the past injuries of others are no longer relevant.

Instead of an analogy, in which Larry represents Canada and Jed represents the First Nations, I read the interplay of Larry's and Jed's perspectives on healing as a framework to conceptualize a relationship with past injury in the present. This relationship with the past is lived as relationships between people whose identities and attitudes are inevitably linked to that past. *The Lesser Blessed* provides a model for relating to the past and each other, without which we are left with a closure that is inadequate to the context. A closure that relegates the past to the past and separates parties and their needs from each other is partial and tenuous. Indeed, it is from this vantage that Indigenous perspectives on reconciliation are necessary for understanding the book and its relevance to the ongoing conversation about the residential schools and Canada-First Nations relations more broadly.

For Larry, Jed is a father figure, but beyond that he represents the mature adult who finds ways to heal from his own painful experiences by connecting with others. For example, Jed is intimately tied to Larry's mother's own healing process. We know little about what goes on in the relationship between Jed and Larry's mother, but one thing we do know

is that Jed is open and expressive about his own traumatic experiences. When he returns to Fort Simmer, Larry's mother notes, "Something happened to him this summer. He sounded kind of shaken up when he called" (3). Jed explains that "no one told us about the killing we'd have to do. . . . You know, after a fire, there's lots of animals that don't make it. They're burned bad and die slow. I lost count of the bears I had to kill, the deer, rabbits, all them animals that suffered. I started to carry a gun with me in the bush for that. Before, I just used my shovel" (67). Jed's pain arises from witnessing the suffering of others. His job is to end the animals' suffering brought on by fire. Larry, too, has been injured by fire. Jed witnesses his suffering and participates in his healing. After Jed describes his own ordeal, Larry remembers "a song Jed used to sing to me when I had my fire nightmares" (71). Jed faces his own psychic suffering in ways that heighten his connections to others rather than come at their expense.

For Jed, healing is an ongoing negotiation: that is, it does not happen in isolation, and it continues to evolve. His relationships with both Larry and his mother grow and change. Larry has grown up and no longer needs Jed to comfort him after nightmares. However, he recognizes a profound need for Jed in his life (3, 66-67). Similarly, the relationship between Larry's mother and Jed evolves, even though they are both already adults. At the outset of the novel, Larry's mother has refused to marry Jed because she cannot trust men. By the end of the novel, they have decided to "give it a go" (104). Marriages are ongoing negotiations, not static contracts, and their relationship will continue to develop if it is to remain a source of healing. Jed's commitment to family exemplifies openness to continually negotiating a set of vulnerabilities whose expressions will evolve. Moreover, he embodies an ideal of healing as a negotiation that goes beyond the family unit. As Larry describes him, "Jed was a firefighter, a bush cook, a Ranger, a tour guide and a whole lot of other things as well. He'd been around the world and he always had a story to tell. He was Slavey and proud of it" (3). Jed is committed to negotiating the complicated, painful world of injury. For him, this requires a powerful sense of identity and community. He claims the significance of his First Nations identity. Larry observes that "He was wearing his classic 'Denendeh: One Land One People' T-shirt" (68). Jed's embrace of his identity comes not from insularity but from worldliness. As Larry points out, "He'd been around the world," and

this seems to shape his own clear sense of identity and its significance to his life. Thus, for Jed, becoming whole is a collective activity done in relation to others.

Jed's character embodies the perspective that healing historical trauma involves rebuilding not only the individual psyche but families and communities as well. Dian Million describes this perspective, arguing that many Indigenous groups and advocates have rearticulated the dominant discourse of trauma to emphasize self-governance as a goal. In this rearticulation, healing from trauma reconstitutes community from a state of fragmentation and isolation, rebuilding connections among Indigenous groups and cultivating international coalitions. She writes that from this perspective "learning one's own people's *history* is included as a key step in resolving trauma for individuals, a step that involves coming to understand the positions one's people occupied in the larger context of an abusive nation-state" (169). Indeed, Jed emphasizes this learning with Larry, teaching him how to hunt and make bannock as well as encouraging him to take drum lessons.

Jed's evolving relationships are also sites of ambiguity. Jed does not approach his relationships with moral certainty; instead, he lives with ambiguity. This goes against the grain of considering healing to be achieving closure. Consider how one of his stories about his traumatic summer resonates with Larry as Larry works through his own traumatic experiences. In a story involving a woman whose husband went hunting and never came back, Jed describes an event of immense heartbreak that he witnessed. Assuming that her husband had left her, she killed her children. That summer Jed stumbled upon the body of the husband and realized that he had died hunting after all. Jed says, "That woman killed her kids for nothing" (70). For him, the cruel irony might be worse than the actual violence; he struggles to find meaning in this event. Larry, though, finds a different meaning in this story of parental violence.

