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Reclamation, Redress, and Remembrance: Aboriginal Soldiers of the Great War in Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*

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**RECLAMATION, REDRESS, AND
REMEMBRANCE: ABORIGINAL SOLDIERS OF
THE GREAT WAR IN JOSEPH BOYDEN'S
*THREE DAY ROAD***

Abstract

Joseph Boyden's novel *Three Day Road* (2005) interweaves the depiction of the horrors of World War I and their detrimental influence on the human psyche with the recollections of traditional Aboriginal life, as it is being altered by white encroachment on Native lands. My paper examines how the author combines Cree hunting stories and warrior traditions with the military actions on the battlefields of World War I, investigating the fear of death and the splendor of success. Traversing the battlegrounds of France and Belgium, the narrative portrays two Cree men who volunteer to fight in World War I and then suffer racial discrimination in the Canadian army. I further discuss how the loyalty to traditional Aboriginal mythology and family ties help to cope with the trauma of war as well as with the impingement of white values on Native cultures. Both experiences bring the question of how to retain one's identity in the face of trauma, which inspires one protagonist to embrace the change and the other to question its purpose. In a manner of redress and commemoration, Boyden's novel revivifies experiences of those who have been marginalized or altogether omitted from official narratives. The global conflict is used here to provide a contextual backdrop for the discussion of national and ethnic allegiances and the healing power of story-telling.

Résumé

Le roman de Joseph Boyden *Three Day Road* (2005) (*Le Chemin des âmes*, 2006) entremêle la description des horreurs de la Première Guerre mondiale et de leur influence négative sur l'âme humaine, avec le souvenir de la vie aborigène traditionnelle altérée par l'intrusion blanche sur la terre d'origine. L'article examine la façon dont l'auteur combine les récits de chasse indienne et les traditions guerrières

avec les activités militaires sur les champs de bataille de la Première Guerre mondiale, interrogeant la peur de la mort et la splendeur de la victoire. En traversant les champs de bataille de France et de Belgique, le récit dresse le portrait de deux Indiens d'Amérique engagés volontaires dans l'armée canadienne, où ils ont souffert de discrimination raciale. Ce travail discute de la façon dont la loyauté à la mythologie aborigène traditionnelle et aux liens familiaux les aide à surmonter tant le traumatisme de la guerre que l'empiètement des valeurs blanches sur leur culture d'origine. Les deux expériences interrogent la façon de préserver son identité face au traumatisme, ce qui amène l'un des protagonistes à embrasser le changement et l'Autre à en interroger la raison d'être. En guise de réparation et de commémoration, le roman de Boyden rend vie aux expériences de ceux qui ont été marginalisés voire totalement oubliés des récits officiels. Le conflit mondial est ici utilisé pour fournir une toile de fond à une discussion sur les allégeances nationales et ethniques et le pouvoir guérisseur de la narration.

In a manner of redress, reclamation, and commemoration, Joseph Boyden's novel addresses a range of problems that are regarded to be central to contemporary Native American and Indigenous literary studies. It engages Native characters, who stand for what has been deemed marginal and negligible by the main stream, representing a culture that was then expected to become extinct. The protagonists' Native origin and traditions are tested in confrontation with the white culture that imposes its rule and demands unconditional assimilation. Residential schools for Native children, the purpose of which was to mould them into the likeness of a white man, and the depiction of various acts of racial discrimination redress the official history by giving a voice to the disadvantaged. Native customs and myths provide for the characters a pillar to lean on when the white man's version of the world disrupts their order of things. Boyden's protagonists cross national and cultural borders and traverse oceans and continents, fighting in a war that is hardly theirs. Joining the Canadian forces in World War I was an act of loyalty to the government that had purposely mistreated and neglected them for a long time. Boyden's novel on the one hand transcends the Aboriginal Canadian experience by stressing the importance of tradition to a nation's history by creating a shared experience of the Great War. On the other hand, it highlights the history of Aboriginal soldiers whose contribution has largely been downplayed or omitted from official history. Hence, the literary focus on Aboriginal soldiers is an attempt to reclaim and recognize their place in official Canadian history.

ABORIGINAL SOLDIERS IN THE GREAT WAR

Before delving into textual analysis, I would like to establish a historical and cultural context for further discussion. During the Great War, a great number of Aboriginal soldiers voluntarily enlisted in armed forces when the Dominion of Canada joined World War I, following Britain's Declaration of War in 1914. At that time, there was no compulsory military service in Canada, so those who went overseas were volunteers. At that time, Indians were wards of the government and did not enjoy the same privileges and responsibilities as Canadian citizens, so they were not expected to volunteer. As much as young men were welcome by the military due to their reputation as fearsome warriors, there was a discussion about the Native involvement, mainly doubts were expressed whether they would be able to adjust to the requirements of modern warfare. Much controversy was instigated by the popular belief in Indian cruelty and their taste for needless torture and scalping. As the Geneva Convention (1906) pronounced such practices unacceptable, Canadian authorities feared that Germans might not treat Aboriginal soldiers according to the rule of law. Moreover, "many White recruits simply did not want to serve alongside visible minorities" (Talbot 100). This initial controversy froze the recruitment of status Indians, however, at the same time, many of them were unofficially admitted and began military training.

