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Indigenous Activism and the Healing Power of Storytelling*

Abstract I: Nelle culture orali dei popoli indigeni lo *storytelling* svolge un prominente ruolo epistemologico, pedagogico e terapeutico assicurando sia la trasmissione del sapere ancestrale che le interrelazioni comunitarie. Il saggio esamina come le scrittrici indigene nord-americane Jeanette Armstrong e Lee Maracle incorporano le tradizioni orali dei loro popoli nei loro romanzi con l'intento attivista di promuovere la decolonizzazione dell'ideologia patriarcale e spronare l'umanità ad abbracciare un'etica di 'ecologia relazionale' che ristabilisca il rispetto per la Madre Terra. Le loro storie possono aiutare il pubblico indigeno e non ad intraprendere un processo collettivo di guarigione dalle molteplici forme di violenza coloniale.

Abstract II: Storytelling is a foundational element of Indigenous oral cultures, where it has a key epistemological, pedagogical and healing role and assures knowledge transmission and community relationality. This essay examines how Indigenous writers Jeanette Armstrong and Lee Maracle use their traditions of orature as part of their activist agenda to promote a decolonization of the patriarchal mindset and prompt humanity to embrace an ethics of 'relational ecology' which restores reverence and respect for Mother Earth. Their stories can help both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers to embrace a collective process of healing from multiple forms of colonial violence.

Keywords: Indigenous women, storytelling, healing, J. Armstrong, L. Maracle.

*Stories are keys to the national treasure
known as our knowledge
(Lee Maracle 2018).*

1. Storytelling as Activism & Healing

Indigenous women are today among the most fervent members of global activist movements aimed at promoting decolonization, environmental justice and Indigenous sovereignty. In

* This article expands some of the topics previously addressed in Saidero 2022.

North America, as in other parts of the world, they are drawing on their holistic worldview of interdependence, reciprocity and kinship with Mother Earth to oppose destructive neocolonial practices and promote more sustainable economic and social relations which can contrast the overexploitation of nature, the current climate crisis, and racial and sexist violence¹. They are also involved in healing Indigenous youth from the intergenerational trauma and cultural genocide caused by colonization by reuniting them with their ancestral cultures and languages.

Central to their activism is their reliance on storytelling, a foundational element of their traditional ways of life and community relationships. Grounded in Indigenous epistemology, philosophy and pedagogy, oral stories are a primary educational tool through which elders have passed down ecological and relational knowledge about the natural and spiritual world and the need for interrelatedness to future generations. As Corntassel, Chaw-win-is and T'lakwadzi state, these oral stories “are not fairy tales or entertaining stories for children – they are lived values that form the basis of Indigenous governance and regeneration”; they are “the experiential knowledge and living histories” of core Indigenous teachings (2009: 138). Sto:lo scholar Jo-ann Archibald (Q'um Q'um Xiiem) explains that stories are also healing ceremonies which “remind us about being whole and healthy” because “[s]tories have the power to make our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits work together” (2008: 11-12). Not surprisingly, storytelling is thus increasingly used as a performative and therapeutic tool for “the cultural and political resurgence of Indigenous nations” (Corntassel *et al.* 2009: 137) in a collective effort to heal from the fractures produced by colonialism. For Indigenous people who have been disconnected from their land-based cultures, storytelling is, indeed, a means for “regaining a sense of belonging and identity” and for engaging in self-representation to counter the colonial process of being “storied by others” (Chan 2021: 171)².

When Indigenous women writers resort to their traditions of orature and translate them into their English texts, they thus do so with the self-conscious political and activist aim of decolonizing the patriarchal mindset and Western research methodologies which have misrepresented and misused Indigenous stories to subjugate Indigenous peoples within the imperialist master narrative. Among them are Sylix writer Jeanette Armstrong from the Okanagan nation and Salish writer Lee Maracle from the Sto:lo nation, both located in the Pacific Northwest of Canada, in current British Columbia³. In spite of their cultural distinctiveness, both writers are committed to Indigenous cultural survival⁴ and

¹ They have, for instance, been active in staunchly opposing fracking and the construction of pipelines, in safeguarding water and the land, and in advocating Climate Justice and the Rights of Nature. Likewise, they have countered gender violence through initiatives such as the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls campaigns and participated in the Red Power Movement to reclaim Indigenous lands and self-determination.

