

This is Our Story:

Healing Through the (Re)Narrativization of Indigenous Trauma

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous creative non-fiction. This paper uses personal experience to create a living example of Indigenous trauma for the reader. I aim to create a hybrid model of understanding the intergenerational trans/historical traumas of Indigenous peoples by drawing on academic concepts such as Marianne Hirsch's "postmemory," as well as N. Scott Momaday's creative work on "blood memory." Using Daniel David Moses's play *Almighty Voice and His Wife*, I argue that Indigenous theatre can create a communal space that aids in the healing of our communities. Throughout the paper I use the personal voice to explain my own experiences of Indigenous trauma. Moses's play helped me to experience my own "blood memory" which connected me to my grandmother and my mother in ways I had been unable to comprehend and articulate before having seen it.

Keywords: Indigenous, Aboriginal, First Nations, Residential Schools, 60's Scoop, Creative, N. Scott Momaday, Daniel David Moses, Indigenous Theatre. Healing. Indigenous Trauma. Blood Memory.

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Dad, I'll make sure your investments pay off.
Mom, Thanks for always picking up the phone.
Jenna, the best big sister ever, thanks for being there, and bringing me Kye!
Love you all.

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We did it!

Hunaq'naqnini. Thank you.

DEDICATION

For my mothers
For my grandmothers
For my sisters
For my nephew

For the past and the present and the future

For you.

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... history, like trauma, is never simply one's own...history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas.

-Cathy Caruth

I am writing this to find some answers. I want to know how I am supposed to heal. How am I supposed to move forward? How am I supposed to recover? From a pain that is mine. From a pain that is not mine. From a pain that is ours and yours and mine. I have found myself so close to drowning that now I must examine fully what it is that has kept me afloat, and I know that I am not alone. I want to explore my Indigeneity with you. I want to explore the intergenerational, historical, trans/historical, postmemorial trauma of my peoples. I want to explore a space that heals us. I am a member of the Akisqnuq Band of the Ktunaxa Nation. I am the third generation stolen. Possibly fourth: my known history as of yet doesn't go past Grandma Patricia, but I'd bet that her mother was another sent to one of those schools. I am a First Nations person in Canada. This means that when my grandmother was a little girl, she was taken away to residential schools. When my mother was a little girl, she was taken away during the 60's Scoop, given over to a white Catholic "civilized" home where she got pregnant with me—the third generation, who when I was a little girl, was taken away by the DIA (Department of Indian Affairs). If you're looking for a further explanation of these events, you won't find it from me. I believe that we, as Indigenous scholars, must demand more from our readers. This is not just Indigenous history; it is the history of Canada. Look it up. Read about it. Grant me the same respect as those dead British men who point to a term that you have never heard. I believe that by further explaining what has

happened to us, I would be doing a disservice to Indigenous students, and people. I ask you to do your research if you are unaware. Let's make this information a necessary part of the curriculum. Together we can push to re-write Canadian history, and expand the boundaries of common knowledge about Indigenous peoples. This paper is not meant to be a history lesson. It is about me. It's about my family. It's about intergenerational trauma.

Before I go on, I must tell you not to cry for me. I am one of the lucky ones. I have an adoptive family who loves me. I need to make that clear.

But.

There is a hole.

There is a moment deep within me that cries into the dark at night.

Motherless.

Like my mother before me, like my grandmother before her, like those multiple generations of children taken away.

Motherless.

This is how my story begins.

Let me point you to Métis author Fyre Jean Graveline's *Healing Wounded Hearts*. I have chosen to model my work after hers, as I want to share my truth in a way that surpasses traditional academic standards. I want this paper to have as much of myself in it as is possible. Graveline writes:

INDIGENOUS CREATIVE NON-FICTION

is what you are about to Experience.

I am not only giving. theoretical. information.

I am sharing personal. painful. spiritual discoveries.

telling factual Stories. in a fictional way.

I use original research. reflective journaling. creative use of Languages. Dialogue.

I Story to make People. Places. Times. Events. Beings. come alive. (9)

Like Graveline, I choose to story in the hopes that I can create a living example of Indigenous trauma, so that you can understand what it's like and how we move forward. This work stems from both the scholarly and the creative. I aim to use a hybrid model, adapting academic concepts like Marianne Hirsch's "postmemory" into a deeper understanding of N. Scott Momaday's artistic endeavor called "blood memory." Throughout my work I will weave my own creative non-fiction into my academic discourse on Indigenous trauma.

My grandmother died before I was born. At sixteen I met my birthmother, but our relationship has rarely been easy. We are a shining example of the current effects of colonialism. We are intergenerational historical trauma. My adoptive mother herself is Indigenous. My sister too. Yet for so many years I have struggled to accept my identity as a First Nations person. I have struggled with hatred and disgust for the Aboriginal people I saw struggling with addictions, education, and life in general. This hatred of my people became self-hatred for that piece of my identity—I didn't want to be an Indian. Ours is a culture of broken homes, broken families, and broken individuals. The Canadian government and its citizens have done much of that breaking.