Indian agents played an important role in the process, as did the Department of Indian Affairs, revealing the controversy between the need to protect the rights of status Indians and the interests of the federal government. For example, since the Six Nations regarded themselves as a separate nation, they expected an official note from the British government, which could, in turn, prove problematical for the Canadian government. At the same time, Indian Councils were often divided in opinions whether to support Native military involvement or not. For example, "[t]he Mohawks pointed out the hypocrisy of asking them to fight for a country and a government that had deprived them of their territorial rights" (Cooke). Talbot enumerates the reasons for Aboriginal ambivalences to the war effort: "broken treaty promises, poverty and poor living conditions, outstanding land claims, the lack of rights and representation, racism, and the overall lack of respect from government and Canadians in general" (107). He further claims that "[m]ost First Nations did not support the Canadian war effort to any significant degree, for a litany of reasons. Some had outstanding grievances with the Canadian state, others were ambivalent towards the imperialist rhetoric of the day, and a great many more determined that direct involvement would not serve their interests" (92-93). By way of contrast, "Iroquois reserves proved active bastions of support for the war effort: the areas around Brantford (Six

Nations) and Tyendinaga (Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte) became the highest sources of Indian enlistment in Canada” (Lackenbauer et al. 123). One must observe that a lot of Native bands that resided away from the white population had no knowledge of the English language and little insight into global affairs.

As the war was going badly, casualties were enormous, and Canada's contribution in manpower compared unfavourably with that of other countries. In an effort to recruit more soldiers, the Canadian Parliament passed the Military Service Act 1917. The new policy opened up recruitment to Japanese and Black Canadians, which soon led to the following conclusion: “What distinguished Japanese–and Black–Canadian community goals (and levels of enthusiasm) from those of First Nations was their desire for greater integration into the Canadian politic” (Walker 25). James Dempsey explains: “In large part, the government’s decision to actively recruit Indians appears to have been a response to Prime Minister Robert Borden’s efforts to replace the increasingly high number of casualties in front-line units by 1916” (in Lackenbauer et al. 121). There were no exclusively “ethnic units” in the Canadian Armed Forces, while the ones with the biggest number of Aboriginal soldiers were broken in the course of war, and the soldiers were assigned to other units. All in all, about four thousand Native men enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force, which made approximately 35% of all status Indians of military age, out of whom more than three hundred died in the Great War (Lackenbauer and Mantle). Talbot adds that “[o]n the home front, First Nations donated no less than \$44,545.46 to the Canadian Patriotic Fund (CPF) and other war funds” (91). Just like in the case of white Canadians, the donations, which were published in newspapers, were hoped to bring public recognition for Native communities or were seen as a way to opt out of enlistment.

There were many reasons why Indians enlisted: some decided to follow family and friends, others were attracted by regular pay, and still others wanted to run away from the stifling conditions on the reserve. An opportunity to see the world outside the reserve was a strong incentive for young, single men. “Men from poor, isolated reserves were often more interested in enlisting than those from communities with high employment and near urban centres,” claims Talbot (109). Many groups expressed their traditional loyalty to the British Crown (rather than the Canadian government) and, in this way, articulated their patriotism. A warrior ethic continued to be an important element of Native, male upbringing, and the battlefield served the purpose to demonstrate one’s bravery perfectly. Combat expertise and handling weapons with great dexterity not only boosted their feelings of pride and self-respect but also garnered public respect. For some, going to war was an answer to the call to adventure, in an attempt to recreate the kind of freedom that belonged to a bygone era in Native history. Active and successful engagement in an

armed conflict provided an opportunity to earn respect and establish one's authority, whereas the spoils of war could abet individual budget as well as tribal economy.

Some young men had problems with adjusting to the rigor of the military hierarchy, for example, "George Strangling Wolf, a member of the Blood Nation, presented himself during inspection wearing elk teeth earrings and necklace and a red handkerchief around his neck" (Dempsey 47). For others, it was the language barrier, which, at least at the beginning, impeded their chances at communication both on professional and personal levels. Lack of formal education meant that they had little access to commissions as officers, but they excelled at infantry roles: they were great scouts and snipers who exhibited stamina and will-power such as, for example, Francis Pegahmagabow, an Ojibwa from the Parry Island agency in Ontario, who was the most renowned for his marksmanship. Unfortunately, contact with white people made Native men more prone to pneumonia and tuberculosis, which decimated undernourished and exhausted soldiers. These diseases, then, threatened Native communities when infected soldiers came back home and spread tuberculosis among their own.

