

otênawi-têwêhikan
(Urban Drum)

A Thesis Submitted to the College of
Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Writing
in the Department of English
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

by

Julianna McLean

©Copyright Julianna McLean, June 2018. All Rights Reserved.

PERMISSION TO USE

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment for the requirements of an MFA in Writing degree from the University of Saskatchewan, I agree that the Libraries of this university may make its Preliminary Pages freely available for inspection as outlined in the MFA in Writing Thesis License / Access Agreement accepted by the College of Graduate Studies and Research in June 2018.

Requests for permission to make use of material beyond the preliminary pages of this thesis should be addressed to the author of the thesis, or:

Coordinator, MFA in Writing
Department of English
University of Saskatchewan

Or

Dean
College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
116 Thorvaldson Building, 110 Science Place
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5C9 Canada

ABSTRACT

Urban Drum is a mixed-genre work consisting of poems and stories that help me Re-Cree-ate. This creative thesis -- written primarily in English -- uses nêhiyaw translated into English to enable readers to experience a dual resonance of language. *Urban Drum* traverses a complicated family story about the impact of the Canadian Indian residential school system on intergenerational survivors. The poetry and prose explores how a Cree woman identifies herself beyond the traumatizing effects of the Canadian Indian residential school system and maps her urban experience with colonial disenfranchisement. There are four distinct sections: Ancestral Thread, pakamâskîkwan nakamow, City Drum Song, Unstitch and Mend, and maskihkiy pîsim nikamowina, Moon Medicine Poems.

The first, Ancestral Thread, takes a backward glance at the ancestral struggle. The second, pakamâskîkwan nakamow, City Drum Song, deals with issues around Canadian Indian residential school intergenerational survival. The third, Unstitch and Mend, includes poems about a Cree woman's resistance to colonialism and how she identifies herself inside the world of Cree ceremonies and traditions. The fourth, maskihkiy pîsim nikamowina, Moon Medicine Poems, reclaims a sensual femininity and explores a developing Cree feminism, in its use of a predominant Cree world-view thirteen-moon calendar.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend deep gratitude to the College of Arts and Science Aboriginal Graduate Student Scholarship; I could not have gotten through the program without this support. I would like to thank Dr. Jeanette Lynes for being a prodigious cheerleader, for her letters of support on my behalf. She does so much more than is required of her. I am eternally grateful for her belief in me. Thank you to the University of Saskatchewan English Department for its support and encouragement. Thank you to Dr. David Parkinson, who went to bat for me many times. I am eternally grateful for his generous spirit. Dr. Sheri Benning, stood by me when I doubted this project, your big kind heart is a rare jewel, thank you for working so hard for us, and for believing in me. The project would not have happened were it not for my McLean and James Smith Cree Nation family. With deep gratitude to my mother, Eliza McLean, who in illness, is still able to tell the stories and teach me nêhiyaw language. Thank you to my siblings, Michael and Andre Mclean for clearing the dust on the bookshelves of my memory and for sharing stories. To my ex-husband Jason Dunn, thank you for being a reliable support person taking the co-parenting reigns when I needed time to study and write. To my daughters MacKenzie-Mahikan, and Isabelle-Amelie, for their patience, support, hugs, and for listening to the stories. Gratitude to Maureen Walker, the best therapist in the world, for getting me through the darkness. To my cohort and soul sisters, The Deers: Cassi Smith, Katherine Lawrence, Lindsay Kiesman, Danielle Altrogge, Shannon McConnell; whose brilliant and insightful literary gifts helped me through, gratitude for their unwavering friendship, for staying near me, we're magical together; love always in antlers. Thank you to the 2018 MFA in Writing Grad cohort, Dylan, Geoff, Vijay, Daniel K., Simon, Daniel Y. and Jennifer! Thank you to professor and author, Bill Robertson for his letters of support, thank you for believing in me, Bill. Thank you to Sherrie Gurel, for helping me sort through my thesis giving it form, and for your gift of friendship. Thank you Tisha Paget, and editor Jennifer Sparks, my great cheering squad. To Simon Bird and Dexter Kakakaway for their kind and generous Cree language interjections into my work, so much gratitude. I would like to thank the people who mentored and collaborated with me, their guidance is the compass that gave Urban Drum direction. Thank you to professor and author Gregory Scofield, for his guidance and suggestion to write the moon poems for healing, for believing in me, for all the medicine teachings. It is an honor to have him be a part of this project. Thank you to Dr. Janice Acoose for all her letters of support, her guidance through this project gave me such strength. Thank you Janice for the word Re-Cree-ate and tâpwê-stries which helped me to understand the need to remake stories, question fundamentalism, and for reminding me of the fire I have within me, for encouraging me to persevere through some difficult writing, for believing in me so that I could believe in myself. Thank you to fellow James Smith member, Dr. Neal McLeod for the gift of Cree language, the James Smith land stories, and for your patience and encouragement in teaching me. Gratitude to the late Richard Wagamese whose voice I hear every day from the Stars, reminding me not to lose my nêhiyâw storytelling voice. Special thanks to Yvette Arcand from ITEP for being an earth angel in my world, much love and gratitude always.