But this is not the story of brokenness, and it is not a story of blame. I want to talk about healing. I want to talk about moving forward. Let's talk about learning more about our past and piecing together the puzzle—no matter how hard that may be. There is no easy answer. I am not here to claim that we all just need to be reunited in harmony. There's too much to work through sometimes, and there's no simple cure. I'm here to talk about another moment—like those dark and motherless moments, those pain-filled traumatic memories—but different. I'm here to talk about that moment of redemption. The moment where it all fits together, where we can experience our trauma collectively in a safe space and we can be proud of ourselves for who we are. We can dance. I want to share my journey and how it was affected specifically by Daniel David Moses's play *Almighty Voice and His Wife*. With this play, Moses has created more than performance art. He has created a healing ceremony. We are a people who have survived multiple generational traumas, and we need artists such as Moses to help make sense of our past, present, and future. I have often felt like a person without a history, even while simultaneously understanding how rich and wonderful my culture is. Though tradition and knowledge persist in our communities, because we have been so broken there is often a lack of accessibility to those tools, to that past, and even to each other. I know so little about my grandmother, about my family, how do I make sense of all their pain? How do I make sense of my own, when I am not always directly affected? How do I begin to heal a hurt that I can barely explain?

In Western psychological terms, it is possible that all Indigenous peoples suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder because of the multiple intergenerational traumas that we have survived. Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux explains:

Indigenous social and cultural devastation in the present is the result of unremitting personal and collective trauma due to demographic collapse, resulting from early influenza and smallpox epidemics and other infectious diseases, conquest, warfare, slavery, colonization, proselytization, famine and starvation, the 1892 to the late 1960s residential school period and forced assimilation. These experiences have left Indigenous cultural identities reeling with what can be regarded as an endemic and complex form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). (1)

The issue that I take with the diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder is that it focuses primarily on the individual, both in the diagnoses and treatment. In cases where the victim has in fact been through an individual trauma, such as a rape or shooting, the PTSD model can (and probably does) make sense. But can the same individual-centred diagnoses and treatments also apply to healing from colonialism and all the layers of intergenerational trauma it has created for Indigenous peoples? Rather than considering our trauma as that of single individuals, I believe we need to look at it in terms of the collective. I will argue that we as Indigenous peoples can come to an understanding of our histories, can *remember* the trauma *in our blood*, as Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday might say, when we experience performances such as *Almighty Voice and His Wife*, as I did in Saskatoon, SK, in January 2012. In order to be able to heal ourselves from a trauma that is often invisible, or incredibly difficult

to comprehend and articulate, my generation must be able to remember—to experience the memory in our blood. Indigenous theatre such as *Almighty Voice and His Wife* creates a safe and communal space for us to experience blood memory—to experience the pain of our ancestors through characterizations of them, pain that is often impossible to grasp because of the gaps and silences in our stories. I argue that healing is possible when we can experience our traumas and come to tell our stories. As Graveline writes,

Healing my WoundedHeart through Story.

requires actually being Heard. Validated.

Supported. Recognized.

within a like-minded Community

(Graveline 56, my emphasis).

Indigenous theatre can aid us in the understanding of the memories we carry within us, and in a communal way allow our trauma to be heard and validated so that we can “story” ourselves, and hopefully find some healing.

Before moving on to discuss the healing powers of theatre, I will define Indigenous trauma by connecting the ideas of trans/historicity, postmemory, and memory in the blood. First, I’ll simply point to the fact that our trauma as Indigenous peoples, although I have named it “historical,” is not from a singular moment in history. Unlike, for example, the Holocaust, the colonization of Indigenous peoples has spanned hundreds of years and continues today. As Nancy Van Styvendale writes, “cumulative, collective, intergenerational, and intersubjective, the trauma of Native peoples, when understood as trans/historical,

exceeds any attempt to fix its location or define its event, even as it demands our attention to historically specific atrocities” (93-94). In considering a model for Indigenous trauma, we can also turn to Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory. As Hirsch explains, postmemory “most specifically describes the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they ‘remember’ only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right” (9). Hirsch focuses on the way children of Holocaust survivors experience images of the Holocaust. While this argument is strongly based on family connections, it applies even to me, adopted and raised apart from an understanding of the traumatic experiences of my biological family. Hirsch writes that “although the familial inheritance offers the clearest model for it, postmemory need not be *strictly* an identity position. Instead, I prefer to see it as an intersubjective transgenerational space of remembrance, linked specifically to cultural or collective trauma” (10). When we can create this space of remembrance, we are able to work through the cultural/collective trauma by giving it a space in our life story: “Postmemory thus would be *retrospective witnessing by adoption*. It is a question of adopting the traumatic experiences—and thus also the memories—of others as experiences one might oneself have had, and of inscribing them into one’s own life story” (Hirsch 10). In this sense, as a younger generation, we may not have experienced the direct trauma of the generations that came before us, yet we must *remember* that trauma in order to have a chance at healing it through integrating the events into our own personal history.

Because Indigenous trauma is both intergenerational and trans/historical, I want to move away from the language of “post” memory and instead adapt Hirsch’s idea using N. Scott Momaday’s term “blood memory.” I take issue with “post” because it implies that there has been an ending. Colonialism is not over. My generation continues to feel the effects—living with the traumas of violence and suicides on reserves, poverty and addiction running rampant. We are still discriminated against on a daily basis in the cities of this country. Hirsch uses the term “post-memory” because she feels somewhat removed from the trauma of her parents, and because she did not directly experience the Holocaust. I see my own trauma as a continuation of both my mother and grandmother’s experiences, as they came before me. I believe my own grandchildren will carry the same weight, with only the hope that I can make it a little lighter for them.