Military service had a huge impact on Native communities, providing young men with the experience of wage labor. Successes in the military helped build their confidence and demonstrated that they were just as capable as their non-Aboriginal comrades. A prolonged exposure to the hegemony of white Western culture changed the way they perceived their own, resulting in the need for change; for example, according to the petition written by Six Nations veterans, "newly returned veterans . . . organized politically to help depose the traditional system of hereditary chiefs, which they claimed had not been supportive of them and their families during the war" (Lackenbauer et al. 121). More contacts with other First nations across Canada broadened their political awareness and led to the establishment of the League of Indians of Western Canada (1919). Even though in Europe Native soldiers observed attitudes that promoted social equality and wider opportunities, back home their legal status still remained unsettled.

After the armistice of 1918, Aboriginal soldiers returned to the same patronizing society, with a government which failed to reward them properly and justly for their services in the war. In fact, "the post-war attitude of the Indian Department was as though the war had never occurred and nothing had changed" (Dempsey 74). During the Parliamentary debates in 1916, it was agreed that "Canadian Soldiers on Active Military Service during the present war [have the right] to exercise their electoral franchise . . . no exception of Indians" (Canada). The decision was an important step towards the franchise of Native people. However, in 1918 Native soldiers were officially exempted from the Military Service Act. Even though they were eligible for the vote

overseas, on returning home, they resumed their legal status as wards of the Crown. Moreover, settlement packages and other benefits discriminated against Aboriginal veterans and their families, failing to improve their social and economic status. Their sacrifice, it seemed, hardly improved general attitudes towards Native people, hence the feelings of disappointment expressed by many veterans. Being ping ponged between the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Indian Affairs, Indian veterans rarely saw justice, and their loyalty and service went largely unnoticed in the broader Canadian community. Only recently has the matter been given duly attention by writers such as Adrian Hayes's *Pegahmagabow: Legendary Warrior, Forgotten Hero* (2003), Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road* (2005), and Whitney Lackenbauer and Craig Leslie Mantle's *Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian Military: Historical Perspectives* (2007). Chester Nez's *Code Talker: The First and Only Memoir By One of the Original Navajo Code Talkers of WWII* (2012) and Gerald Vizenor's *Blue Ravens* (2014) talk about Native soldiers in the US military.

WARFARE AS A PUBLIC AND PRIVATE EXPERIENCE

Boyden's novel presents both the universality of war as a human experience, the consequences of which reach beyond ethnic and national borders, and a personal tragedy. Telling the story of two Cree men, Xavier Bird and Elijah Whiskeyjack, who volunteer to join the Canadian armed forces, the author depicts the war's destructive effects on human beings. Once the two young men complete their training and are sent overseas, they join the ranks of thousands of other nameless soldiers who perform their military service during the time of war. Their distinct ethnicity vanishes amidst the global conflict, in which individuals do not matter and in which a death toll reaches well into the hundreds of thousands. Since individuality is erased, they must obey orders: "But tonight we're told to go to that town. We have no choice" (Boyden 24). Those who exhibit a moment of weakness, such as falling asleep on sentry duty, end up like Gerald, who "cried and begged the whole walk to the place where he was to be executed. He tried to run and screamed so much that they had to gag him and tie him up. He was shot in the rain, crying like a child" (72). Soldiers are often confused as to the sensibleness of their efforts especially when they become victims of rivalries between officers: "The problem is that McCaan would have to suggest a better plan to Breech than Breech's own and there's never any of that" (152-53). Even though the enemy is well-defined and easily recognizable, soldiers also suffer from friendly fire: "It's our own rifles firing at us. . . . I wonder what kind of sign this is that the first time I am under fire it comes from my own side" (24-25). Months in

trenches take their toll on the combatants who are tired, covered with lice, and suffer from pneumonia, whereas constant rain and damp air cause their flesh to rot: "When the soldiers see that their feet are black and swelling, they call it trenchfoot" (203).

The battlefield is presented as a brutal and bloody scene, in which there is no time to ponder the intricacies of life and death:

Arms stick up from the pool of water, some with fingers curled like they are grasping something I cannot see. A few bare feet stick straight out of the water as well. I wonder what has become of the boots. . . . Besides the limbs, rotted faces peek over at us. I see the eye sockets are empty and their lips have pulled back from their open mouths so that they look like they're screaming. (78)

War makes people cruel, like lieutenant Breech's pointless order to damage the swallow's nest, killing the little birds as their mother watches. Yet the circumstances of war also foster friendship and camaraderie among fellow soldiers: "So long has Elijah been around that he is like a part of my own body" (24).

