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Learning to Walk Again: Indigenous Female “Healing Activism” in Cherie Dimaline’s Short Story “Room 414” and Contemporary Activist Movements

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**LEARNING TO WALK AGAIN:
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Abstract

After more than five hundred years of colonization and (neo)colonialism, the adopted structures and ways of thinking are still dominated by the “colonial myth” of “a story of imagined White superiority” (Episkenew 3). Counteracting this destructive master narrative, Indigenous literature has been established as a powerful tool. This article will focus on textual as well as extra-textual healing processes while formulating what I call “Healing Activism.” The term aims at describing the transcendent power of Indigenous female healing narratives that can lead to “positive changes to public policy” (Episkenew 191). “Healing Activism” in literature is exemplified by the short story “room 414” written by Anishinaabe/Métis author Cherie Dimaline that depicts the struggles of a young Aboriginal drug addict and prostitute living on the streets in one of Canada’s largest cities. The girl’s liberating, yet painful healing journey suggests cultural renewal and reconciliation by emphasizing the crucial role of women in Anishinaabe culture and tradition as community builders and their healing powers. Extending this topic to an extra-textual context, the article will examine the recent (partly) Aboriginal and (mainly) female-run Idle No More movement and its engagement in igniting awareness and political action.

Résumé

La nouvelle *Room 414* de l’auteur indigène Cherie Dimaline, aborde les thèmes de la prostitution, de la toxicomanie et de l’identité féminine autochtone en milieu urbain au Canada. La protagoniste – une jeune fille sans-abri et sans perspectives – se retrouve constamment dans des situations où il est question de vie ou de mort. Avec

ses racines ancrées dans le colonialisme, sa situation ne peut que s'améliorer si elle retrouve sa propre identité et commence à guérir ses cicatrices mentales et spirituelles. Cet article explique le concept de « healing activism » qui analyse la connexion entre l'activisme social et la guérison individuelle et collective. Par le biais de la nouvelle *Room 414* et du mouvement contemporain Idle No More, l'article analyse l'interface essentielle entre la littérature, la politique et la conscience publique. Face à l'oppression des femmes indigènes par des lois sexistes et racistes, la résistance littéraire et politique fait partie intégrante de l'idée de décolonisation.

When dealing with contemporary realities of both urban Native¹ life and life on a reserve, it is inevitable to address the terms and concepts of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as well as historical trauma (HT) (WalDRAM; EpiskENew). More than five hundred years of colonialism have often resulted in dysfunctional communities and intergenerational effects of a trauma that has not been resolved. In her book *Taking Back Our Spirits: Indigenous Literature, Public Policy, and Healing* (2009), Jo-Ann EpiskENew refers readers to Terry Mitchell and Dawn Maracle, who argue that the term PTSD is inappropriate when used in a First Nations context because it does not take into consideration the circumstances of Canada's history of colonization and hence neglects ongoing colonialism. The effects of a collective trauma are accordingly conceptualized as PTSR, i.e. "postcolonial traumatic stress response" (EpiskENew 9).

Centering her studies on the notion and process of community healing, EpiskENew acknowledges the healing functions of Native literature in a (post-/neo-)colonial Canadian society by claiming that it can help to write against the master narrative and rectify the colonial myth (2). By writing down what happened to them, Residential School survivors started to "publicly expose the destructive effects of internal colonialism" by means of their autobiographic accounts (Lutz, *Contemporary Achievements* 88). With the dialogue about what has happened to generations of First Nations and what continues to deeply affect the relationship between Indigenous and settler society, "the term 'healing' became central to any discourse relating to the Indigenous peoples of this country" (EpiskENew 11). EpiskENew tackles the difficult task of defining healing while firstly clarifying that it does not mean that Indigenous people are sick and in search of a cure. Ward Churchill asserts that it is colonization and colonialism that deserve the adjective "sick." He also introduces the adjective "wounded" as opposed to sick (EpiskENew 11), which is later taken up by Eduardo Duran in his crucial work *Healing the Soul*

¹ I will use the terms Indigenous, Aboriginal, and Native interchangeably, as do the primary and secondary sources consulted for this article.

Wound. Episkenew maintains that “most settlers deny that their society is built on a sick foundation and, therefore, deny that it requires a cure” (11). Healing hence involves not only Indigenous Canada but also—perhaps most importantly—non-Indigenous Canada.

Darien Thira discusses, what he calls, the “fourth wave of colonization” and argues that it is “made up of therapeutic foster homes, treatment facilities, and consulting mental health and social service professionals (not to mention researchers and academics) who have shifted the label from ‘savage’, ‘heathen’, and ‘deficient’ to ‘sick’ Indian and/or community” (Thira).² The term “healing” here displays confinements inflicted by colonization and yet the possibility to subvert them. What is considered as healing then is to break free from colonial structures, Eurocentric conduct, the marginalization and continued oppression of First Nations rights. The idea of decolonization³ as the processual endeavour to liberate Canada from the oppression of colonial structures, mindsets, and consciousness emphasizes both healing and activism as interdependent concepts. Activism as another healing instrument, which has lately received tremendous attention, establishes the notion of decolonization as the most adamant expression of resistance and aspiration to liberate First Nations and non-First Nations from colonized ways of living, behaving, and thinking:

Through the example of activism, however, the concepts of healing and decolonization may be explored, with insights from political ecology. Activism often involves the stages of healing or de-colonization . . . including ceremony, reclaiming, re-naming, recovery, and the formation of coalitions and other types of governance. According to the work of Brave Heart and DeBruyn, and trauma and loss scholars David Eng and David Kazanjian, unrecognized grief as it relates to intergenerational trauma plays a strong role in whether people are able to develop new, de-colonial systems that change the pattern created by the oppressor. (Middleton 12)

² See also Milloy (302); and Ward.