Moving forward, I have chosen to use the term “blood memory,” coined by Momaday in his works of prose and poetry, to describe the trans/historical intergenerational trauma of Indigenous peoples. Blood memory is a type of memory that we carry based on our familial connections. Momaday uses blood memory throughout his works, sometimes directly, and other times by placing himself in the lives and stories of his grandmothers and grandfathers. In *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday writes illustrates how blood memory is passed on: “Although my grandmother lived out her long life in the shadow of Rainy Mountain, the immense landscape of the continental interior lay like memory in her blood. She could tell of the Crows, whom she had never seen, and of the Black Hills, where she had never been” (7). Even though Momaday’s grandmother was raised away from

her homelands, as her people had left the interior before she was born, she remembers that connection so perfectly that she can describe what would have been experienced by her ancestors as her own experiences. She can see what her ancestors have seen through her storied connection to them. Momaday opens the book at the death of this woman—his grandmother. He is going home to visit her grave, but instead of thinking of her last days as an old woman, Momaday illustrates blood memory by looking back on her life: “I like to think of her as a child. When she was born, the Kiowas were living the last great moment of their history” (6). Momaday imagines himself in those moments of his grandmother’s childhood—of course it is an impossibility that he could be there physically, yet he holds on to the memory of that time as passed to him through his people. Regardless of whether he was actually there, he can remember when the Kiowa people were strong before contact. The memory is carried through generations of Kiowa people as their own.

Blood memory has often been a controversial term. Specifically, Arnold Krupat argues that blood memory is “absurdly racist” (Su 198), as, in his view, it makes exclusive and essentialist claims about Indigenous peoples. Chadwick Allen examines why the concept of blood memory can be difficult for some to accept:

...the deployment of blood memory relies on a series of contemporary assertions rooted in indigenous worldviews and personal experience... the analysis of blood memory thus forces us to confront emotionally charged issues of racial identification and indigenous spirituality and to contemplate the roles these can play in indigenous minority activism. (178)

In order to avoid the essentialist argument, I want to point out that I am making no biological claim about Indigenous peoples. I do not believe in quantifying by blood, and, I would argue, neither does Momaday. The choice of the term “blood” memory points us to the historical weight of the blood quantum laws of the United States, while simultaneously destabilizing the concepts those laws are based upon. By using the term blood, Momaday examines the concept of a deeply ingrained inheritance from our ancestors, yet he denies biological determinism and exclusionary definitions of Indigeneity with the addition of *memory*; memory is a creative, dynamic force that connects us to the past in a much stronger sense than blood quantum. As such, blood memory is anything but essentialist. Our blood runs thick with the memories of our ancestors, perhaps not on a biological cellular level, but on a more spiritual and metaphorical plane. Blood memory is a type of memory that connects us to the generations that have come before us, and those that will follow. We are able to experience the traumas of our histories passed to us through our blood connection to our peoples. Blood memory, as such, is by no means exclusive to us, as Indigenous peoples, just as trauma is not inherently ours. A strong example of this can be found looking back to Hirsch; her connections to the traumas of her family, and the Holocaust are evidence of blood memory in another culture. Just like Hirsch, Momaday understands that we have incredibly strong connections to our peoples. We must make a space for those connections—we must remember what it felt like to be removed from our lands, our families, and our traditions, in order to move forward—in order to heal.

Momaday's concept of blood memory not only covers his individual connection with his family, but it also illustrates his connection to the whole tribe as they have been for thousands of years. Momaday tells the story of an antelope hunt during which two chiefs argue over the udder and one chief gathers his people and leaves (18). Of the story, Momaday writes, "*this is one of the oldest memories of the tribe*" (19). Memory, then, is no longer only an individual act. Momaday introduces us to an idea of memory that connects Indigenous people to each other—that connects him to the Kiowa people. This understanding trusts that the memories of our ancestors are also our own. What is physically impossible—remembering something that one has not experienced—becomes possible in Momaday's work, and in his understandings of Indigenous peoples. Laguna Pueblo author Paula Gunn Allen provides another example of blood memory: "The workings of racial memory are truly mysterious. No Cherokee can forget the Trail of Tears, the time when entire Indian nations were abducted and held captive in strange lands by force of arms" (qtd. in Huang 188). The Cherokee people, more than a century removed from the generation that walked the Trail of Tears, remember the devastation because it remains their own—in their blood. In *The Woman Who Watches Over the World: A Native Memoir*, Chickasaw author Linda Hogan provides another example of the collective pain of Indigenous peoples:

I was only one of the fallen in a lineage of fallen worlds and people. Those of us who walked out of genocide by some cast of fortune still struggle with the brokenness of our bodies and hearts. Terror, even now, for many of us, is remembered inside us, history present in our cells that came from our

ancestor's cells, from bodies hated, removed, starved, and killed. (qtd. in Huang 180)

Here we can yet another example of the figurative use of biological language to describe the trans/historical intergenerational traumas of Indigenous peoples. Momaday, Allen, and Hogan place emphasis on how we carry our trauma as victims of assimilationist policies: "in our bodies," through our memories.