DEDICATION

otênawi-têwêhikan
(Urban Drum)

for ancestors who survived, for those who call from the stars,
for my mother Eliza Mclean,
for my daughters MacKenzie and Isabelle
for my brothers and sisters
Anthony, Anna-Maria, Michael, Andre, Joseph, Chantal

maskihkiy pîsim nikamowina (Moon Medicine Poems)
for the muses that keep us looking Moon and
believing in her magic

ARTIST STATEMENT

... Oh *nôkomak* your bundles I carry inside,

the full moon dancing beyond my walls.

I have seeped into

your faces,

drowned in the pictures

I have gathered

and

cannot

hold.

(*Blue Marrow* 9)

This excerpt from the book-length poem *Blue Marrow* by Louise Halfe connects conceptually to *nêhiyaw* bundles. In *Cree Narrative Memory*, language expert Neal McLeod translates from Cree the English word “bundle” as “*nayahcikan*” explaining that a “*nayahcikan*” is “something you put on your back, something you carry. A bundle is a spiritual embodiment of collective memory and is added to and subtracted from as time goes on” (9). In *Blue Marrow* Halfe speaks to the heartbreak of not being able to embrace the bundles from *nôkomak* - grandmothers. In my symbolic representation of bundles, I rely on *nêhiyaw* storytellers like Halfe and McLeod to help me understand my relationships within Eurocentric political and social constructions, as an intergenerational survivor of the Canadian Indian residential school system trying to make sense of Christian and Cree fundamentalism.

Urban Drum, an extension of my own stories of self-determination and resilience, connects my stories and poems to bundles to emphasize the relationship, as Louise Halfe describes it, between loss and my deep desire to reclaim my heritage, my Creeness. I connect my stories and poems to bundles, too, as a way of exploring what cultural reclamation might mean for my developing nêhiyaw feminist world-view. Indigenous feminist theory, according to Tricia McGuire-Adams, allows “for a critical engagement with the effects of colonization and patriarchy in our communities, and it has created a space for Indigenous women to theorize decolonial thought and practices” (16). Indigenous feminist theory is useful in the representation of bundles because such nêhiyaw spiritual embodiments of memory show how the consequences of colonialism have distanced me from nêhiyawêwin. A first generation Cree post Indian residential school survivor, I was disconnected from nêhiyawêwin because Canada’s colonial system imposed the Indian residential school as an indoctrination camp on my grandparents, and my mother who went to day school. According to Jeannette Armstrong, children like my grandparents and mother “were seized from our communities and homes and placed in indoctrination camps until our language, our religion, our customs, our values, and our societal structures almost disappeared. This was the residential school experience” (“The Disempowerment” 239).