² Chan's recent study witnesses how storytelling is used as a counselling tool in projects with Indigenous youth to facilitate the process of healing and prevent suicide. See also Archibald (2008).

³ The traditional Okanagan territory occupies the interior of British Columbia and stretches into Washington state, USA. The Sto:lo nation is located in the Fraser River Valley, BC.

⁴ They are founders of the En'owkin Centre and its International School of Writing aimed at educating Indigenous youth.

value the transformational and healing power of storytelling. They also share a heightened environmental concern for the endangered ecosystems of the West Coast and the ecological crisis our planet is facing.

This essay examines Armstrong's novel *whispering in shadows* (2000) and Maracle's *Celia's Song* (2015)⁵ to show how these activist-writers incorporate traditional oral stories into their narratives with the performative intent of propounding their environmental ethos and a model of 'relational ecology'⁶ based on reuniting with family, community, and the land. Indeed, both use ancestral stories and tricksters to give voice to multiple perspectives from the human and non-human world, thus spurring us to reconsider the connective spaces between them and to value the world's ecological diversity. Defying the rigid categorisations of Western individualistic traditions, they posit an Indigenous epistemological paradigm of relational subjectivity which is grounded in the spiritual and in the belief that "knowledge is shared with all of creation" (Wilson 2001: 176), including animals, plants, the earth, the winds and the cosmos. Their aim is to teach both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers how to heal our relationships with the Earth and all her creatures by listening to the voices of the land and embracing an ethics of reverence and respect. Indeed, as the trickster Mink says in *Celia's Song*, all stories deserve to be told, "[e]ven the waves of the sea tell a story that deserves to be read" (7).

In order to understand their teachings, Indigenous stories and healing ceremonies cannot be read within the oppositional and dialectical discursive approaches of the Western tradition. Instead, as Western readers, we need to decolonize, as Smith suggests, our research methodologies (2012) and embrace what de Ramirez calls "conversive literary and scholarly strategies", which are linked to the principles of interconnectedness, relationality and inclusivity. As she explains,

[t]he term *conversive* conveys both senses of conversion and conversation in which literary scholarship becomes a transformative and intersubjective act of communication. Here the scholar becomes a listener-reader of literary works (like a listener participating in an oral storytelling event), and in turn becomes a storyteller-guide to assist others in becoming listener-readers of those literary works (1999:1).

2. Jeanette Armstrong: "The land is what gives us stories"

A conversive approach begins with acknowledging that "the sacred is manifested in the relationships between each person and all other parts of creation" (de Ramirez 1999: 100) and that storytelling is thus an act of spirituality by virtue of its power to weave those relations among and within the human, natural and spiritual worlds which are interdependent. It also entails acknowledging the intimate connection between storytelling and Indigenous knowledge, language, ecology, and foremost with the land. In fact, as Armstrong explains,

⁵ All references are from these editions.

⁶ The term 'relational ecology' refers to the links between the human and non-human world. It provides a new way of thinking about our relationships with other living beings beyond Cartesian dualisms and helps us reconsider human-nature relationships in a more holistic perspective (see Deville & Spielwoy 2019). It is thus "consistent with Indigenous epistemology" (Chan 2021: 181).

“the land is what gives us stories”, which “are about our knowledge, our right relationship with the land”; they are “a way to be able to engage in our identity, of being *of* the land, of viewing ourselves as a subset of relatedness with other systems” (2021: n.p).