³ According to Frantz Fanon and his renowned study *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), decolonization contains the intention to challenge the colonial situation and the very act of liberating oneself from this situation (2). Fanon further asserts that decolonization is a historical process that “can only be understood, it can only find its significance and become self coherent insofar as we can discern the history-making movement which gives it form and substance” (2). Acknowledging that the reversal of colonization is impossible and that there will never be a true decolonized state, as if colonization never happened, leads to the fact that colonial mindsets, policies, and general frameworks are still alive and at work today. (Neo)Colonialism, and hence decolonization as its antagonist, comprises all levels of contemporary life, including education, politics, courts, literature, as well as our individual behaviour and internalized mindsets. For a more recent critical discussion of the term “decolonization” within a Canadian context, see Tuck and Yang.

As Indigenous scholars have stated repeatedly, Native literature has become a powerful tool to promote decolonization, liberation, and healing. In how far literature can mirror and enhance positive changes in policies and public consciousness can be observed in contemporary social, political, or environmental activism by First Nations (as well as non-First Nations allies). “Healing Activism” hence describes a new form of resistance that transcends textual spheres and fosters a greater visibility. It reclaims Indigenous knowledges and promotes Indigenous Health and Wellness. A healing discourse—individual and/or communal—often involves or results in reclaiming agency, self-determination, and activism. At the same time, activism reaffirms a strong Indigenous presence and identity, which again nurtures healing processes.

The intersection between literature, healing, and activism will be exemplified in the following analysis of Métis writer Cherie Dimaline’s short story “room 414” from the short story collection *Red Rooms* and the contemporary Idle No More movement⁴ as a new form of political activism confronting, for example, the prevailing issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women along British Columbia’s “Highway of Tears.”

HOMELESSNESS AND HEALING

In his acclaimed work *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (1995), Arthur Frank portrays narrative ethics which includes several stories of disease, but, as Nixon comments, “although [Frank’s work is] focused on

⁴ To name other literary First Nations examples of promoting and dealing with “Healing Activism” I should mention, for example, texts written by Richard Van Camp (Tlicho). In his short stories “On the Wings of this Prayer” and “The Fleshing,” from his short story collection *Godless but Loyal to Heaven*, Van Camp focuses on the contemporary topic of resource depletion as exemplified by the Alberta Tar Sands. His adamant plea for ecological vigilance and the reclamation of/return to Traditional Ecological/Environmental Knowledges (TEK) are highlighted by the depiction of a catastrophic dystopian future, in which the Windigo figure has returned and has literally taken possession of the humans on earth. The topic of “Healing Activism” is also taken up by such Indigenous writers and scholars as Warren Cariou (Métis), Jack Forbes (Powhatan-Renapé and Lenape), and Jeannette Armstrong (Syilx), who promote the return to Indigenous methodologies and knowledges. Extra-textual activist movements that go beyond the confines of literary texts can also be observed in grassroots organizations which oppose recent Pipeline projects (like Enbridge or Keystone XL) or continued land theft as exemplified by such cases of their protests as the 1990 Oka crisis, Ipperwash, the Caledonia standoff, or Chief Theresa’s hunger strike to draw attention to dire housing conditions on the Attawapiskat reserve in Ontario.

the stories of illness, it is easy to read across from disease to homelessness” (39). Consequently, Frank’s work exemplifies three story types: the restitution narrative, the chaos narrative, and the quest narrative. While homelessness is the main topic of the chaos narrative, the quest narrative suggests personal growth and transformation as well as healing by means of finding and reclaiming one’s voice because, as Nixon asserts, “It is by stories that we can reclaim our sense of self, and make sense of the ‘narrative wreckage’ of our lives during or after illness, and by extension, in the disruption of homelessness” (39). Frank situates homelessness as an embodiment of a chaotic social status which society cannot identify with, and hence it excludes the homeless from its ranks, perceiving them as the “other” (113). He further postulates this dichotomy as being at the center of society’s ignorance and as a coping mechanism that allows society to focus on medical treatment and in this way, as Nixon summarizes, to “avoid the massive social changes required to see the other as part of oneself” (39).

For Indigenous people in North America this form of “othering” has further ramifications, which are illustrated in First Nations literature in which, most frequently, large cities stand for a poor lifestyle, no housing, prostitution, physical abuse, drug and alcohol addiction, and no connection to the protagonists’ Indigenous heritage. Dara Culhane confirms in her article that such literary representations adequately reflect real-life circumstances:

Anyone passing through inner-city Vancouver on foot, on a bus, or in a car cannot help but SEE, in a literal sense, the concentration of Aboriginal people here. . . . many representations of this and other inner-city neighborhoods in Western Canada are characterized by a marked *invisibility* of Aboriginal people, and women in particular. (593; emphasis in orig.)