Several related themes are woven through my thesis: the struggle of my relationship with Cree language, the loss of cultural practices and ceremonies, my attempts to create ceremony, my resolve to identify myself in ceremonial practices as a nêhiyaw feminist, and finally the reclamation of my femininity through the sensual power

and healing medicine of Moon. There are four distinct sections within *Urban Drum*, each with a thematic epigraph from poetic influences. The first, Ancestral Thread takes a backward glance at the ancestral struggle. The second section is pakamâskîkwan nakamo, City Drum Song which deals with issues around post Indian residential school survival. The third is Unstitching and Mending, poems about a Cree woman's resistance to colonialism and how she identifies herself inside the world of Cree ceremonies and traditions. The fourth section, maskihkiy pîsim nikamowina, Moon Medicine Poems, delves into reclamation of sensual femininity, inspired by a predominant Cree world-view thirteen-moon calendar.

Narrative is central to both the poetry and prose in *Urban Drum*. To stray from a narrative storytelling mode would lose the integrity and cultural origin of nêhiyaw story, as Winona Wheeler (qtd. in Beeds) claims, former head of University of the Saskatchewan's Indigenous Studies Department (61). Also, Wheeler (qtd. in McLeod) speaks to what happens when we do not honor our nêhiyaw bundles: "The bundle is plundered, the voice silenced, bits are extracted to meet empirical need, and the story dies" (9). Like Wheeler, it is important for me to acknowledge nêhiyaw ways of conveying knowledge apart from the colonial academic structures. Further to this, it is crucial for me to root my speaking and writing voice within nêhiyaw orature, rather than the confines of Canadian literary conventions. Wheeler (qtd. in Anderson) claims that "Indigenous oral histories do not abide by conventional disciplinary boundaries. They are about relationships and generational continuity, and the package is holistic - - they include religious teachings, metaphysical links, cultural insights, history, linguistic structures, literary and aesthetic form, and Indigenous 'truths'" (18). It is those

conventional academic and literary boundaries that Wheeler alludes to that I seek freedom from. Freeing myself is an act of self-decolonization from the systemic colonial structures whose agents indoctrinated my ancestors. Wheeler's view of oral history also supports my narrative choice with many of my prose poems. Like both Wheeler and McLeod, sharing memories through storytelling connects me to nêhiyaw oral history because "Stories found in memory help people find their way out of colonialism" (*Cree Narrative Memory* 9).

Strategically, there is limited use of Cree within *Urban Drum*. I rely on my limited knowledge of Cree for the construction of poetry to show how language was kept from me and show how little I know. I connect my use of Cree (although limited and unconventional at times) to Mikhail Bakhtin's claims about metanarratives in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Bakhtin explains that societal dialogue involves more than one voice: "Dialogism is the characteristic epistemological mode of a world dominated by heteroglossia. Everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole [and] there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others" (426). My poem, "Your Language, Our Language, The Truth" (in its early stages of evolution), connects to Bakhtin's claim by revealing some of the possibilities for Re-Cree-ation. I use words, Re-Cree-ate, Re-Cree-ation, following Janice Acoose's "Cree-atively Speaking" in *Me Funny* to signal my rejection of a Canadian colonial master narrative.

I include stories of my mother and my grandparents to connect my generation to a colonial system of education designed to assimilate the 'Indian' into European society. Such stories are important to challenge the rhetoric in Canada that tells the country

Indigenous people are okay, when in fact we are not. David Garneau states in “Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation: Art, Curation, and Healing,” in *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action In and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* that “By focusing on Indian residential schools, the government has reduced colonialism to a soluble problem; the schools are closed, the victims are paid off, problem solved. Now shut up. Let us ‘put event’s of the past behind us so that we can work towards a stronger and healthier future.’ We need to challenge this narrative” (37-38). Challenging the narrative, part of my motivation to create the *Urban Drum* project is to show that deep intergenerational healing is still needed in Canada.