This Okanagan land- and language-based worldview, which emphasizes land as kin and interrelatedness against the Eurocentric land-as-property view, is the core of the storytelling process in *whispering in shadows*, where prose, poetry, letters, diary entries, oral stories and songs commingle to chart the protagonist’s web of interrelationships with the Okanagan land, her community, and an international network of environmental activists. In her essay “Land speaks”, Armstrong explains the intersubjective relation which ties her to language, land and story as a listener-teller: “language was given to us by the land we live in ... it is land that holds all knowledge of life and death” (1998: 176). The Okanagan language is thus an ongoing storytelling process in which she is “being spoken to ... and is not the one speaking”; she is simply “a listener to the language’s stories” which her words are “merely retelling ... in different patterns” (1998: 181). Armstrong also acknowledges that as a writer she is “claimed and owned by this land”, because it is N’silxchn, the Okanagan language, that “permeates my experience of the Okanagan land and is a constant voice within me that yearns for human speech” (1998: 176). Her narrative is thus a conscious decolonizing attempt to bend the rigidity of the English language to fluidly accommodate the symbiotic sensibilities of the Okanagan worldview, to make the Okanagan way of life and of being speak through the acquired colonial language. In the following passage, for instance, “the borrowed tongue” (18) is used to convey the Okanagan precept of inseparability between humans and the cosmos through visual patterning and “boundary-busting poetic imagery” (Haladay 2006: 37) which establish a fluidity between earth, sky, language, women, body, rhythm, sound, motion and song, thereby debasing Western visions of reality as grounded in dualistic divisions and asserting the Okanagan view of reality as transformative, changeable, animated and alive:

Sky and breath.

One and the same in her language. Once said as word, she feels the sky images form. Dressing. Putting its dress on.

She sees it that way. A billowing garment covering the female form, moving with the body. In seeing sky, seeing also the warm earth-female it covered. Finding herself in that. Finding peace. Knowing its meaning as her own breath, her own body. She feels light now. Able to dissipate. To move into that vaster rhythm. The song of wings brushing wind (291).

In the novel, Penny Jackson, the activist-artist who is “constructed as a self-image of Armstrong” (Sorflatten 2006: 387), is also claimed by the Okanagan land language, which inspires both her art and her environmental consciousness. Like Armstrong, Penny is a listener-teller of its stories, which she has learned mainly through her great-grandmother Tupa. As an artist, she can hear the voices of the colours speak to her and translates those voices into visual paintings so they can be seen by others. As Tupa says:

“Paen-aye! You made some painted faces out of the flowers on my shawl. And those white and grey pebbles they make pretty colours. You and the colours can talk, I see. They tell you things. Listen to them. They never lie. Come now ... look! There’s a turtle now, swimming toward the shore. It comes from the dark down deep. It comes into the light and the colours. It swims the song you were singing” (46).

The colours are here “animate, speaking persons” (Haladay 2006: 34) as are the trees, animals, wind, water, sun and all the other spirit beings of the non-human world which she considers her relatives, and whose brotherly voices/stories she yearns to listen to throughout her life in a relation of holistic interconnectedness that allows her to partake in mystical knowledge. It is, for instance, through the dove’s cooing, the squirrel’s chattering, the whispering sound of the pine needles, the clicking of grasshoppers and the glorious rising of the sun that she “can hear the mystery” (38) of cosmic perfection and thereby “achieve the power to become serene and calm within and so to make good decisions” (34).

Thanks to the land’s stories, Penny’s artistry and sense of self develop along the Native paradigm of inseparability, relationality and reciprocity, which provides a counter-narrative to Western individualism, dualisms and hierarchies. Indeed, it is the disassociation between the human and non-human world that Penny identifies as being responsible for environmental degradation and human disease. In the novel’s more overtly political sections, Armstrong denounces the desecration of the land as a consequence of colonial reasoning and globalisation, which is “a global design/of conjure and conquer” (151). Free enterprise and capitalism are, for instance, seen as having severed familial connections with the land (and within communities) in favour of money and power, which equate to exploitation, mass production and pollution:

Shit, is what is happening, that’s what. The resources are getting plundered and everything polluted. Do you know the extent of damage that free enterprise has caused? Never mind the fact that there is a rigid class system, as a result, keeping the rich powerful and the poor powerless ... It’s effecting the environment and it’s getting worse. It’s got to effect the people in the end (81).