Victimized

My Grandmother locked away on St. Mary's reserve. They turned that school into a casino and hotel, you know. I can't stand being in there. How do you enjoy a meal in a dining room where my grandmother, then a young girl, was forced away from everything she knew—everything she should have been allowed to know? How can you sleep at night with the silences echoing where laughter should have been? All I see are nuns walking the halls. All I can imagine is horror. Somebody told me "it wasn't that bad here at St. Mary's." Wasn't that bad?!? Children deserve the best life anyone can give—parents who love them, Elders who support them, their own language, their freedom, and their *childhood*. They deserve love.

My Grandmother died at the age of 37 after having eight children, all taken away from her. They say she used to see ghosts. They say she was a wild one.

How do we heal from trauma that is not ours, *per se*, but belongs, perhaps, to ancestors from hundreds of years ago? Building on Pierre Janet's work, Bessel A. Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart describe the process of healing from individual

trauma: “Traumatic memories are the unassimilated scraps of overwhelming experiences, which need to be integrated with existing mental schemes, and be transformed into narrative language. It appears that, in order for this to occur successfully, the traumatized person has to return to the memory often in order to complete it” (176). In the case of intergenerational trauma, the memory is not necessarily my own, but as Momaday explains, it is the memory in my blood which I need to return to. Just as the Cherokee must be able to tell the story of the Trail of Tears, I need to be able to integrate my own deeply traumatic history, and that of my mother, grandmother and ancestors, into the story of my life. Complete recovery from trauma, according to Van der Kolk and Van der Hart, means that “the story can be told, the person can look back at what happened; he has given it a place in his life history, his autobiography, and thereby in the whole of his personality” (176).

Graveline, it seems, would agree with this understanding:

it takes more than Time. to work through Trauma.

whether my Pain is caused by Cruelty. Neglect.

lack of Respect.

Ignorance. Arrogance.

or even Fate.

to Heal. I must say my Truth. (192)

We must be able to understand our trans/historical intergenerational trauma in order to fit it into our personal narratives, both individually and collectively, and so have a chance at recovery.

Western medical treatments of PTSD often align with Van der Kolk and Van der Hart's theories about the narrativization of trauma as a mode of recovery. "In order to recover," medical anthropologist Allen Young explains, "each patient must satisfactorily recall his etiological event and then disclose it, in detail, to his therapists and fellow patients in the course of psychotherapy sessions, the narrative is the Rosetta stone of his disorder" (qtd. in Fagan 205). Kristina Fagan, however, notes that "it has been increasingly argued that psychological theories do not necessarily apply cross-culturally and that Western trauma theory may be insufficient in understanding Aboriginal expressions of trauma" (205). Fagan further argues that because Aboriginal societies have "their own distinct traditions of storytelling, it makes sense to consider that Aboriginal people may express connections between past and present pain in ways that differ from Western therapeutic models" (205-206). If we are to focus on Indigenous trauma, then we must adapt concepts such as PTSD into the Indigenous context—telling our stories must happen not individually between patient and doctor, but collectively within our communities.

Another reason that the PTSD model of healing may not work in the Aboriginal context is because it focuses mainly on an individual who has been through a specific traumatic event. Amy Bombay, Kim Matheson, and Hymie Anisman explain that when we diagnose someone with PTSD, we are only offering therapy on the individual level. This is problematic, they write, because "focusing solely on individual experiences has resulted in the collective experience being overlooked, despite the profound impact of collective trauma" (22-23). Individual

Western therapeutic models may not work for Aboriginal people, then, because our pain is not solely our own. In my own experience, my individual pain or direct traumatic experience is actually much less than the collective pain of my peoples, as I experience it. My blood memory, then, has more of an affect on me than any memory I could come up with on my own in a therapist's office. In order to heal from our trauma, we must work as a collective, just as we were hurt as a collective. We feel the experience in our blood. We cannot separate ourselves from the traumas of our mothers, fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers.

Like Graveline, author Jo-Anne Episkenew, in *Taking Back Our Spirits*, writes that "all of us must... by necessity, craft our own personal myths to enable us to interpret and understand our lives" (69). A personal myth, Episkenew explains, is "*an act of imagination that is a patterned integration of our remembered past, perceived present, and anticipated future*" (69, emphasis in original). The concept of imagination is also present in Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain*: "the imaginative experience and the historical express equally the traditions of man's reality" (4). Momaday works to create his own personal myth through his connections to his ancestors; imagination and history come together to make reality in his work. Whereas Van der Kolk and Van der Hart place emphasis on the traumatic experience being retold exactly so as to correct the "speechless terror" of the traumatized (172), it is important here that Indigenous authors—Momaday, Episkenew, and Graveline—write about experiencing the trauma through the imagination. Because so many of us have been removed from our connections with our ancestors, and often our homelands, imagination has to be a part of our

reality—the Cherokee may know that the Trail of Tears happened, but being able to really step inside that experience comes through imagining ourselves as our ancestors. Instead of simply being able to retell the story, we need to be able to feel that it is a part of us, to understand it as an experience, whether our own, or part of our trans/historical intergenerational trauma (or a bit of both).