In order to convey the message that everything is not okay within Indigenous cultures, I chose the genre of poetry, as “Thinking poetically involves moving away from the epistemological straight jacket and the colonial box that the social sciences have often placed on Indigenous narratives. Thinking poetically gives us a space to recreate, although imperfectly, the narrative thinking of the greatest of our kêhtê-ayak (Old Ones) and our storytellers” (*Indigenous Poetics* 89). Orature has long been one of the nêhiyaw ways of conveying knowledge. McLeod speaks of a moment with his grandmother when they were talking about his family namesake: “These stories, and parts of them, emerged when I sat with nicâpân. She asked me to record the words” (15). Like McLeod’s nicâpân, my mother asked me to record her stories. Many of them. She often looks forward to my phone calls so we can talk about her life on the James Smith Reserve. An Elder now, she asked me to record her stories. I have shared a few of her stories within this project because they are relative to my nêhiyawêwin and cultural memory. For instance, my mother told me that her mother told her a story about her dad, my

grandfather, which I include in the bundle-like section Ancestral thread as “My Kokom Told Me A Story.” It was relayed to my mother from my kokom whose voice I emulate to imagine what it would be like if she were alive today telling me this story. Giving voice to ancestors like my kokom is a key device used by several Indigenous writers, such as Metis poet Gregory Scofield, Metis knowledge keeper Maria Campbell, and Cree poet Louise Halfe.

In addition to giving voice to ancestors, some poems are sensual moon poems which I include to Cree-ate *Urban Drum* as healing medicine, sâkitowâsk (love medicine) that shifts feelings and desires and connects the textual body to nêhiyaw cosmology and spirituality. According to some nêhiyaw myths and legends, Moon was created for woman. Manitoba Plains Cree artist Jordan Stranger shares a story on *our-story.ca: Indigenous Arts and Stories* about wisakêcâhk, a trickster spirit who creates Moon for women. Moon cycles are how many nêhiyaw women mark their menstruation, growth, life, and fertility cycles. The journey of the moon poems, a trajectory within *Urban Drum*, powerfully shifts trauma and pain from Christian and Cree fundamentalism to provide healing sâkitowâsk.

What makes this particular project relevant for Indigenous Literatures is the nature of *Urban Drum*'s topic: post traumatic intergenerational Indian residential school trauma. In fact, as Armstrong [qtd. in Maracle] explains “The documentation, together with the telling, of the Native sojourn through the quagmire of Canada’s colonialist past is an extremely important human document to Canadian literature” (*Bobbi Lee* vii). For me, writing about the trauma has become a means to Re-Cree-ate. There is supporting research from trauma patients who agree that exposing trauma so the healing can begin is

important. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Dori Laub found that, “survivors did not only need to survive so they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one’s story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life” (63). This is why many survivors have come forward to convey their truths to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Important to my documentation as an intergenerational survivor is the realization that my knowledge of nêhiyaw culture and nehiyawewin may be constrained in trappings of colonial English. In a critical essay about Pauline Johnson’s English romantic trappings, Cree playwright Tomson Highway emphasizes in *From Oral to Written: A Celebration of Indigenous Literature in Canada. From 1980-2010* that, “Once the contemporary reader gets beyond that, however, one encounters a sincere soul who bears an undying love for her land and her people, and takes immense pride in her Indigenous identity” (148). Like Highway’s characterization of Johnson’s work, my own *Urban Drum* lovingly explores and simultaneously Re-Cree-ates connections to my nêhiyaw people, and I use the Cree language as an act of decolonization and reclamation.