The effects include “systematized racism” (185), compromised food security (228), and unethical behaviours like “[p]utting human genes into pigs and tobacco plants ... making new bacteria and killer viruses for weapons ... And growing human tissue to sell” (138). Ultimately, these individualistically-based socioeconomic systems have created an imbalance between “body human” (84) and spirit that mars human health, as Penny’s cancer diagnosis attests. Comparing her cancer to the flesh-eating monsters of Indigenous creation stories, Penny indeed admits that: “Now everything is out of balance ... We put the things out there which was not meant for our bodies to have to deal with. Our bodies are part of the natural world” (247)⁷. In order to heal, therefore, “[w]e have to try to restore the balance

⁷ The monsters are all those things that breach the balance with the natural world and have to be rid of, if we want to survive.

in the natural world” rather than “think we can escape by making newer better drugs” (247-278) which just make us weaker.

In *whispering in shadows* Armstrong’s belief in the sacred power of story to transform and heal the world⁸ is reclaimed in contrast to modern science’s veneration for drug-based therapies which fail to cure the body/spirit divide. Woven into the fabric of the text are, for instance, Coyote trickster stories, which remind us that the world undergoes constant change because the demonic flesh-eaters shapeshift and come back in different forms, but also that “the spirits of the earth can tip the scales” (239). Coyote can, indeed, transform those monsters and “redraw them. Towards nature’s way” (192) so as to re-establish “a golden connection/to the big mother” (152). His presence is a reassurance of hope in the eternal possibility to achieve reconciliation and unity with creation because the knowledge about how to do that is contained in stories. As he tells Penny in her final dream, “it’s in the story. Every story. It’s just the same old monsters again. I’ll take care of them bastards” (287).

Armstrong also honours Okanagan *captikwl* (oral stories) by associating Penny with Shining Copper Woman, the planetary First Mother of ancient creation stories who “shone so bright people thought she was like the sun. And when she died they loved her so much she became a mountain that people went to for a vision” (280). Like Copper Woman, Penny has “a vast love for humans” (294), which fuels her life-long commitment to the activist cause. While evoking matriarchal strength, wisdom and nurturing, the association also connects Penny with her grandmothers – the great-grandmother she is named after and Tupa who left copper pennies “buried beneath the ground when she wanted medicine” (294)⁹. It thus reinstates the inseparability between the living and the dead, as well as the validity of Indigenous medicine and curative methods, which do not separate physical and spiritual healing, but rather adopt a holistic approach that addresses the body, mind, spirit and emotions. To achieve such a wholeness, individual healing cannot be disjoined from family and community. Thus, after her cancer treatment at the clinic, Penny – and her sister Lena who is recovering from drug-addiction – feels “full inside” (281) only upon returning to the mountain (named Copper) and partaking in community-based activities like planting, harvesting and singing on her ancestral gathering grounds. Filled with the warmth of family and with the spirit of the land and of Tupa, both women are finally able to dissipate the shadows that had carved a hole inside them and Penny is ready to accept her imminent death as a cyclical return to the earth that loves her.

Rather than material wealth, Armstrong claims, “it is the people and the community that secure and sustain you” (2020: 168). The importance of community healing and of ceremonies that place the individual within a sacred circle of sharing, caring and mutual support is asserted throughout *whispering in shadows*, which draws on Sylix teaching stories

⁸ The power of stories to inform about the world is also opposed to modern technology – i.e., “television as teacher ... Computer as guardian of information” (92) – which traps us into virtual life and contributes to “the witchcraft culture of destruction” (192).