Traumatic experiences make Xavier's "face [grow] old too quickly" (20) and he exhibits post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms: "his sleep is not restful. He twitches and his hands shake. He calls out and this wakes him up" (20). The boy loses not only his hearing but also his peace of mind: "We all fight on two fronts, the one facing the enemy, the one facing what we do to the enemy" (327), knowing that he will have to live with this memory for the rest of his life. He also realizes "the futility of war demonstrated by history," to use the title of the 1902 Nobel Peace Prize speech delivered in 1904 by Élie Ducommun, which fails to resolve the major questions of international politics: I "can see in my mind men crawling in and out of the tunnels in these hills like angry and tired ants, thinking of new ways to kill the other" (209). Xavier observes the consequences of erroneous decisions of his commanders and his own helplessness: "I have reached the point where nothing makes sense to me anymore, especially the actions of the ones who move the soldiers about and order them to their deaths. I hate them for what they make me do, but I do not speak of it, just let it fester like trenchfoot" (305).

World War I was the first total conflict in which not only armies but whole nations were locked in a mortal combat. Boyden's depiction of war has little to do with daring deeds and acts of heroism or valiant soldiers who willfully sacrifice their lives for the greater good. On the contrary, its realistic rendition emphasizes the horrors of war, ascribing to it no glory but pain and suffering. Through the focus on individual characters, Boyden's portrayal of the Great War communicates the truth that there is nothing noble or romantic about it, in Xavier's words: "We all acted there in ways it is best not to speak of" (23).

Belligerents are portrayed as savage and inhumane, with military ruthlessness seen as an indispensable element of combat. The front line is depicted as a gory and pointless mess, with soldiers acting as both victims and perpetrators of violence. The realistic depiction of war conveys the message of its atrocities and serves as a warning against its costs. Its universal message highlights tragedy, loss, and futility as central motifs to the experiences of not only the Great War but any war in which people die.

NATIVE HUNTING TRADITIONS APPROPRIATED BY MODERN WARFARE

Boyden's depiction of warfare highlights pointlessness of the soldiers' sacrifices, as well as their positions as pawns in the game they neither understand nor control. The introduction of Native soldiers, however, provides an opportunity to show the war effort from a different perspective. No doubt, it is the same debilitating and harrowing trauma, which has been the topic of a myriad of cultural representations and whose horrors affect all humans alike, regardless of time, place, and ethnicity. Yet Boyden manages to marry Aboriginal distinctiveness, namely their prowess at tracking and hunting, with the demands of modern warfare. In the eyes of the white commanders, their Cree origin makes Xavier and Elijah especially suited for engaging targets from concealed positions and feeding valuable combat information back to their units. They are singled out because of their good eyes and steady hands. Traditionally, Native boys were taught to use weapons since early youth, and when they became warriors, they used to spend most of their time developing hunting skills: they learned how to handle different weapons, how to avoid enemy's arrows, how to track animals and humans, and how to find their way in the wilderness. Not only did they develop stamina and patience while going without food for days, but they also learned how to survive outdoors. Following guerilla warfare, whose primary goal is to inflict casualties, capture prisoners and demonstrate prowess (e.g., counting coup) while suffering as few losses as possible, they learned how to take advantage of the terrain in order to ambush the enemy. The white commanders quickly notice that Aboriginal soldiers demonstrate keen observation powers, and that they are patient and easily adaptable.

The author uses specific vocabulary to conjure the imagery of hunting while talking about the battlefield. Fighting on the frontline is like stalking deer, "[the] ones who order us are as crafty as wolves" (28). Elijah sneaks about like a fox at night, he "moves with no wasted movement, like a wolf on some smaller animal's trail" (121) or advances "slow and silent . . . [to] figure out . . . whether that is friend or foe over that little ridge" (32). Sweaty

uniforms emanate animal-like scent, and the soldiers use the Indian art of camouflage: “Thompson pulls out a chunk of charcoal and blacks his face and arms and hands and any other exposed skin” (75). Assessing the soldier’s gear, Xavier observes: “I wonder if my moccasins in my pack would be a better choice right now. This mud is not all that different from the mud of the Moose River” (31). While trying to fix the position of the German sniper, Xavier “learned the sound of the rifle and how to track it through distance and time. . . . [and] listen carefully . . . for the sounds of the big and little guns” (30). Lessons learned while hunting come in handy in the trenches: “The one called Fat whimpers like a dog. The others around me breathe too loud. A good hunter will hear us” (24), observes Xavier.