In order to recover from our trans/historical, intergenerational traumas, Indigenous peoples must do some difficult work. Aime Rowe explains that we must experience the pain of our traumatic history before we can achieve healing:

When you do the work of recovery, you have to go through trauma: you drop into the worst of the wound. Like the vulture, you pick among the rotting flesh of lives cast aside in order to set things right: to recover those stories and the real people behind them, to remind us in the present where we've been and who we come from, and to heal the wounds—not only our own, but those of the ancestors. (518)

I have been able to talk about residential schools and the 60's Scoop for years in classrooms, and with friends, but it took being in the audience of a dramatic performance for me to be able to necessarily feel the emotions, to go through the traumatic experience, to *remember*, in order for me to integrate my family's experience into my own story—for those experiences to become my own. Poet and writer Qwo-Li Driskill writes, "If we can find ways to kinesthetically know historical trauma, power, and oppression, we can more deeply understand the nature of our oppressions and the impact of colonization on our lives and communities" (n. pag.). I take Driskill's use of "kinesthetic" to mean that we must be able to experience the

traumas that we face. It is clear that from an Indigenous perspective, Indigenous peoples need to experience something concrete, some sensation or movement within us, in order to be able to truly make some sense of the trauma in our lives. Often this means being able to embody the experiences and pain of our families and nations, which we can achieve through watching theatre. The imagined story being told on stage allows us to connect on a deeper level, as we can easily place ourselves inside the characters' stories, like the story of Almighty Voice. We experience the pain and trauma in our bodies as we watch the characters go through it. The historical version of events is given powerful emotive qualities through an author's ability to recreate and add to it so that it becomes a tale of collective trauma.

Traumatized

My mother taken away at three years old. Forced into a Good Catholic Home.

Feeding and clothing the poor little Indian girl. Duty.

Love? Not so much.

Forced away from everything she knew—everything she should have been allowed to know. How do you form an identity as a girl with brown skin in a white skinned family?

Defined by difference.

Fast Forward. Sixteen years. Never knowing who she is. Never knowing her sisters, her brother, her home in the mountains. Always searching.

She found love. Nineteen. Summer Fling. and then she's nothing but an unwed mother.

No choice. No power. No control.

Shamed into adoption as the only option. She didn't even get to pick what family I went to—that's for the government to decide, because you are an Indian.

Due to the implementation of multiple assimilationist government policies, we, as Indigenous peoples, often lack a connection with our biological families. For Momaday, as Allen explains, this connection holds strong: "...in his epilogue to *Rainy Mountain* Momaday imagines Kiowa elders in order to project himself back through their lifespans—through their 'blood'—and beyond to even older Kiowa memories" (102). Unlike Momaday, I grew up with very little knowledge about my history. I did not learn about the residential schools my grandmother attended until I was in my late teens, and it took me until my early 20's until I heard the term 60's Scoop—the governmental policy that took my mother away from her family and into a "more suitable" (white) home—even though I am only one generation removed from her. If our histories are not spoken about, how can we recover from the trauma? How am I to narrativize what I barely know about? All of my life I felt hurt, anger, mistrust, and yet I never knew why. Education has been a large part of my own narrativization process, but it takes something more powerful than simply learning about horrific events—we must be able to understand the reality of these events as our own. The imaginative space of theatre can encourage this kind of understanding.

Knowing very little about my history growing up, I was unable to name the pain that I held onto inside of me until I started learning about my past. But to be honest, I have rarely, if ever, been able to *feel* that pain—to integrate it into my own

understanding of my life, until I attended *Almighty Voice and his Wife*. Episkenew writes, “Unlike other literary forms, theatrical productions are not the creation of solitary individuals working in isolation. They are communal both in production and in performance” (147). It is this communal nature of the theatre, I argue, that makes it such a powerful space for healing. Recovery from trauma, as Van der Kolk and Van der Hart explain, means being able to integrate the memory into our lives, and I would go further to argue that we must feel the experience, go through the trauma, in order to heal. Episkenew explains the difficulties of this approach: “during the process of storying traumatic events, we may re-experience those emotions associated with the original trauma” (70). I argue that not only can we “re-experience” trauma through story, but we can in fact *experience* our intergenerational trauma for the first time when we experience it through the theatre.

There has been so much silence surrounding the trauma of Indigenous peoples. I remember reading Shirley Sterling’s *My Name is Seepeetza* and I had no idea that my grandmother very well could have been the main character. For me, it was a very abstract “they” who had attended and been harmed by the government’s residential school policies, not my own grandmother. That is, until I sat in the audience of The Native Earth Performing Arts (NEPA) production of *Almighty Voice and His Wife* by Daniel David Moses at the Backstage Arts Centre in Saskatoon, Saturday, January 28, 2012. Blogger Raymon Montalbetti writes of the production: “There are rare times in the world of theatre when one feels honored to be present at a performance. Where a profound shared experience is being carved into living

memory and at the same time a deeply personal response shutters through the body articulating, ‘I am bearing witness to an important event’” (“Almighty”). It is important to note here that NEPA focuses on ceremony within their productions, and aims for their work to be healing. As Ae Ran Jong explains:

The specific NEPA template for theater as a ceremony parallels other Aboriginal ceremonies such as the pipe ceremony, the sweat lodge and the prayers of the talking circle. Theater as ceremony seeded by NEPA follows precise processes and practices to create a distinctive working rehearsal procedure. Theater as a ceremony primarily focuses on healing the participants. (n.pag)

Here, it is clear that the founders of NEPA, including playwright and former artistic director Tomson Highway, are working not to create just any production, but with a higher aim—an aim for theatre as ceremony that heals our communities.