It is not astounding that the character of Dimaline’s story, living on the streets of Toronto or Vancouver, pursues a way out of this invisibility, because her whereabouts in the novel, “Pain and Wastings,” form a rhyming synonym with “Main and Hastings,” one of the main crossings in Downtown Eastside Vancouver, notorious for high rates of drug addicts, homelessness, crime, violence, and prostitution. The HIV infection rates in this area “exceeded those anywhere else in the ‘developed’ world” (Culhane 594). Farley, Lynne, and Cotton write that over fifty-two percent of one hundred prostitutes in Vancouver, whom they interviewed for their study, were of First Nations background. They also write that PTSD among these women was rampant and that eighty-six percent were currently, or had been at some point in their lives, homeless (242). Culhane asserts that it is through medical prevention projects and politicizing issues of the (Aboriginal) residents living in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside that “a previously invisible population has entered into

public discourse” (603). The high rates of Aboriginal homelessness in the cities are not really surprising if we refer again to Frank’s remark about a tendency common for society to separate homelessness and prostitution from its realms in order to make way for, what Tuck and Yang call, “settler moves to innocence” (1).⁵ That the legacy of colonization is still directly affecting Aboriginal people today serves as a painful reminder of unresolved traumas. As Piliavin, Entner Wright, Mare, and Westerfelt claim, “Institutional disaffiliation is perhaps the most systematically developed thesis on the conditions leading to homelessness” (36). The term “institutional disaffiliation” itself describes a group or individual estrangement from governmental institutions and their structures, which results in further mistrust and growing isolation. Canada’s Indigenous population has been facing racist colonial structures and policies for more than five hundred years, explaining the prevailing feeling of estrangement and disaffiliation from the country’s government.⁶ Reasons for institutional disaffiliation rest on the lack of family ties, human connection, and kinship, which were purposefully damaged by Residential Schools, the Indian Act, and other legal regulations that continue to ignore Indigenous people’s rights to land, language, and traditional sustenance. People who have grown up in adopted or foster care homes are hence more likely to become or remain homeless, or they might even return to homelessness (Piliavin, Entner Wright, Mare, and Westerfelt 37). In her poem “Blind Justice,” Lee Maracle writes about settler society as being “an occupier of . . . [her] homeland in . . . [her] homeless state” (216), portraying the hypocrisy surrounding settler society and the fact that Canada “was built on stolen land” (Eigenbrod 13). In that sense, Indigenous peoples have been robbed by colonialism of their homes: spatial and ideological ones, as well as physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual homes. This profound level of displacement, a theft of land and identity, leaves many Aboriginal people uprooted on the streets.

⁵ Tuck and Yang elaborate on the term, explaining that such moves “problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity” (1).

⁶ As Jeannette Armstrong writes, “Arising out of the siege of conditions of this nightmare time, what is commonly referred to as the ‘social problems’ of Native peoples emerged. Homes and communities, without children, had nothing to work for, or live for. Children returned to communities and families as adults, without the necessary skills for parenting, for Native life style, or self-sufficiency on their land base, deteriorated into despair. With the loss of cohesive cultural relevance with their own peoples and a distorted view of the non-Native culture from the clergy who ran the residential schools, an almost total disorientation and loss of identity occurred” (599-600).

CHERIE DIMALINE'S "ROOM 414"

In her story, Dimaline addresses the above-mentioned issues, weaving together several layered stories within one narrative. A first person narrator, who is also the protagonist of the frame narrative, tells different stories that all revolve around the narrator's workplace: a hotel in a big city. The collection consists of five separate short stories that are numbered according to the rooms their protagonists have inhabited in the frame narrative: "room 414," "room 502," "room 106," "room 207," and "room 304."

The bleak character of the hotel rooms matches the despairing situation of the rooms'/stories' protagonist. The transitory boundary between life and death forms a recurring topic in her stories. Emphasizing the fine line between sex and power, life and death, homelessness and home is at the center of the short story's plot, representing Frank's category of chaos narrative. The protagonist of "room 414," a young Aboriginal prostitute and drug addict called "the girl," is portrayed as being outside the ordinary world, not belonging to anything, and not complying to any set of rules or codes. She is "wearing underwear marked 'Wednesday' on a Sunday evening . . . and a wifebeater shirt made grey from a thousand washes in someone else's machine" (Dimaline 5). Being treated with no respect and sometimes as less than human, the men "deposit" (5) her back onto the cold streets, where she waits for another "trick" (13). Since the girl's real name is not revealed throughout the story, her anonymity facilitates her role as the literary embodiment of the desolate existence of many Aboriginal women, living in the shadow of society on the streets of Canada. Her life circumstances are reflected in her physical condition, which is described as clearly deteriorating. Her "spindly legs," "bony, bruised hips," her face "raw and jagged," "nicotine-stained fingers" (5), "smudged eyeliner," "puffy eyes of a middle-aged woman who lived too hard and smoked too much," and "her skin hid[ing] the sickness that crept through her blood" (8)—all testify to the rough shape⁷ her body is in, and her equally "rough" outlook on life: "her breath was gone like a runner at the end of a lost race: a pointless and frustrating place to

⁷ Her inner torment and bad physical condition is further described as follows: "Her shoulders hunched in on themselves so much she was sure that if she really wanted to, she could pull them completely together. Perhaps she could flap them fast enough that they would carry her away; she's [sic] be liberated by the bad posture of low self-esteem. She giggled at the image and caught herself laughing in the smudgy reflection of the brass plated elevator buttons. And for a moment, she didn't recognize the girl, the girl with the wings constructed of bones and fear, smiling an absurd sort of smile that was separate from the rest of her face" (13).

be” (14). The disunity of body and mind/spirit expresses her literal and metaphoric homelessness. Her existence in the city as a homeless “hooker” leaves not only exterior/physical but also interior/mental scars: “she felt unwell. There was pain from somewhere deep inside of her” (24). She clearly considers the city to be the opposite of “back home” (6), and yet she also sees it as her way to flee from hurtful events that keep on haunting her. However, her stagnation is to come to an end and transform in fact into her sovereignty, which is indicated by her pondering about her past and, what she describes as, a “constant internal yelling” (30).