Being able to make use of familiar experience in an unfamiliar world helps Xavier and Elijah to survive: “to be the hunter and not the hunted, that will keep me alive. This law is the same law as in the bush. Turn fear and panic into the sharp blade of survival” (31). While training in Ontario, Xavier remembers: “Nighttime is when we learn to patrol quietly and sneak up on one another. This is what Elijah and I like best, and what we are best at” (108). That is why, Thompson “is amazed by how long we can lie still despite the lice and without falling asleep, how we can spot movement that he is not able to see. Elijah explains to him that it is hunting, and hunting is what we have done all our lives” (104). For Xavier and Elijah, showing hunting skills is also a way of gaining approval of fellow soldiers: “If I can do this I will no longer be so much the outsider. I will gain respect” (116). They can also boast about their marksmanship:

Your new name is simply X, and when men ask you why, you tell them, “X marks the spot on any target you wish to hit!” The others laugh and cheer, shout out to me, “X marks his spot!” It strikes me then. None of these who are here today can call me a useless bush Indian ever again. They might not say it out loud, but they know now that I have something special. (117)

Hunting can serve as a metaphor for warfare but the hunt also works in myriad ways at the metaphorical level to express its complexity both as a practical and spiritual pursuit. In Aboriginal communities, hunting is an important activity connected both with their survival and culture. Hunting has always been accompanied by strict religious rituals that aimed at ensuring the balance between a spiritual world and a physical one. Aboriginal people believe that the animating spirit that encompasses existence is present in all living and non-living things, people, animals, and plants alike. Native religions view nonhumans in the terms equal to humans—they are regarded to be conscious, spiritual, and social beings. According to the principles of Native spirituality, all forms of life are meaningful and taking one of them means loss, a belief,

which today is associated with the idea of ecological awareness (Crawford). A common appearance of the wolf in Native mythology derives from the belief that “[p]redators were recognized for their power, and humans recognized a kinship with them because humans also took animal lives for food” (Crawford and Kelley 393). Native legends include stories of animals who take care of humans, and specific religious ceremonies involve interspecies marriages, which perpetuate the idea of a special bond they share as being part of the same world. Xavier declares: “I feel comfort with animals. They make me feel closer to land” (Boyden 189).

Since Native people depended on the natural environment for survival, there was a question of how to combine this need with respect towards nature. “Many rituals and traditions stem from practices developed to provide an ethically satisfying resolution to the question of how to take other lives in an ethical manner” (Crawford 392). Hunters kill animals for sustenance and warriors kill the enemy to protect their nation, but they kill only as much as it is necessary to ensure the survival of the tribe, thus maintaining a balance among various elements of the biosphere. The act of killing an animal cannot be random or thoughtless but must be accompanied by special prayers and rituals that give respect to the animal’s spirit. Native hunters apologize to and ask pardon of the animal for taking its life, they give thanks for the opportunity to feed their family, and offer prayers so that death is given a meaning. They talk about the gift of animals who would allow themselves to be taken, thereby acquiescing to the universal system whose elements are mutually dependent—“the land ethic in which humans and nonhumans form an integrated economy of nature” (Taylor 233). Taylor explains:

The myth of voluntary exchange served to place limits on the exploitation of animals by emphasizing that animals are not to be reduced to objects of utility. That animals were seen as engaging in voluntary exchange implied that they were active agents in the world, entitled to be recognized as such . . . [thus] for humans to exploit animals more than necessary was to violate the moral order. (233)

Since the emphasis was put not on the hunter’s skills but on the gift that he was about to receive, Native hunters did not boast about their kill but remained humble, asserting their responsibility for the natural world. Hunting also serves as a spiritual exchange, in which eating meat creates a bond of flesh: “A similar principle exists in Christianity’s communion rituals, which establishes links between Christ and contemporary humans” (Crawford 393). Forming a kinship between people and animals assures that “[t]hese cooperative, or mutualistic, relationships between humans and animals underlie the religious aspects of hunting for Native American people” (Crawford 391).

Mutual respect is the key term to describe Native relationships to animals during hunting, killing, and in the way Native people handle the meat and the bones. For example, unborn fetuses of female animals as well as all inedible parts are treated with care and respect: "Antlers and skulls are decorated and placed in prominent locations. Bones of land animals and birds are placed on elevated platforms, and those of water animals are returned to water. Bones are not given to dogs, nor are they thrown away for that would be disrespectful" (Crawford and Kelly 339). Since the renewal of the species is key to the survival of animals and people (vide the extermination of the American buffalo and the decline of the Plains tribes between the 1870s and 1880s), they never hunt to excess or show greed, which would be an insult to the animal's spirit. Hunting is also an important social occasion, which creates a strong bond among its members: it might be a collective effort, such as driving bison or caribou into an ambush, setting controlled fires, or building fences to cut off their escape, or an individual action, such as stalking deer or setting snares. Traditionally, it also maintained a strict division of labor: men took part in the hunt and in the act of killing whereas, after the hunt, the kill became the property of women who prepared food and skins.