Therefore *Urban Drum* reaches back into hallowed spaces of my ancestral past to reclaim nêhiyaw bundles enriched with knowledge and language that were subsequently eroded through the Canadian government’s colonial genocidal policies and the Indian residential and day school system. My work, too, documents Re-Cree-ation of nêhiyaw stories in recognition of their significant contributions to ongoing knowledge. In fact, McLeod claims that “As we find ourselves enmeshed in the trajectories of various stories, we also

make contributions to the larger narrative. While we are influenced by the stories or the kêhtê-ayak (Old Ones), we also add to the meaning of these stories through our experiences and understanding, and add in small ways to the ancient wisdom” (*Cree Narrative Memory* 11). What I understand from McLeod’s words is that generationally speaking stories are a means of survival, hope, and Re-Cree-ation. McLeod also adds, “Collective memory is the echo of the old stories that links grandparents with their grandchildren. In the Cree tradition, collective narrative memory is what puts our singular lives into a larger context. Old voices echo; the ancient poetic memory of our ancestors finds home in our individual lives and allows us to reshape our experience so that we can interpret the world we find ourselves in” (11). Like Cree poet Louise Halfe, Cree etymologist and knowledge keeper Neal McLeod, Cree scholar-activist Kim Anderson, Cree educator Winona Wheeler, Metis knowledge keeper Maria Campbell, Cree artist Jordan Stranger, and Metis scholar-artist David Garneau, Metis-Cree educator-activist, poet Emma LaRocque, Okanogan poet critic educator Jeanette Armstrong, deceased Anishinaabe novelist Richard Wagamese, Metis poet Gregory Scofield, all of whom inspire my work, I endeavor to share and re-Cree-ate through my poetry and stories to heal the past, present, and future to ensure cultural continuity.

Julianna McLean
Saskatoon Saskatchewan
September 2018

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Acoose, Janice and Natasha, Beeds. "Cree-atively Speaking" in *Me Funny*. Taylor, Drew Hayden, ed.. Douglas & McIntyre, 2008.

Anderson, Kim. *Life Stages and Native Women Memory, Teachings, and Story Medicine*. U ofManitoba P, 2011.

Armstrong, Jeannette. "The Disempowerment of First North American Native Peoples and Empowerment Through Their Writing" in *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*. 2nd ed. Daniel David Moses and Terry Goldie, eds. Oxford UP, 1998.

Bakhtin, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Texas UP, 2017.

Beeds, Tasha. "Remembering the Poetics of Ancient Sound kistesinaw/wisahkecahk's maskihkiy (Elder Brothers Medicine)" in *Indigenous Poetics in Canada*. Neal McLeod, ed. Wilfred Laurier UP, 2014.

Canada Indigenous and Northern Affairs. "Statement of apology to former students of Indian Residential Schools," 2008. <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100015644/1100100015649> Accessed 13 July, 2018

Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Johns Hopkins UP.

Cree Literacy Network. <http://creeliteracy.org/category/lesson-2/seasonal/calendar/> Accessed 13 July, 2018.

Garneau, David. "Imaginary Spaces of Conciliation and Reconciliation: Art, Curation, and Healing" in *Arts of Engagement: Taking Aesthetic Action In and Beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*. Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin, eds. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2016.

Grand, Sue, and Jill Salberg. *Trans-Generational Trauma and the Other: Dialogues across History and Difference*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017.

Halfe, Louise Bernice. *Blue Marrow*. Coteau Books, 2005.

Highway, Tomson. *From Oral to Written: a Celebration of Indigenous Literature in Canada, 1980-2010*. Talonbooks, 2017.

Maracle, Lee. Bobbi Lee Indian Rebel. Women's P., 2017.

McGuire-Adams, Tricia. *Anishinaabeg Women's Wellbeing: Decolonization through Physical Activity*. MA Thesis. Victoria UP, 2010.

McLeod, Neal. *Cree Narrative Memory from Treaties to Contemporary Times*. Purich Publishing, 2007.

---. *Indigenous Poetics in Canada*. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2015.

Salberg, Jill, and Sue Grand. *Wounds of History: Repair and Resilience in the Trans-Generational Transmission of Trauma*. Taylor & Francis, 2016.