Within the story, exterior elements dominate the identification process of the main character: the girl’s identity is neither expressed nor shaped by herself, but instead it is ascribed to her by the often hostile clients and abusive people in her life. Her indefinable existence as a young wandering prostitute is revealed to the reader at the same time as the first hint about her Aboriginal descent is given, when she hatefully recalls “these cold, hard men. . . . the ones who called her squaw. Who called her half-breed, the ones who would just as soon slap her than bother to put on the condom she always handed them” (6). Her identity is hence defined by other people—mainly her clients who disparage and belittle her—and not by herself. What they “call” her is what she in fact “becomes” until she reclaims her own identity and starts to believe that she, too, deserves a self-determined, connected, meaningful life. But behind her initial emotional detachment is the desperate need to find a way out of the repeated “indifferent,” “unremarkable,” “insignificant” space, and to “forge a connection” (6). The lack of connection in her life is extensive, and her loneliness is palpable in every sentence. She lacks any feeling of self-worth, and her concomitant need for self-punishment finds symbolic expression in her repeated presence near the floor, on the ground, laying in the dirt and grime of the street, the bar, or the hotel floor. The story includes multiple examples but suffice here to mention a few: “She was eye-level with the floor. . . . She could see lint” (10); “the girl woke up in the alleyway . . . lying fetal on the floor of a hotel room beside a sleeping stranger” (12); “now she was under the table” (20); “when she finally cleared away the clouds from her eyelids and felt the sandy ground beneath her bared thighs, it was like reaching the bottom of the knot” (30). The years of drugs, alcohol, living on the streets, and selling herself have aged her body prematurely. The girl has literally touched bottom.

The reader’s expectation of a harmonious, loving, and traditional life back home at the reserve remains unfulfilled when the girl continues to recall images of herself and her relatives “posing with half-empty bottles” and “making ‘monkey juice’ in her grandma’s basement from the dozens of bottles that lined the rec room” (14-15). Alcohol abuse within a dysfunctional family shaped her upbringing. By addressing this issue and, in this way, by rejecting

to establish a clear-cut dichotomy between a good reserve/family life (as represented by “back home”) versus a dirty urban life alone and homeless (as represented by “the city”), Dimaline draws attention to the relative insignificance of life on reserve or urban space and physicality to individual Indigeneity. No exterior factors (whether physical appearance or a status card) can establish a person as (especially) Indigenous. Life on a reserve does not secure or come along automatically with Indigeneity either.⁸ The girl’s inability to connect with her Native roots is challenged when her dreams keep reminding her of her suppressed identity conflict.

After waking up from a disturbing, yet somewhat visionary dream, “she did remember . . . to walk down to the patch of glass-strewn beach at the bottom of her new city to put tobacco into the water on the anniversary of her brother’s suicide, that crazy, cynical shadow dancer who had killed himself” (12). Clearly, the dream seems to have a direct impact on her daily life since it brings back old sorrows and reminds her of the death of people that were once close to her. She even acts upon it and visits her brother’s grave, performing a traditional ceremony and leaving tobacco, which is the first time she herself identifies with Indigenous traditions and life. Later on, however, she walks into a bar with the intention to get drunk and forget her sorrows and memories. There, she soon recognizes one of two women who had previously appeared to her in a dream. In that dream, the girl had perceived the two as standing beside her in a most powerfully protective way:

She looked to her left and there stood a young woman with a serious face. She was wrapped in deep layers of material the same colour as the veins that snaked up and down her pale arms. She had sad smudges under her eyes as though a coal miner had tried to wipe away her tears in a moment of tenderness. Her dark hair was pulled back tightly into an intricate medicine-wheel braid that took up every wave from her head and wove it into meaning. Her lips were thick and cut by deep creases symptomatic of a life spent outdoors in unforgiving sunlight and inside in dimly lit corners. She did not look unkind; she looked beautiful and fierce.

⁸ In a CBC produced documentary series called the *8th Fire: Aboriginal Peoples, Canada and the Way Forward*, more specifically in episode 1, “Indigenous in the City,” Cree artist Kent Monkman addresses the issue of why Aboriginal people live in the city with the following question: “Why are people living on reserves?” He then goes on to argue that many of the reserves have actually been rather arbitrary and artificial places constructed by the colonial governments in order to control Aboriginal life in Canada, stating that “[t]here is the perception that all Aboriginal people come from a reserve” (00:15:50). Having never lived on a reserve himself and arguing that neither of his extended family ever has, he clarifies that living in the city was a conscious choice that would offer opportunities reserves did not have: to “participate in the world” (00:16:38).