From the Western perspective, however, hunting evokes and perpetuates a stereotypical image of an Aboriginal man as a bloodthirsty and ignoble savage. This biased representation uses the affinity to nature to stress the protagonist's connection to the primitive and uncivilized. Xavier's words seem to support this claim: "I'd much rather be outside on the cool grass, me, but the officers won't allow it" (Boyden 25). Native proximity to environment and wisdom about nature's ways was used to highlight their difference and largely shaped Western attitudes: "Elijah tells me Breech says that it is our Indian blood, that our blood is closer to that of an animal than that of a man" (109). According to the white military tactics, lurking behind trees was viewed as cowardly and less honorable than facing the enemy in open combat. This rhetoric helped the white commanders to undermine the Native tactics during their first encounters. However, during trench warfare, with raids or attacks launched or defended against, Native soldiers were preferred for dangerous duty as snipers or reconnaissance scouts. Boyden's novel shows how the perception of a Native soldier shifts to suit the needs of white people. On the one hand, commanders willingly use Xavier's and Elijah's hunting skills in combat, assign to them dangerous tasks, and later praise them for excellence. Their "savage" cold-bloodedness is not only welcome but even encouraged as long as they continue to kill the enemy. As a reward, they are allowed a degree of freedom and independence their fellow soldiers may only dream about.

On the other hand, Boyden's narrative shows Native soldiers who are acutely aware of an oppressive aura of otherness accompanying them. They must constantly watch themselves when in the company of fellow soldiers:

“The white men around their table look at us oddly. They do not like that the Indians talk in words that they can’t understand” (287). It is not only their distinct physique and strange language but also poor command of English and a reserved attitude that make it harder for them to fit in. This knowledge, in turn, induces self-censorship: “Elijah and I discuss capturing and plucking a goose for dinner but decide against it. It would be obvious that the Indians were the guilty ones” (93). They have little faith in the white sense of justice: “You know that the *wemistikoshiw* do not care to believe us when they hear about our kills in the field,” the corporal says. “We do the nasty work for them and if we return home we will be treated like pieces of shit once more. But while we are here we might as well do what we are good at” (287). Even though they are discriminated against, the warrior ethic obligates them to display courage, honor, and loyalty, just as the commanders expect them to behave: “Better to let them know you’re an angry warrior than some fucking bush Indian” (68). By demonstrating not only physical but also mental toughness, they inadvertently valorize and mythologize violence, thus subscribing to the stereotype of a savage Native warrior from Wild West shows. Initially selected on the merit of fierceness and bravery, then praised for marksmanship and efficiency in combat, they are scorned for savagery of their behavior the moment their cruelty becomes uncomfortable or no longer desired.

HUNTING DEVOID OF SPIRITUALITY: ELIJAH BECOMES *WINDIGO*

Boyden’s novel appropriates the idea of hunting in order to show how its meaning may be subverted by Western values that serve their makeshift agenda. Visvis agrees that “*Three Day Road* inverts the discourse of savagery by dealing with the violence that supposedly characterizes First Nations practices and unsettles our expectations by attributing it to Western society” (236). Native tradition views hunting as indispensable to the survival of the people and gives it an appropriate measure of importance. Ritualized activities and behavior connected with hunting, in which not only individuals but the whole tribe take part, do not only signify respect for nature but also help forge social bonds that bring stability to the precarious world in which Aboriginal communities live. Following ritual introduces order and ensures success, thereby shaping people into principled beings. It also fits the ethics of social order by means of encouraging and maintaining socio-ethical attitudes. When this balance is distorted, then it is neither expressive nor normative of virtue.

This danger is represented by Elijah, who “has learned to take pleasure in killing” (Boyden 284). Elijah says that killing is in his blood and he is happy

in the trenches, which “supports the notion of racial savagery based on innate biology that was a prominent assumption during Duncan Campbell Scott’s tenure as Deputy Superintendent of General Indian Affairs from 1913 to 1932 and was often used to validate cultural assimilation” (Visvis 234-35). Elijah believes that “[t]his war will make him into something” (Boyden 109), by which he understands being noticed and appreciated by the whites. It will give him credibility outside the Native world and prove that he can be better for once: “These others think that I’m something less than them, but just give me the chance to show them what I’m made of when it is time to kill” (25-26). When he leaves the residential school and comes to live with Xavier, he does not know how to hunt, which makes him inept in the eyes of his people. Joining the military provides an opportunity to carve his own space: “We will be given a higher rank, and we will make more money and have more freedom” (127). For Xavier, war is horrifying; he vomits after seeing a soldier shot, whereas Elijah smiles at his victory. We can observe how his reputation is growing together with vanity: “I see how Elijah’s eyes glow, how he is feeding off the fear and madness of this place. He makes a good soldier. McCaan is very happy with him, I think” (38). In a naive pursuit of acceptance, Elijah denigrates traditional Native spirituality and its customs:

[he] removes his sharpened skinning knife from its sheath and pulls the man’s hair back and removes his scalp with careful motions as simply as he would remove the skin from a pike. He places the hair in his kit bag, assuring himself that just as some other Indians consider it a sign of honour in battle, this counting coup and taking scalps, he will too. (214)

Once the boundary between violence and barbarism is crossed, Elijah has compromised his ethics: “All he carries now in his pack are the trophies of the dead. He collects them like pelts” (310).