While for Jed the story grapples with external obstacles to love between men and women, for Larry it is a story that allows him to conceptualize how parents destroy their children. The parental desire to kill one's children is a theme in much of his narration. The novel begins with his belief that he is "already buried" and that his death is the result of "the acts unforgiveable" perpetrated by his father (1). At the opening of the novel, Larry has been killed by his father. Inevitably, this figurative murder influences how he understands Jed's story. The woman in

Jed's story is a Dogrib tribal member, like Larry and his mother. Her acts of infanticide mirror the creation story of the Dogrib people. In the origin story as Larry tells it, a woman has puppies that turn into humans in her absence. Some turn back into puppies, but three remain human and become the first Dogrib people (52). When Larry first tells the story, he emphasizes the human survivors, the first Dogrib people. Toward the end of the novel, he revisits the story, asking Jed what happened to the other children. Jed tells him that the woman, their mother, killed them (105). This story positions the Dogrib people as survivors of attempted infanticide. Importantly, while Larry hears this story from Jed, the meaning that he makes of it speaks to his individual suffering. Not only his father's abuse but also his mother's silence threaten to kill him. He tells a story in which a mother locks her son outside in the snow because he "had seen something and his mother knew what he had seen and . . . he challenged her" (99). The son dies, and his ghost haunts the mother. While Larry's father is the abuser, it is mothers who kill their children in these stories. Jed does not dwell on infanticide in his own narration of the stories (after all, Larry has to ask him about the conclusion to the creation story later). However, the stories that Jed tells become part of a larger picture that Larry is drawing to make sense of the damaging effects of his mother's silence and possible complicity. Jed's stories do not provide Larry with a single, coherent meaning to shape his understanding of his suffering. Instead, these stories give him a way to conceptualize his very conflicted feelings about his mother.

Jed's stories further develop his connection with Larry but not because they provide solutions or a single meaning. Instead, they speak to a pain that Larry cannot fully articulate on his own. For Jed, the stories are his own attempt to make sense of an unspeakably cruel context, one beyond any individual's control. For Larry, the stories refer specifically to the context of abuse. Rather than being locked into Jed's context or having Jed's meaning imposed on his experience, Larry reinterprets the stories for his own context. The stories honour Larry's suffering without telling Larry how to feel or what to do. In a similar fashion, Shamus is another healing figure in the novel because of his ability to recognize Larry's pain without imposing certainty. When Larry is in the hospital recovering from the fire, Shamus is one of the few adults to be sensitive to his suffering. While the nurses force Larry to look at his burned face, Shamus covers the mirrors. He tells Larry, "this is not

a world for children,” acknowledging Larry’s damaging experiences without imposing a certain meaning or moral (80). The ambiguity of these exchanges gives Larry autonomy as well as connection.

The ambiguity of Jed’s stories bursts the confines of the healing and closure formula. In the closure model, stories “make sense” of events; presumably, once the story is told, sense has been made, and healing is complete. However, Jed’s ambiguous stories demand connection and reinterpretation rather than reveal a fixed understanding of past injury. Moreover, ambiguity lends itself, far more readily than moral certainty, to facing the messy reality of relationships between individuals and, by extension, between nations. In broad terms, healing cannot be a “final settlement” in which boundaries and rights are cemented. Reconciliation, if it is truly to be healing, might need to be ambiguous to accommodate the multiple constituencies and needs at play.

Power relations and historical injuries are complex. Ambiguity might be the best way to conceptualize honestly the ways that multiple actors are implicated and injured. For example, in an ambiguous anecdote, Jed tells Larry of an experience that he had in India, an Indian in India. Jed and his friends were smoking hashish and were surrounded by thieving monkeys. In a tourist mindset, all Jed can think of is, “if I ever wanted a postcard, I wanted a postcard right then and there. I would have bought a box of twelve pictures of these eight monkeys on this balcony as we passed the pipe” (4). The monkeys attacked them, and Jed says, “We just hoped they’d leave us alone because we were tourists in India, for chrissakes. The Blue Monkeys had no right to turn this postcard into something angry or greedy, so I prayed like mad” (5). This led Jed to a spiritual experience but also the realization that “I had to get out of India. . . . I realized I had to go to Africa, the dark continent. I had a feeling the Blue Monkeys would not follow me there” (5-6).

The scene is certainly tantalizing but also ambiguous. Perhaps Jed is critical of his role as a tourist in India, or maybe he is only telling an entertaining story about one of his travels. The story might suggest that, as a North American Indian, he ought to have developed solidarity with Indians (as another colonized people) rather than participated in the neocolonial practice of tourism. In this reading, the blue monkeys might symbolize local resistance to this practice. As Jed explains, “The monkeys have their own tribes in the city, and I guess the monkeys had been studying me and my buddies” (4). The monkeys, native to India,

rebelled and resisted the colonizer. Maybe Jed recognized and respected this. On the other hand, his desire to go to Africa could signify a deeper immersion in colonialism, signified by the colonial language of Africa as “the dark continent.”