Then, the girl looked to her right. The hand that gripped her shoulder on this side belonged to an old woman; a woman whose severity and kindness ran down her face like the patterns of a butterfly's wings. In fact, almost everything about the woman reminded her of a butterfly. She looked so fragile in her age, yet ready to travel many miles before settling to rest. The woman held no weight at all in this room, yet she filled every thing, every hollow space encased by the skin of something else. The girl felt the woman in her ears and mouth. The old woman was tangled in her hair and was crawling down her throat.

And then the two women reached down into her darkness and pulled out a cloak. (11-12)

Now, all of a sudden in her waking life, when wanting to get drunk in that bar, the girl sees them again "in a city where she knew no other Native person beside from some of the skids who hung out in the park. . . . the unrelated cousins who bummed cigarettes off her . . ." (17). This meeting, and the girl's reaction to it, reveals her isolation from both everything and everybody Native in the City and from whatever symbolizes "back home" (8). Her chosen isolation becomes a means of self-punishment and an inner strategy to not face the guilt she feels about her lifestyle. "Native in the city" means "skids" (17), which she excludes from her definition of Native—an identity she does not even ascribe to herself. She fears any possibility of her heritage to be revealed as in such a case she would have to confront it with her present lifestyle:

There were a few Native organizations in the neighbourhood where she could get a lunch or a shower or even some new clothes. . . . And what if they tried to make her talk to an Elder? How should she form the words and tales of her days and nights to such a respectable person who could never understand what she did or how she lived? What was there on the other side anyways? (17)

Here, the reader grows to understand what "Native" may mean to the girl; it means the workers and Elders in Native organizations, whom she considers "respectable" and so does not dare to face them. Dominated by shame, guilt, anxiety, depression, emotional detachment, and disaffiliation, the girl shows the main symptoms of PTSD/R (Farley, Lynne, and Cotton 246). At this point, there seems to be no solution and no incentive for her to turn back to "the other side" (Dimaline 17), which provides a vision of a life, she does not feel entitled to live, yet. She imagines instead a peaceful life with her latest "trick" (13) as her partner. Her question "what was there on the other side anyways?" (17) only emphasises her position as different from the "respectable" Natives. It reinforces her exclusion from any tribal or First Nations community and underlines her existence as a "half-breed," who should ideally be able to inhabit two worlds. Her longing for belonging—to that community she is so cut off from—is manifested in her secretly watching women from Native

organizations singing or offering tobacco; women who are literally from “the other side of the road” (17).

After her spiritually revealing dream journeys, she comes to the realization that the repression of any memories of her family and life on reserve prove to be more painful than her depressive life on the streets (Dimaline 32). This testament of her isolation is especially terrifying when taking into account the Indigenous concepts of tribal/communal identity. Indigeneity is firmly rooted in kinship and relationships not only within one’s family but within the broader community one lives in. For example, in her book *Life Stages and Native Women: Memory, Teachings and Story Medicine*, Kim Anderson writes about this aspect with a particular reference to the Midewiwin group, according to whom:

childhood was a time to begin to learn the disciplines of the community in anticipation of becoming a full contributing member. Adolescence was a turning point in which children broke from “the good life” [childhood] into what Midewiwin teachers refer to as “the fast life,” a time of rapid change, introspection, vision, sacrifice, and transition.⁹ (66)

Describing the protagonist as a “girl” and not yet a “woman” suggests her age in-between adolescence and adulthood. Having no paternal or other relational guidance in her life, the girl’s internalized mechanisms of self-protection become apparent by means of her statement that she would rather sell her body to strangers than face her repressed emotions and fears (Dimaline 32). Lutz writes in accordance with Vine Deloria, Jr.: “in a tribal sense there is no difference between an individual’s and the tribe’s identity, – if they fall apart, that is a sign of great alarm and causes mental, spiritual and even physical suffering” (*Approaches* 197).¹⁰ For the most part, her choice to live a life separated from her family and community displays not only the effects of intergenerational PTSR but also her need for individual healing in order to reclaim and reconnect with her Indigeneity.

⁹ According to Anderson, the Midewiwin are “a spiritual society of the Anishinaabek” who “define the roles and responsibilities of the life cycles as having seven stages” (9). Calvin Martin claims that “the famed Midewiwin, a kind of community health organization equipped with a wide range of ritual paraphernalia and the principal repository of tribal folk-history” was a “post contact, nativistic cult” (84-85).

¹⁰ Lawrence asserts: “For Native people, individual identity is always being negotiated *in relation to* collective identity, and *in the face of* an external, colonizing society. Bodies of law defining and controlling Indianness have for years distorted and disrupted older Indigenous ways of identifying the self in relation not only to collective identity but also to the land” (4; emphasis in orig.).

The girl's healing journey becomes more and more discernible to the reader when the chaos narrative slowly transforms into a quest narrative as the protagonist reclaims her identity and finds meaning by moving towards reconciliation. The language and terminology that appear towards the end of the story evoke images of a pregnancy and birth, symbolizing the girl's metaphorical rebirth. For example, when she experiences one of her visionary dreams, she describes herself, or her mother's reaction to her, as "some dream daughter as real and unreal as a fetus buried deep inside a Fallopian tube" (Dimaline 28). Yet the metaphor becomes more complex when the girl's condition continues to be described in medical terms, now evocative of her giving birth: "She felt certain now that she was dying. Her pulse was quick and fluttering, her tummy was extended and sore, her head screamed at her, and she felt as if she would pass out from nausea and the constant internal yelling" (29). It seems thus that the girl experiences the birth both ways, as giving it and as being born again, because when the dream/vision comes to an end, we also read that: "She felt her shirt go first; then her hair slipped through an airy cervix, relief and tension at once in the transfer. . . . her landing back into reality was not an easy one, being whipped through rips and epochs by the seat of her pants" (30). The climactic alleviation that the girl experiences here is reminiscent of the final stages of birth, and so the reader finally comes to the realization that the girl is about to (re)enter the world as newly-born or reborn. The focus on the girl's body, as both being reborn and giving birth to her new self, reinforces the aspect of her newly found self-determination and self-help, the process of which is unfolded as the narrative develops.