Devoid of humanness and spiritual depth, Native skills that have been appropriated by white culture lose their viability. Aboriginal activities of hunting for sustenance, collecting pelts for clothing or external markets, and scalping the enemy as a part of a mourning war pattern or a symbol of “the combative essence of the enemy warrior” (Holm 49) are corrupted by a Eurocentric standpoint. Hunting animals for food is substituted by the act of killing people as justified by war: the same means are used to forward a different agenda. Hunting for fur disrupts natural balance: “[t]he Hudson’s Bay Company had instilled in the Cree a greed for furs that nearly wiped out the animals, and because of this the time finally came when even the most experienced of the bush men and women were faced with the decision to move to the reserve or die of hunger” (Boyden 99). And taking scalps, which was a

traditional proof of a warrior's prowess, comes to represent a barbaric activity that is condemned by the "civilized" world.

There are many theories about the origin of scalp taking in North American Native cultures. One of them claims that it was initially introduced as a bounty to ease the anger of the frontiersmen:

When the English and the Dutch came to the new world they brought the custom with them. Scalping was introduced by the Governor of the New Netherlands in order to facilitate collecting bounties on Indians. Once the Indians had assisted them in surviving the first few winters, the Dutch, hand in hand with the British, carried out the systematic program of genocide on all the Eastern tribes. (Meyer 17)

This claim is repeated in the words of a Western soldier who tells Elijah: "Do what my people taught your people a long time ago. Take the scalp of your enemy as proof. Take a bit of him to feed you" (Boyden 188). Scalping, however, cannot be directly attributed to Elijah's "Native instincts," nor to the traumatic effects of wartime madness, as it appears to be a byproduct of addiction to morphine. The drug on the one hand numbs his feelings to make war bearable, but on the other hand it muffles his senses and divests his actions of reason. Thus, a confrontation with the values of the Western world undermines the stability and potency of elements of Native heritage. Hence, Boyden's depiction of war is a travesty of survival in the wild, with soldiers in the trenches of World War I mocking the traditional ways of Aboriginal hunters.

In his madness, Elijah becomes a *windigo*—an evil spirit from Algonquian legends, according to which people who were lost in the woods and starving would resort to cannibalism and become *windigos*. According to one version of the legend, "the first *windigo* was created when a starving man ate his own family. As punishment for this transgression, the man turns into a *windigo*" (Schoeffel 80). The victim becomes violent and anti-social, posing a threat to the safety of the whole community because he would gradually be overcome by the urge to consume more human flesh, giving more power to the *windigos*. Thus, the only way to destroy the evil spirit is to kill the host and burn the host's body to ashes. The culturally specific trope of the *windigo* symbolizes excessive human greed and is associated with winter (heart) coldness. Elijah's barbaric actions disrupt natural harmony and balance, allowing the evil to spread. It happens when the rules handed down by the ancestors are no longer observed: "The world is a different place in this new century, Nephew. And we are a different people. My visions still come but no one listens any longer to what they tell us, what they warn us" (Boyden 58), observes Niska whose own father was tipped off by one of their own: "rum is a sly and powerful weapon" (47). Tribal solidarity and loyalty are corrupted by white

encroachment, resulting in antagonisms not only between Aboriginal people and the law but also within the Native community.