Stranger, Jordan. "Wisakedjak and the Moon." *Indigenous Arts & Stories*, www.our-story.ca/winners/arts/5092:wisakedjak-and-the-moon. Accessed 7 June, 2018.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PERMISSION TO USE	i
ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
DEDICATION	iv
ARTIST STATEMENT	v
BIBLIOGRAPHY	xiii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	xv
Section One: Ancestral Thread.....	1
Dear Ancestors.....	2
Memory.....	3
nêhiyaw Family Name.....	4
nihtâwikicikanisihk – The Place of Good Growing.....	5
Your Language Our Language The Truth.....	6
Re-Cree-ate.....	7
Ceremony.....	8
My Questions.....	9
The Cree I Know	10
The Cree I Want to Know.....	10
Adhesions By Cree Indians.....	11
Gordons Industrial School.....	12
Elkhorn Residential School.....	13
My Roots.....	14
Buffalo Song.....	15
Maude Mary Jessie Theresa (nee Bayers) McLean RN.....	16
The Offering: What Am I Doing Wrong.....	17
Beatty Eye’s.....	18
nimosôm owîhowin – My Grandpa’s Name.....	19
Unwanted Everyday.....	20
Climbing Lacombe’s Ladder.....	21
It’s Not A Lie: My Language.....	22
Tanning Hides.....	23
Letter To The Indian Agent.....	24
First Love In The Pas.....	26
Listen Deep: For Richard.....	27
White Sage.....	28
Mystery Man.....	29
Uncle.....	30
Kokom Told Me A Story.....	31
What It Really Means To Be Born Again.....	32

Section Two: otênaw pakamâskîkwan – City Drum Song.....	33
Sperm Donor.....	34
nikâwiy – My Mother.....	35
Family Story.....	36
Melancholy In Sepia.....	37
mahikan (Wolf): A Dream.....	38
The Yellow House.....	39
Sweet Tea and Bannock.....	40
A Nightmare.....	41
Strangers.....	42
Playtime.....	43
On A Bust To Edmonton.....	44
Bannock.....	45
Dry Meat.....	46
The Orphanage.....	47
Lara-Ashley.....	48
Hand Me Down.....	49
V-Space.....	50
Where’s The Money.....	51
Jack and Jill’s Till.....	52
Dashboard.....	53
How Bruce Lee Saved My Life.....	54
Dawson Creek 105 th Avenue.....	55
O’Brien School.....	56
A Flood a Kayak a Raging River.....	57
acâhkosak – (Stars) For MacKie and Izzy.....	58
Full Circle.....	59
Section Three: Unstitching and Mending.....	61
Unstitched.....	62
All My Relations.....	63
Drum.....	64
Making Space.....	66
Titled Girl.....	67
I Will.....	68
Calls To Action?	69
Where Tradition Is Useful.....	70
The Dream.....	71
How To Unsew A Ribbon Skirt.....	72
The Tattle-Tale.....	73
White Medicine.....	74
Right Wing.....	76
You Can Only Wear This.....	77
Question Etymology.....	78
Spiderweb.....	80
Section Four: maskihkiy pîsim nikamowina (Moon Medicine Poems).....	81
ka-sîpîhkosit tipiskâw pîsim.....	82

nape-mêskaknis (Coyote).....	83
Winged Sweeper.....	84
sosowêmihkwan Shining Shell, Slippery Spoon.....	85
Under This Buding Moon.....	86
This Is Your Moon.....	87
Worn Out Ways.....	88
I Stood Still.....	89
On This Golden Bed.....	90
wâwâskêsiw-sîpy.....	91
kisê-pîsim.....	92
So I Mooned Him.....	93
Eight January Moons.....	94
Slow Drum.....	95
Deflower.....	96
Down Under.....	97
Where Cree-ation Happens.....	98
GLOSSARY.....	99
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	101