After experiencing her rebirth in her dream/vision, the girl continues to carry out her "duties" as a prostitute and returns to her "trick." When she arrives at the hotel, the metaphor of rebirth appears again as the girl describes the elevator as "deposit[ing] her like a baby in a basket on the doorsteps" (32). Her "whimpering" (34) before entering the room revives again the image of the girl as a 'newborn.' Yet when she enters the room, she is confronted with death again as she finds the dead, bleeding body of a client, whose suffering reminds her in fact of her own experiences of pain from the hours before. The death of the man is pervasive, which is visualised by means of the image of the girl who is covered with the man's blood. Yet the experience of it is subversively liberating to the girl; in an act of, what seems to be, a confirmation of her existence, she "check[s] her own pulse" and feels in fact as if "[s]he was released. Hands that had been cupped around her as if she were a tiny bird had opened to the sky" (34). This foreshadowing of her metaphorical return to life is further extended into a possibility of, what previously seemed to her to be, "an impossible future back home" (34) when we learn that the girl uses the dead's man money to leave the place of her destruction. In disbelief about her life and his death, her rebirth has been

completed, enabling her to envision a future away from prostitution, homelessness, and a shadow existence. Metaphorically speaking, she has thus learned to walk again. And so, what was formerly impossible even to imagine has now become a reality: a better life away from the streets is no longer beyond the girl's reach.

The metaphorical rebirth enables the girl's reconnection to her Indigenous identity, which is triggered by the spiritual guidance of her dreams and visions. A cloak that the women appearing in her dream protectively gave to her in one of her visions epitomizes the reclamation of her (Native) identity:

They pulled it around the girl's shoulders. The cloak itself became a wide, round star-filled sky. Its weight was the weight of all eternity, from time immemorial passed down through slow migrations across eons and down the strands of DNA that brought everything to this moment. It was comforting. . . . (12)

After her visionary dream, the girl wakes up and is incapable of transferring the comforting presence of the cloak and its ramifications into the reality of her life on the streets. Her desperation seems to increase, but the narrative focuses instead on the prospect of change that is foreshadowed by the aforementioned birth analogy drawn in fact right after this dream. Finally, the cloak becomes a metaphor of her ability to enact her dream's messages and take on agency: "Now the cape she shrugged up over her shoulders and tossed over her head was the wide, round star-filled sky itself, and she was running toward it as fast as she could" (35). The cloak that she is now actively pulling over her shoulders as shelter from the cold shows that she can finally permit herself to do what is good for her and not what hurts her. Rediscovering her entitlement to shelter and protection, she is now able to leave her life as a homeless prostitute behind. In this way, we see how the girl's self-punishment has turned into agency and self-care; the girl's rapid change from being at the bottom to finally reaching for the sky as a metaphor for her re-empowerment at the end of the story highlights her existential transformation. Alongside the hope for a better future, the girl finds the power to determine for herself the meaning of her past, present, and future.

The initial presentation of the girl as uprooted and estranged from (her) Nativeness is in accordance with the factual reality of many Native women. Due to ongoing and still valid colonial identity regulations of "Indianness" that are based on "racist and sexist criteria" (Lawrence 24), Native women have been at a higher risk of legally losing their Nativeness. As Lawrence writes, "Taking into account that for every woman who lost status and had to leave her community, all of her descendants also lost status and for the most part were permanently alienated from Native culture, the scale of cultural

genocide caused by gender discrimination becomes massive” (9).¹¹ Dimaline’s story shows thus how such imposed identity politics leave the protagonist with a sense of “institutional disaffiliation” (Piliavin, Entner Wright, Mare and Westerfelt 36) and estrangement from both settler society and her own Indigenous community, which is reflected in the protagonist’s homelessness. Yet what the story also shows is how the “cure” to the protagonist’s chronic alienation and self-punishment is provided by other female characters who remain strong: her grandmother, her “aunties,” and especially the two women from her dream. They provide comfort during desolate times and become significant role models who offer guidance to the girl, making her change of life possible.

Emphasizing the significance of female support in regaining individual empowerment, Dimaline’s short story addresses the point also made by Leanne Simpson in her work *Dancing On Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence*. Simpson quotes Anishinaabe elder Edna Manitowabi, who explains how significant the role of the elder females—mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and sisters—is in teaching the younger generations about life and traditions. It is manifested in Dimaline’s short story when the girl recounts her first dream, in which the two women appear; their comforting touch felt by the girl on her shoulders symbolizes the spiritual guidance, reassurance, advice, and confidence with which the young of the community are provided by the elderly women.