⁹ Haladay notes that the gesture is “a spiritual and material transaction with the Okanagan land” which upholds a relation of reciprocity. It is opposed to the association of Penny’s name with another “form of currency” which is “a manifestation of copper whose worth is valued on a different scale in the colonial marketplace” (2006: 46).

to put forward the Okanagan view of community as a cooperative and harmonious unit, in opposition to the Eurocentric model of community as a collection of “unrelated strangers” (274). The very word *Sylis*, she explains, conveys the idea of a sustaining community through its central image of many strands twined together to make one strong strand (2007: 6-7). For community to function as “a whole healthy organism”, however, we have “to be able to sustain community” and bring it “continuously in balance with all of the other living life forms” (2007: 8-9). Community practices that involve working together on the land, self-sufficient communities that rely on organic food production, and pan-Indigenous fair trade cooperatives based on spiritual work, trust and mutual assistance are, for instance, posited as a model of sustainability against the capitalist exploitation of global corporations and NAFTA. Ceremonies and rituals like dancing, singing and smudging, which are performed at the environmentalist gatherings Penny attends, equally celebrate a relational ecology within and among communities, while symbolic associations like the bear¹⁰ who transforms into Tupa, into “the Aztec man from Mexico”, and into the constellation of the Great Bear (287) establish “an ecology of relationships” (Chan 2021: 181) along the circular trajectories of Armstrong’s story, reminding us that every last piece must be in place to restore wholeness.

3. Lee Maracle: “We start with an old story and...tell it back different but the same”

Restoring unity and wellness to the community through storytelling is also imperative for Sto:lo people because story is governance, culture, identity and relationship. Indeed, story transmits transgenerational memory thereby ensuring the survival of Indigenous epistemic traditions. As Maracle explains, storytelling connects the listeners with the elders who told stories “so we knew what a Sto:lo was, and how we came to be who we are and will always want to be” (2020: n.p). Storytelling is interrelational and interconnective also because it relies on participatory listener-teller interaction and dialogic engagement:

when we listen, [we] seek to add to the story, to shift the direction of the story and challenge the teller to create a new one from our interventions ... We form a circle and insist each of us respond to an aspect of the story, poem, play or the scene that struck us. We take it on a journey through our lives, our history, our sense of self, and engage each other in discussion of that (Maracle 2020: n.p).

Furthermore, storytelling is a collective and reciprocal process in which the listener is summoned to tell the story back. Maracle clarifies how in the mythmaking process of story creation “we start with an old story and ... tell it back different but the same” (2018: n.p), thereby allowing different perspectives to be introduced and understanding to be broadened. In this process, the storyteller contributes creatively to tribal culture by creating new stories from old ones to accommodate the changes of modern times, while preserving ancient teachings.

Conjuring “a new story different but the same” (Maracle 2020: n.p) to disrupt colonial

¹⁰ The bear is a Native symbol for healing, family, health and protection.

attitudes is what Maracle does in *Celia's Song*, where she retells the Salish flood story about the double-headed sea serpent who fights itself and causes an underwater earthquake that destroys Indigenous villages in the Pacific Northwest. Retold mainly by Mink¹¹, the shape-shifting trickster and "primary witness" (5), the story of Restless and Loyal, the battling heads of the serpent, is intertwined with the vicissitudes of a contemporary Sto:lo community who is facing the transgenerational effects of colonialism and cultural erasure. In Maracle's retelling, the double-headed snake, which symbolically reminds us of the spilt between mind and heart, body and spirit, and masculine and feminine, can be read as a metaphor for the dualistic mindset that generates opposition, division, war and violence. As Maracle explains (2016), the two-headed serpent is, indeed, about the split mind (a condition similar to what is known as bipolar disorder in the West) which results from the inability to grieve and accept unspeakable events, like the mass deaths resulting from natural catastrophes and epidemics. The split mind is what Indigenous peoples experienced after the colonial encounter with Europeans and is the source of implosion of their families, societies and nations, because of the destructive and self-destructive violence it upholds.