This ambiguity has to do both with the legacy of trauma and with negotiating relationships in a highly ambiguous reality, one in which a single solution cannot be immediate, equitable, or permanent. The blue monkeys represent the haunting effects of trauma and its connection to colonial violence. Jed describes the look of the monkeys that “gave this postcard away”: “Those eyes. It seemed as if some of these monkeys had killed before in an elevator and the elevator had never been blessed, you know, and the people in India would ride in this elevator all day and they would think: ‘Why does this elevator feel so spooky? Is it haunted? Why does it stink?’” (4). The monkeys, then, carry the haunting effects of violence. What is the solution to this haunting? Is Jed a perpetrator of neocolonialism or a fellow victim of continuing colonial arrangements or both?

The Lesser Blessed is not about distinguishing victims from victimizers. Most of the novel’s characters are culpable of greater or lesser degrees of cruelty, and all have suffered themselves. Instead, the novel is about two competing needs: the need to find closure and the need for ongoing, evolving negotiation with others. And that negotiation is part of a complex and ambiguous present.

A Closing but Not Closure

The Lesser Blessed offers a double-edged picture of healing. As a young adult novel, it boldly represents violence and feelings of hopelessness. It paints a vivid picture of what it means to grow up in the Canadian north. The novel’s vision of healing is respectful of young adult readers and survivors of sexual violence and colonial domination. It is honest, hopeful, but not saccharine. The novel appeals to sex and rebellion as legitimate forms of self-actualization. While providing a picture of healing that appeals to normative patterns, Van Camp does not allow readers to enjoy an easy resolution. The novel comments obliquely on the role of the Canadian state in the lives of First Nations people in the north. The world of *The Lesser Blessed* is not solely a psychological landscape; it is a political world as well. From this perspective, individual

psychic healing is important, but it is insufficient in a reality of ongoing suffering and injustice.

To return to the idea of reconciliation, it is important to note that from First Nations perspectives reconciliation is more than facing past injuries and finding solutions to the practical considerations of land ownership and use. As Tully writes, reconciliation is “about constructing a genuinely bi-cultural treaty process. It is not only an interest-oriented practice governed by one set of procedures, but also an identity-oriented practice aimed at mutual understanding by exchange of stories” (11). As Tully describes it, the exchange of stories is a way to understand identities, experiences, and worldviews of others; it is a way of connecting. Julia Emberley explains that Indigenous storytelling is an interactive activity between speaker and listener: “The active relationship between storyteller, listener, and story gives meaning to Jo-ann Archibald’s conception of ‘Indigenous storywork,’ an interactive process that brings people and story together to accomplish the work of comprehension. In other words, learning *to learn* requires a mutually beneficial and reciprocal *work ethic*” (149). In this light, the acts of storytelling that comprise *The Lesser Blessed* perform healing that addresses more than one need and more than one actor. Storytelling heals the speaker, but it can also cure the listener. Importantly, it is stories’ openness to interpretation and multiple meanings that provides opportunities for connection. Unlike a history book, with pages that can be turned and forgotten, storytelling lends itself to retelling. The relationship between storyteller and listener is renegotiated with each telling. In this way, the tension between Larry’s need for stability and closure and Jed’s openness to connection and ambiguity creates a space for healing that respects the autonomy of each while recognizing their interdependence.

Indeed, serving the needs of different audiences and putting those needs in conversation might be what brings together the dual functions of Aboriginal literature in Canada. One audience is Aboriginal readers; another is non-Aboriginal readers. Van Camp’s novel provides a kind of testimony, allowing Aboriginal readers to be seen and heard while educating and implicating non-Aboriginal readers. Readers root for Larry but also see themselves in the larger context of the novel. In this way, the novel moves readers toward the civic responsibility imagined by Simon when he writes about testimony work that might “stage an encounter with history as a force of inhabitation, a sense of dwelling

with the past that instigates an altered way of learning and living from images and stories that engage not only one's identities and distinctions, but as well one's sense of their rights and responsibilities" (136). *The Lesser Blessed* unsettles readers and narrative conventions, leading us into the unsettled, ongoing, ambiguous negotiation of a shared and painful world.

NOTES

¹ For more, see Martin; and Wakeham.

² As Henderson and Wakeham write, "the federal government's recent apology to Aboriginal peoples for residential schools has occluded broader consideration of the long history of cultural genocide and its constitutive components such as the establishment of reservations, the expropriation of lands and resources, the deliberate suppression and distortion of Indigenous languages, beliefs, and cultural practices, and the disruption of kinship networks, not to mention the present conditions of poverty, incarceration, and compromised health lived by many Aboriginal people in Canada" (12-13). See also Episkenew (189); and Mackey (50).

³ For more, see Egan, "Resolving 'the Indian Land Question'?"

⁴ Mr. Harris, the English teacher, is extremely rigid and will not hear any discussion or change that could better accommodate his students. In response to a student asking "But couldn't we just move things around? Couldn't we just talk?" Mr. Harris yells "No!" (10).

⁵ In their respective pieces in *Reconciling Canada*, Million and Emberley discuss the limitations of European models of the individual psyche with respect to healing and testimony. Such critiques acknowledge that, while psychotherapy can be an important part of some people's healing, there needs to be a wider and more flexible conception of Indigenous healing that includes community norms, traditions, and spirituality.

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