The reappearing women in the short story stand for the spiritual teachings of female guides. Both women seem to represent different values and stages of life. The girl’s meeting of them in her dream symbolizes the meeting of three generations, an ancestry that has its roots in matriarchal lineage. The images present in the dream as well as the women’s physical appearance allude to traditional Native life and ceremony. Consequently, “cedar and heat” (Dimaline 10), which appear there, are evocative of the traditional sweatlodge ceremony. The long dark hair of the women, “hair . . . long and smooth, like the sleek ferns that grew down at the shore behind her auntie’s house” (10), remind the culturally literate reader¹² of the traditional way of wearing hair “pulled back tightly into an intricate medicine-wheel braid that took up every wave from her head and wove it into meaning” (11). “Smudges” on the

¹¹ The restrictive and dishonouring as well as highly controlling treatment of women was partly rectified when, in 1985, the so called Act to Amend the Indian Act, or Bill C-31, was passed, making it possible for approximately 100,000 Native women to regain their “Indian-status” (Lawrence 9). According to this act, “women could no longer gain or lose Indian status as a result of marriage” (Makarenko). However, Bill C-31 was met with mixed reactions among the Indigenous populations in Canada (Lawrence 14).

¹² See also Lutz, *Approaches* 191.

women's faces (11) allude to the pre-sweatlodge ceremony of cleansing, or "smudging," your body and mind with traditional sacred herbs such as tobacco, sage, cedar, and sweetgrass. Their presence in the dream suggests "time immemorial passed down" (Dimaline 12) and "a frayed red thread of Aboriginal blood" (Lord 4), a sense of heritage and continuity that the presence of the two women seals and is experienced by the girl as her homecoming.

As Frank declares, in the quest narrative, "illness is the occasion of a journey that becomes a quest" (115). When the girl gives a meaning to her suffering, seizing it as an opportunity to regain her voice and her strength, she consequently creates a more purposeful future for herself. She is therefore on her way to become an Indigenous woman who stands up for her rights and reclaims what has been taken away from her: her (intellectual) self-determination¹³ and knowledges embedded in Indigenous frameworks.

CONTEMPORARY ACTIVIST MOVEMENTS: IDLE NO MORE

Dimaline's story shows how crucial Indigenous female voices turn out to be for the protagonist's process of healing. To further address this issue but this time focusing on extra-textual examples, which expose the continuing colonial discourse and public policy neglecting and marginalizing Indigenous peoples, especially Indigenous women, I would like to turn now to a brief discussion of the Idle No More movement.

Since the late 1980s, "582 Aboriginal women have been reported missing and murdered across Canada," of which forty women went missing alongside the 724 kilometres of Highway 16 in Northern British Columbia,¹⁴ also known notoriously as "Highway of Tears" (Smiley, *Highway of Tears* 00:00:48). Matt Smiley's 2014 documentary *Highway of Tears* exposes the fact that despite common knowledge that Aboriginal women are "3.5 times more likely to experience violence than non-Aboriginal women" (00:00:57), "in 2013, Human Rights Watch released a report stating that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Northern British Columbia failed to protect Aboriginal women" (00:00:44). Amnesty International has been fighting for greater acknowledgement of these disappearances of women along the Highway for

¹³ Marie Battiste explains "intellectual self-determination" as follows: "The recognition and intellectual activation of Indigenous knowledge today is an act of empowerment by Indigenous people" (4).

¹⁴ It stretches from Prince Rupert, British Columbia, to Edmonton, Alberta, and further into Manitoba.

over ten years. Its 2004 report, "Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence against Indigenous Women in Canada," states that it:

... examines the role of discrimination in acts of violence carried out against Indigenous women in Canadian towns and cities. This discrimination takes the form both of overt cultural prejudice and of implicit or systemic biases in the policies and actions of government officials and agencies, or of society as a whole. This discrimination has played out in policies and practices that have helped put Indigenous women in harm's way and in the failure to provide Indigenous women the protection from violence that is every woman's human right. (3)

It of course goes without saying that the step towards acknowledging the disappearance of and general violence against Indigenous women as a Human Rights concern is crucial and most urgent.

Since the decolonization ideology goes hand in hand with the ideals of healing and liberation (in its many different meanings), Tuck and Yang quote Lorde, in whose view: "writing is not action upon the world. Rather, poetry is giving a name to the nameless, 'first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action'. Importantly, freedom is a possibility that is not just mentally generated; it is particular and felt" (20). What Cherie Dimaline presents in her writing reflects in fact the reality of urban Indigenous female life experiences and the long-lasting effects of (neo)colonialism and marginalization. While her fictional protagonist finds a way to reclaim her identity and take charge of the course of her life, it remains questionable what "tangible action" towards the improvement of the desolate situation of many homeless Aboriginal women is actually taking place on an extra-textual level. And yet the resistance is active and it comes from Indigenous people, women in particular, who, despite living in a world dominated by white supremacy, speak in a clear and strong voice of resilience; in Maracle's words: "Even as men abduct as I hitchhike along the new highways / To disappear along this lonely colonial road / I refuse to be tragic" (216).

Just as many Indigenous adolescents have used political movements of the 1960s to increase their representation and visibility (Atleo 69), so do the Aboriginal youth today find a voice in contemporary activist movements such as Idle No More. The group, which started with "a series of teach-ins throughout Saskatchewan to protest impending parliamentary bills that will erode Indigenous sovereignty and environmental protections, has now changed the social and political landscape of Canada" ("Story"). This grassroots movement was initially founded in 2012 by three First Nations and one non-First Nations women: Jessica Gordon, Sylvia McAdam, Nina Wilson,

and Sheelah McLean. Their aim was to oppose the 2012 Jobs and Growth Act, also called Bill C-45, which is “the government’s omnibus budget implementation bill that includes changes to land management on the reservations. It attacks the land base reserved for Indigenous people, removes protection for hundreds of waterways, and weakens Canada’s environmental laws” (Caven).