Maracle's creative reworking of the old story is used to both deconstruct colonial oppression and reclaim storytelling and stories as Indigenous methods of healing and resurgence; it thus responds to her dual intent to decolonize and reconcile. Indeed, the need to remember and retell old stories which preserve Indigenous knowledge is asserted against the neglect for the old ways, which is identified as what caused the breach between humans and the serpent and in turn triggered the natural disaster that devastated the land and the people, leaving both "bent" and "crippled" (3). As Restless contends, after the colonists' prohibition laws which forbade singing among the Natives, the people lost their spirituality and stopped honouring the serpent through ceremony and song. This granted him permission "to slide from the house front and return to the sea" (2), thereby depriving the people of his protection. The humans' disrespect for old ceremonies also justifies Restless' hunger for mischief and fuels his "plans to consume the spirit of humans" (27). Opposed to Loyal who is "obsessed with his commitment to protect" (22) and to find someone who will bring back reconciliation and unity, Restless upholds violence and spurs horrific human behaviours like war, rape, incest and pedophilia by returning to the land to devour broken human spirits. He, for instance, feeds on the drunken workers of a pig farm, one of whom kills a woman, chops her body up and feeds her to the pigs (41); he feeds on the "white men who used to come on to the reserve, grab a girl walking down the road, rape her, and return her" (9); and he also slides into Amos, a dislocated survivor of the residential schools who perpetrates the desecration of the land by shamelessly clearcutting trees and, most abhorrently, rapes a five-year-old girl.

It is this violence against women and complete disrespect for the feminine that Maracle denounces as the root cause of Indigenous implosion and of all human and environmental tragedy. The intertwining of gender violence and violence against the land is, for instance, made clear in the novel's opening pages by Celia, the "delusional" seer (11) who witnesses

¹¹ In line with storytelling as a collective enterprise the story is fleshed out through the accounts offered by Celia and her grandmother Alice, which create a more comprehensive narrative.

the storm's destruction of Nuu'chalth territory in a vision. As the ribbon of seaweed braided with "beer bottles, chip bags, hamburger wrappers ... underwear and condoms" washes up on the shore, she wonders if "this debris began as an insult to women" and is abhorred by the thought that "the woman's panties are so small" she may have not been old enough to consent (12-13). Again such violence is seen as a by-product of colonialism and the loss of Indigenous value systems which have resulted in the spiritual malaise of the people. As Maracle writes in *I Am Woman*:

Sexism, racism and the total dismissal of Native women's experiences ... result from the accumulation of hurt sustained by our people over a long period of time. Our communities are reduced to a sub-standard definition of normal, which leads to a sensibility of defeat, which in turn calls the victim to the table to lateral violence ... On this table of lateral violence sit the violence of men and women against children and the violence of men toward women (1996: IX).

The violation of women's and young girls' bodies and the implicit loss of connection with the feminine is what needs to be addressed by the characters in the novel in order to start their process of reconciliation and healing. As part of the "struggle to clear the table of lateral violence" (1996: IX), Maracle's tale prompts a decolonization of the feminine which restores value to women and their traditional roles in Sto:lo matriarchal societies. In the novel, it is, indeed, the women who will "*find a way to reconcile the new life with the old story*" (62-63) so the people may rediscover who they are and heal from their anger, hurt and disconnectedness. It is the women who are the knowledge-keepers of traditional Indigenous herbal medicines, who provide care to the sick, and who administer community healing through storytelling and other ceremonies, which are thus revalorized as foundational to Indigenous epistemologies, in contrast with non-Native views of oral stories as make-belief legends and of their rituals as "witchcraft, mumbo jumbo, voodoo" (258). Stories are, indeed, exchanged to foster nurturing community bonds, which can resurrect traditional ways of life based on a participatory sharing of experiences and on working together to find release from trauma and pain. They are shared to provide relief in moments of enormous emotional and physical distress, such as when Stacey recounts her sexual affair with a doctor to the women while they nurse little Shelley after her brutal torture and abuse:

The women responded with deep acknowledgement. Except Celia, who isn't sure if she should laugh or be horrified. She wonders what kind of people think about sex while tending a dying child ... The women have relaxed into Stacey's story. They seem to need to be relaxed to keep up the madness of tending Shelley (199).