In *Almighty Voice and His Wife*, Moses creates a space for his Indigenous audience members to re-connect with their blood memory. I want to stress that this is not a story from my nation, nor about my family—Almighty Voice was a Cree man who grew up in Saskatchewan during the time of the Red River Rebellion. In Moses’s own words, “A short version of the story begins in late October of 1895 when Almighty Voice kills a cow... All you need to know is the Mounties hear about it and arrest him and throw him in the guardhouse... Almighty Voice escapes and heads off across the prairie... The details of the incident shift from version to version of the story...” (“How my Ghosts” 69). Almighty Voice then kills a Mountie in a supposed argument about the cow, and remains on the run for the next year and a

half. The authorities then corner Almighty Voice and his friends and kill them with RCMP cannons. Moses's theatrical recreation of this story begins with a love story—Act One explores Almighty Voice's courtship with his wife, White Girl, a young girl who attended residential school for a time before she came to marry Almighty Voice. The Act ends with the death of Almighty Voice, a haunting moment just after White Girl shows him their baby (*Almighty* 25). As I have said, this story is far removed from the Ktunaxa nation, in the Rocky Mountains where I am from, yet Moses, in *Almighty Voice and His Wife*, makes the story an Indigenous one. Just like Momaday, Moses uses his imagination to create a memory for Indigenous peoples, not necessarily about the specifics (there is little to no focus on the killing of the cow), but about the general experience of Indigenous peoples during this time, and, I will argue, across multiple generations.

There are three moments that I want to discuss from *Almighty Voice and His Wife* during which I was literally overcome with blood memory—connected to my history, to my family, in a way that I had never experienced before. In Act One, which depicts the love story between Almighty Voice and White Girl, the white man's God haunts White Girl. She shares her fear with her husband in Scene Five:

VOICE What's the matter, White Girl?

GIRL You shot and the teepee broke. All the sharp pieces fell
 down on you, worse than hail. I think it hurt you. I think you
 got hurt.

VOICE Stop it, White Girl, stop it. Don't be afraid. I'm all right.

GIRL That god. That god. I'm afraid.

VOICE That stupid god can't hurt me. That god belongs to that place,
 in the school. You're here now, I'm here now. He's not.

GIRL He's everywhere!

VOICE I told you he's a lie

GIRL He's like glass. He's hard. He cuts you down. (14)

Earlier in the scene, White Girl tells Almighty Voice about the glass windows in the school and how they had cut her. She fears god just as she fears the school she was sent to. Earlier, in Scene Three, White Girl tries to make Almighty Voice call her Marrie—her Christian name—and says that she will call him John Baptist so that “their” (the Christian) god will not get angry with him. Moses brings the reality of residential schools to the audience through this young girl terrified of a jealous god, terrified that god will kill her husband—a nightmare that is only too soon to come true.

In these moments watching White Girl, I could imagine my grandmother, a young girl unable to ever truly come back to her family as she, like White Girl, would have been indoctrinated by the priests and nuns at her residential school. For White Girl, to have any true connection to her past would be to reject the god of the nuns and priests who controlled the school, a god who has been shown to be jealous and punitive. I understood the terror in White Girl's eyes, and the complete lack of parallels between her two worlds—that of the school she had been forced to attend and her home with Almighty Voice. I could understand the choice my own mother had to make—to stay with the only family she'd ever known, to finish high school, or to try and raise a daughter on her own, when she had barely known her own

mother. She had no connection to our family history as it should have been. We were all taken away from the world that we should have known and, through White Girl, I could remember the pain and the fear of all of this. White Girl describes her mother starving to death, and the scarcity of food in the winter the play is set in, and in those moments I remembered the starvation. I remembered the injustices of the RCMP, of the Indian agents. My blood runs thick with these tragedies, and Moses reminded me by creating a way for me to experience those feelings—to name them and give them a place in my story.

The second part of the play that I want to discuss happens in the Second Act—a rousing vaudeville take on history. Almighty Voice has died and is now a ghost, joined by the “Interlocutor”—White Girl now dressed in white face and a Mountie’s garb. This act is about the internalization of the white gaze—White girl has taken on so much of the white world that she becomes not only white, but also an interlocutor, a symbol of the white people’s power over the Aboriginal population. In Moses’s essay “How My Ghosts Got Pale Faces,” he discusses using white face as a play on the racist minstrel shows from the same time period as Almighty Voice’s story, where actors often wore black face:

It allowed me to suppose that it would not have been impossible that many of the people who gathered to watch the standoff in which Almighty Voice and his friends were killed had also, in their lives, watched and enjoyed a minstrel show, that their attitudes had been, in part, formed or at least encouraged by the minstrel show’s racist stereotypes. (73-4)

In Moses's own words, the Interlocutor is "a white man and the master of ceremonies of something that seemed like the ruins of a minstrel show" (75). Helen Gilbert interprets the white face in *Almighty Voice and His Wife* as a simple ploy to make non-Indigenous audience members uncomfortable: "...there is little doubt that it affords indigenous performers a rare opportunity to burlesque white characters, white theatrical forms, and whiteness itself, for the (dis)pleasure of (mainly) white spectators" (681). This oversimplification of Moses's use of white face, however, ignores the Indigenous audience. Gilbert discusses the white face being used to parody racist stereotypes of Indians, but White Girl is not simply mocking the character of the Interlocutor, but *becoming* him, and in doing so, losing herself and her Indigeneity—Indigenous audiences find this all too familiar to our own stories. While Gilbert may be right that "the mask refracts the viewer's gaze" (693) in the case of a non-Indigenous audience, it also works as a mirror that *reflects* our own experiences as Indigenous people internalizing the white gaze.