The Idle No More activists created a Facebook page, which until the present day has more than 141,000 likes and a Facebook group that presently counts 54,333 members, the number of whom is growing every day. The movement has reached Native peoples worldwide and finds many non-Native allies with the same environmental values, human rights principles, and objectives: “to assert Indigenous inherent rights to sovereignty and reinstitute traditional laws and Nation to Nation Treaties by protecting the lands and waters from corporate destruction” (“Story”). What is, however, most pertinent to this article is the fact that the Idle No More movement can be seen as an example of a resistance movement created and led by female voices. Just like Dimaline’s story, the movement, with its organization on a mass scale and vibrant activity, proves the strength of Indigenous women who, as the Kino-nda-niimi Collective put it:

. . . have always been leaders in our communities and many took a similar role in the movement. As they had done for centuries when nurturing and protecting families, communities, and nations, women were on the front lines organizing events, standing up and speaking out. Grandmothers, mothers, aunties, sisters, and daughters sustained us, carried us, and taught through word, song, and story. When Indigenous women were targeted with sexual violence during the movement, many of us organized to support those women and to make our spaces safer. Many also strived to make the movement an inclusive space for all genders and sexual orientations and to recognize the leadership roles and responsibilities of our fellow queer and two spirited citizens. (23-24)

One of the most valuable assets of this movement is thus its openness and ability to recruit into its ranks more and more people: female empowerment from which the movement arose has clearly swept the masses, encouraging further emancipation and engagement in “Indigenous activism [which] has taken many forms” (Murphy). The Idle No More Movement is therefore an undeniable example of “Healing Activism.” Just like Dimaline’s story, it clearly shows the possibility of “learning to walk again,” both on an individual and group level. As Native educator and artist Khelsilem sums up, “I think that’s where a lot of it comes from—this very strong history of our people starting to feel proud of ourselves again and becoming more visible and becoming stronger and becoming more active” (qtd. in Murphy).

Consequently, the empowerment that comes with current streams of Indigenous activism, like Idle No More, enables Aboriginal families, communities, and larger organizations to speak up and not let most pressing issues be glossed over by the authorities. For example, the “Stolen Sisters” report has been further developed into the “No More Stolen Sisters” campaign that aims at:

A national action plan to end violence against women which addresses the root causes of violence and identifies holistic, culturally-appropriate ways in which to prevent violence and to support those impacted by violence. . . . [As well as] [a] national public inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women focused on exposing the nature of this violence and on ensuring government and police accountability for an effective and coordinated response. (“No More Stolen Sisters”)

Indigenous activism exposing the truth that the authorities try to conceal is a necessary form of resistance that receives more and more public attention worldwide. Hence, projects like film documentaries on the subject matter, for example, Smiley’s *Highway of Tears*, become of key importance as they reach a broad international audience that pressures the police and the government to act on these demands. That such attempts can be powerfully effective has been proved in 2012 when the RCMP released a national report surveying the missing and murdered Aboriginal women, which is a first step in the long-awaited recognition of the national problem at hand—the mistreatment and lack of protection of Canada’s Aboriginal women.

But it is also the cause of such mistreatment that needs consideration. While Dimaline’s short story successfully portrays the ramifications of homelessness, prostitution, drug and alcohol addiction, the general public largely ignores their causes. Looking at the extensive problem that Aboriginal women are facing counteracts the colonial Eurocentric mindset that fuels violence against Aboriginal women: “Racist and sexist stereotypes deny the dignity and worth of Indigenous women” (“Stolen Sisters”). Also, the governmental neglect and lack of investigation, protection, and prevention have served to confirm the assumption of some men that they would get away with the murder of Aboriginal women (“Stolen Sisters”). Indigenous (non-governmental and international) organizations, movements, activists, and writers have successfully urged the government to move towards justice for the affected families and communities and to finally take action: the new Canadian government of Justin Trudeau has announced that a national inquiry into missing and murdered Aboriginal women and girls has recently been launched (“National Inquiry”).

Indigenous political activism and its human rights campaigns as well as Indigenous literature increase the visibility of Indigenous women in Canada and raise Canada's public awareness, which altogether works against ongoing marginalization. Problems such as those encountered by Dimaline's protagonist in fiction are directly tied to colonialism and are fuelled by the underlying colonialist and paternalistic structures that are based on the disparagement and objectification of Indigenous people, Indigenous women in particular. Dimaline's short story and the Idle No More movement not only point to the *status quo* of Indigenous people, but they also focus on its many causes. Relegating colonialism to something of the past is a danger that euphemizes and downplays Indigenous struggles in the city and on reserves. Feeling safe in your own country is a privilege of non-Indigenous people in Canada. It is a cruel reality that such is not the case for Indigenous women. Such differences in lived realities of safety and privilege are a human rights violation and perpetuate internal colonial structures. Indigenous literature as well as a newly emerging form of activism protest against the existence and persistence of these differences and work towards effectuating actual changes in public policies and consciousness. Counteracting the "fourth wave of colonization," Indigenous people reclaim their Indigeneity and redefine healing by blending traditional knowledges with contemporary ways of resisting.

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