Consensual sex and love, which Maracle believes has "the power to heal" (1996: 23), are here counterpoised to sexual violence and embraced as forces that can restore respect for women and feminine values. Finally, stories are shared to provide guidance. Jacob, the would-be shaman who can potentially restore the balance with the serpent, is, for example, told stories about Ravensong by Celia and her mother that provide him with the knowledge

he needs to face his own terrible fear – the fear that he might allow his masculine side to predominate and become disrespectful of the feminine like child-abusers and rapists. The women’s stories also teach him the value of empathy and the need to restore the relation of reciprocity with the land, so he can embrace his role as shaman and resist being swallowed by the snake.

By embracing storytelling as “an act of ceremony that seeks to undo and re-imagine” (Sium & Ritskes 2013: VIII), *Celia’s Song* also attempts to heal the horrific transgenerational legacy of the residential school system and to prompt re-indigenization against the loss of Indigenous culture it occasioned. Like story, song and dance are thus reclaimed as valuable agents of spiritual healing, which restores connectivity and holism to the individual and the community. As Mink remarks:

Songs are about light. They teach our children to adore the light inside. They tantalize the musculature and restore cellular movement in that easy way that the breath of the four winds has of tantalizing the earth, dragging sound through trees, and haunting the world with the beauty of breath’s power. Breath on vocal cords ... can inspire humans to resist tyranny ... can settle the fears of a child. Song’s breath across vocal cords can excite the love of a woman for a man ... restore peace of the body after the agony of divorce ... heal the sick, raise the dead, and encourage the living to go on in the face of terror (215).

During the comeuppance clubbing ceremony, dancing, for instance, releases Amos from the many “horror stories his body collected” (254) due to the physical, sexual and psychological abuses he suffered in residential school, while the singing of his dead ancestors allows him to free his spirit from “his toxic insane life” at the mercy of the serpent and from “the deep toxicity of the memory of hate, of hurt” (255). Singing is, likewise, used by the old bones in the mountain – those of the original people who fell out of the sky before the newcomers arrived – to guide Jacob on his vision quest and to soothe the angry uninterred younger bones of the longhouse who had shared Restless’ hunger for revenge against the people’s negligence. As a symbol of ancestral Indigenous culture and resilience, the old bones seek to overturn Restless’ anger, hurt and fear and restore Loyal’s protection, caring and courage. The unison of song between the old and new bones at the end of the novel bears hope that the “the threat of the serpent” (62) can ultimately be removed and the crazy, split-minded people healed.

4. Conclusion: Conversive Listening

Indigenous stories, Sium and Ritskes state “are the continuing fire that keeps Indigenous being alive and dynamic” (2013: vi). Indeed, as Armstrong tells us, *captikwl*, the Sylix word for ‘story’, contains the image of the ember flying off after the fire is dying out, so that the knowledge we have can be split off in the stories and breathed on to the future generations to shed light to darkness. In this dark age it is important, she claims, to listen to these stories and “rekindle a new fire from the small embers” (2021: n.p).

In the novels discussed Armstrong and Maracle have indeed breathed new life into old stories, rekindling those embers to fit the needs of our modern times. By sharing their

stories with us, they are making us all participant of their Earth-honoring worldviews and are summoning us to become participatory conversive listeners of the land's voice. It is our call now to unite in a global, pan-human effort to heal Mother Earth and free humanity from violence of all kinds. As Mink concludes: "You know what to do with the story now" (269).

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