Act Two moves us from a historical event into a mock-up performance missing all of the cast but the Ghost (of Almighty Voice) and the Interlocutor. Disorienting at first, the audience slowly comes to understand, along with the ghost of Almighty Voice, that White Girl remains present underneath the Mountie garb and white face. As Moses explains, "the clear drama of [Act Two] began as the GHOST realized that White Girl still existed inside the character of the INTERLOCUTOR. The GHOST then started to take over the show, to use its conventions to reawaken and remind White Girl about herself" ("How My Ghosts" 75). We see Almighty Voice pushing the Interlocutor into singing songs that were

supposed to be sung by Indian characters—other actors who never show up to complete the show. We can see her start to question herself as the show moves forward in fits and starts. In one moment, we see White Girl’s vulnerability as she sings a haunting song about being an Indian named Sioux (47), and in the next we have her fighting against that vulnerability in full force as the Interlocutor. Near the end of the play, in one of the most the climactic moments of Act Two, the Interlocutor goes on a tear, interrogating Almighty Voice and illustrating White Girl’s self-hatred:

INTERLOCUTOR ...Or are you drunk? Besotted! Be seated, sir. No! Stand up! You, sir, you, I recognize you now. You’re that redskin! You’re that wagon burner! That feather head Chief Bullshit. No, Chief Shitting Bull! Oh, no, no. Bloodthirsty savage. Yes, you’re primitive, uncivilized, a cantankerous cannibal! Unruly redman, you lack human intelligence! Stupidly stoic, sick, demented, foaming at the maws. Weirdly mad and dangerous, alcoholic, diseased, dirty, filthy, stinking, ill-fated degenerate race, vanishing, dying, lazy, mortifying, fierce, fierce and crazy, crazy, shit, shit, shit, shit... (56)

The rant gets louder and louder and White Girl eventually stands within the audience screaming the insults at it. Again I was overcome; just as I remembered the pain of my ancestors in the aforementioned scenes, in this particular moment of the play I remembered my own pain. I remembered being a child and feeling like I

was dirty, I remembered the first time I heard the words squaw, chug, and drunk. I remembered all the jokes and the names and the ignorance that I had experienced over the years, and I knew that I too had internalized those ideas, that I too had thought and felt those things about myself. But this performance was an expulsion. This scene allowed it to be said, allowed me to feel the pain of it in a way that would have been impossible for me to say out loud for myself. It made it okay that I felt this way, because Moses illustrated this internalization as something that is impossible for us to escape.

Internalized

“But you’re not dirty like them.” I’ve never been Indian enough. I’ve never been white enough. I’ve never been happy.

2 months old. Taken away from everything that I should’ve known.

Fast Forward. 24 years and I am grateful. So grateful that I didn’t get to learn any of it. This is what the government has done for me. Made me grateful that I wasn’t raised with my mother. Made me despise the way she handles herself. Made me fearful that I will be like her.

She was never taught how to be a mother. They took that away from her.

The more time I spend with her, the more I feel it.

Who are we? What unites us? What defines my family?

We are Motherless.

You tell me how we heal from that.

There are very few critical works that address *Almighty Voice and His Wife*. One in particular is the Master's thesis of Timothy Stone. In it, Stone makes very much the same argument I am making—that Moses's theatrical production is, in fact, a healing ceremony. In theatre, Stone argues, the audience becomes "intimately connected" to the character on stage: "Not only does the performance onstage facilitate opportunities for the process of embodiment to occur between the audience and the actors but it also facilitates this process between actor and character" (72). Stone argues that audience members are forced to empathize with the characters on stage, especially when those characters are going through trauma, or suffering. He writes, "In essence, representations of the suffering of others cause audience members to involuntarily subjugate their own perceptions of self, making it possible to experience the represented world vicariously through the traumatized subject onstage" (74). I take issue with this argument because, as with Gilbert's interpretation of the white face, it doesn't seem to take into account an Indigenous audience. I am arguing that we do not just experience the character's suffering vicariously, but instead are brought to a deeper understanding of our "perceptions of self" through experiencing blood memory. Stone points to the science of emotion in his argument: "mirror neurons are provoked into action when pain and disgust—feelings that a scene of suffering is likely to provoke—are experienced" (73). There is a key component missing here—when Indigenous audience members look upon suffering, like that of *White Girl*, which we have experienced for ourselves over generations, how can that be described as mirroring, or the embodiment of another's pain? Instead, we are bearing witness to our own suffering, as individuals,

as part of a nation, as part of the Indigenous community, in the past, present, and future.

Finally, I would be remiss to ignore the beautiful ending of Moses's play. After giving us a love story, a tragic death, and a vaudeville act with a deep message, Moses gives us the final scene: only moments after White Girl's aforementioned racist expulsion, a spotlight shows a placard reading "Scene Nine: Finale." Here, the ghost of Almighty Voice and his White Girl are finally reunited:

INTERLOCUTOR Who am I? Do you know?

GHOST I recognized you by your eyes.

INTERLOCUTOR Who am I?

GHOST White Girl, my White Girl.

INTERLOCUTOR Who? Who is that?

GHOST My fierce, crazy little girl. My wife. *Ni-wikimakan. [My wife.]*

The INTERLOCUTOR touches her face with her gloved hands as the GHOST embraces and releases her. The spotlight finds her face as her gloved hands begin to wipe the whiteface off, unmasking the woman inside. The GHOST removes one glove and throws it on the dead fire, she does the same with the other. The fire rekindles. Piko-ta-ta-wi kisisomoyan ekwo [I have to go finish dancing now.]

INTERLOCUTOR *Patima, Kisse-Manitou-Wayou [Goodbye, Almighty Voice.]*

(56-57)

Then White Girl removes the rest of the white face and her RCMP outfit, bundles it in her arms, and holds it as her child—“*becoming WHITE GIRL again*” (57). She has been reminded of herself by Almighty Voice, who pushed her into recognizing her identity as an Indian woman, as his wife. Moses writes, “My guess is that *Almighty Voice and His Wife* works like a purging or an exorcism, that the Ghost spooks the Interlocutor and the audience. It feels like it gets a lot of the poison out” (“How my Ghosts” 78). The Interlocutor has tried to hold on to the show, tried to hold on to her racist values, and tried to keep up the charade, but the Ghost of Almighty Voice has finally broken through. With that final purging, she is freed from the hold of everything she has been taught in the white school, and, as audience members, we can be, even if only for a moment, freed from our own experiences of racism.

The Ghost of Almighty Voice dances behind White Girl in celebration. It is a scene of redemption. It is a scene of freedom from the white gaze, and of overcoming the internalization of that gaze. By this point in the play, I was sobbing—so grateful to Moses, to the actors, and to the audience for the experience. Montabelli wrote of the same moment: “In fact, sitting across from me, at the final movement of what I experienced as a dance of redemption with a cry/song so ancient and so tomorrow that penetrated the heart, a man wearing a large black stetson sobbed. Not sentimental tears but deep sobs of remembered pain and hope. His partner stroked his back” (“Almighty”). The play becomes an act of ceremony as we, the First Nations people in the audience, remember our pain, the pain of our ancestors, the pain that will come upon our children. Moses allows us to experience

this pain, to go through it, and in that final dance and song, to be freed from it—to remove the costume, stop the show, and be truly connected to ourselves as Aboriginal people, as Almighty Voice and White Girl are in that moment. Qwo-Li Driskill writes, “Theatre aids in decolonization because through it we can learn what decolonization and healing *feel* like. Native theatre helps us understand our histories, tell our stories and imagine our futures” (n. pag.). The ghost’s dance is a celebration for all of us, a moment of decolonization as he is reunited with White Girl. The ghost of Almighty Voice dances the Ghost Dance, which is also the title of Act Two. As Gilbert explains, this dance “evokes the Ghost Dance religion that swept across the Great Plains of North America in the early 1890s. [It was] believed that the dance would protect [Indigenous populations] from white men’s weapons and restore the pre-colonial world in which Indians had comfortably subsisted” (695). As we watch the Ghost Dance, the audience can feel the freedom from colonialism, racism, and white oppression, and even if the world outside the theatre has not changed, we have been able to know what it should feel like. Leaving that theatre I felt strong and proud of who I am. I was able to fit all the pieces into my life and to come away knowing that it’s okay to be an Indian. We remember so that we can let go and move forward.

There are many ways in which Aboriginal communities are working to heal the pains of intergenerational trauma. As I write this we are days away from the national Truth and Reconciliation event here in Saskatoon, where thousands are expected to attend the hearings as residential school survivors come together to share their stories. The important part of these kind of events, and the art form of

the theatre, is that we are not trying to heal on our own. Collective trauma begs for collective healing, and that is what Moses and the Native Earth Performing Arts Company has done for us with *Almighty Voice and His Wife*. This play has run three productions over ten years, and I hope to see it again soon. Indigenous performance and story are an important part to our healing journey as Indigenous peoples—a healing journey that is necessary for our children, and our children’s children, for many generations to come. Richard Wagamese writes, “Somewhere out there, right now, is an Indian kid like I was, wandering around someone else’s Bobbsey-twin neighborhood wondering why he’s there and who he is. Somewhere out there is an Indian kid looking for a smile that will make the clouds go away. He’s our responsibility, all of us” (18). The boy (or girl) Wagamese is speaking of has the same story as *White Girl*. Today, as a century ago, there are children who cannot escape the internalization of the racism they face. We need to tell their stories, but most importantly, they need to know that it is okay. This is what Moses has done for me. Through *Almighty Voice and His Wife* I was able to remember the pain and the trauma—my own, that of the generations before me—and even to feel the hurt of those yet to come. In remembering, I created a space in my story for these memories, and I was able to come full circle, to accept the pain as a piece of my life, one that I can only move forward from. For that I thank Daniel David Moses; NEPA; Paula-Jean Prudat and Derek Garza, the actress and actor who played in the Saskatoon production; and the audience who went through the experience with me.

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