In Boyden's narrative, the world war is a manifestation of *windigo* in modern times—a disruption of life, which undermines spiritually peaceful existence. It represents destructive appetite, no longer for human flesh only but for the complete devastation of both the natural environment and Indigenous cultures. Contacts with white men result in a clash of conflicting values: when Niska's father kills a woman who goes *windigo*, he is imprisoned for manslaughter and dies in prison. The white system of justice refuses to understand the reasons behind his actions, which testifies to the erosion of traditional practices: "Boyden, like Highway, uses the figure of the windigo to connect the institutions of law, police, prison, reserve, residential school, and army, suggesting that these institutions are responsible for putting Cree ways of life under siege" (McCall 64). Being raised in a residential school, Elijah is cut off from his traditional animistic religion and exposed to Christianity, in which the natural world is devoid of spirit, thus, allowing man to exploit it to fit his own needs: "No Indian religion for [me]" (Boyden 127), he claims. Lacking spiritual footing and support of his people, Elijah becomes susceptible to Western influences. He dons an English accent and falls easy prey to deceptive values, which promise him acceptance and recognition for his worth. Elijah becomes *windigo* because of his lack of moderation, just as World War I military leaders were driven by their insatiable lust for power. The sanguinary and brutal war is a break of history in a similar way in which Elijah's ethical trespassing signifies break of native traditions. Both experiences bring no glory but loss in their wake, which is embodied on the symbolic level by the figure of *windigo*. However, Boyden further complicates Elijah's characterization having him admit: "I'm not crazy. . . . What's mad is them putting us in trenches to begin with. The madness is to tell us to kill and to award those of us who do it well" (322). Elijah's awareness of the situation he has found himself in offers distance to the narrative by shifting focus from an individual to global decision makers whose actions instigate military conflicts. Those who attack and those who defend jointly participate in the bloodshed, regardless of their reasons and ethnical affiliations. Elijah's accusatory statement questions "the commonplace paradox of military heroism. . . . Boyden's concurrent representation of Elijah as both a cruel, morphine-addled killer and a brave honorable tribute to his people" (Gordon 124). Reaching beyond the confines of a narrative of a particular ethnic identity, this doubling indicts those who declare wars, and it questions the dubious ethics behind their rationale.

THE POLITICS OF NATIVE TRADITION(S): CONCLUSION

In *Three Day Road*, the Eurocentric idea of the Great War has been reworked through Aboriginal motifs, showing where the two meet, and how the cultural border crossing may enhance our understanding of the world. Combining artistic and documentary functions, the novel shows human suffering inflicted in the service of war effort as a universal, not culturally, temporally, or spatially specific concept. Taking on the subject of Aboriginal soldiers, Boyden's novel revivifies experiences of those who have been marginalized or altogether omitted from official narratives. It also demonstrates the damaging effect of the Western world on Aboriginal people: a demise of native practices and traditions, erosion of family ties through forced assimilation, identity crisis, and the destruction of the natural environment. Different sets of values associated with Native and Western cultures make the Aboriginal situation difficult when one tries to satisfy both parties. Boyden shows the ambiguity connected with the symbolic imagery, which highlights the natural/instinctive versus man-made/acquired dichotomy. For example, the regenerative influence of forest fires or healing powers of fire in a sweat lodge that cleanses and restores natural balance is contrasted with fire during war, which brings only death and destruction: "Fire is sometimes good for the bush, makes it come back more fully. But back there, back at Ypres and the Somme, I think the earth is so wrecked with shells and poison gas that nothing good will ever grow again" (59). Thus, the novel demonstrates and disputes an ambiguous attitude toward the moral implications of actions instigated by agenda-driven motifs, which are culturally and historically conditioned.

The reason why Xavier survives is because he has a grounding in Native culture and he maintains his connection to land: "I leave my medicine bundle around my neck. That alone is who I am" (Boyden 365). McCall agrees that:

Xavier's strength emerges from his ability to retreat: from the English language and its conventions of privileging hierarchy; from the military culture of discipline and punishment; from British/Euro-Canadian cultural norms of etiquette, competitiveness, and cruelty; and ultimately from contact with non-Cree peoples, institutions, and ways of life as he takes the "three day road" into the bush with Niska. (71-72)

In his attempt at resisting assimilation, he is assisted by his aunt Niska who represents the restorative power of family and healing, which is crucial for spiritual and physical survival: "I had taught you all about the physical life of the bush, and it was time to teach you about the other life" (Boyden 266). Like her father before, she is *hookimaw*, a healer endowed with special visionary

powers but also responsibilities to her people. She is the one to kill those who go *windigo*. Aunt Niska stands for tradition, she refuses to live on the reserve and pursues a traditional, self-sustainable life style in the bush. She is the guardian of inherited tradition and a storyteller like her father, who was the last great talker in the clan. Finally, she is the one to rescue Xavier by feeding him stories about their past—a form of spiritual nourishment that gives him strength and keeps him alive. A Native woman healer signifies the importance of oral lore, which assists cultural recuperation and which has long been the source of empowerment for her people.

Elijah, on the other hand, is uprooted: the childhood spent in a residential school run by Catholic nuns, absence of familial and communal support, forceful substitution of the Native language for English, sexual abuse, and repeated incidents of racial discrimination contributed to the destabilization of his self. Yet, again, the author problematizes his characterization—Elijah facilitates his assimilation by mastering the English language, but he also abrogates his position because his British accent and language fluency remove him further away from the familiarity with his native tongue and traditions. Exposure to the white world brings his addiction to morphine as analogy to the corrupting effect of alcohol on Native people. Moreover, the Western values that he adopts are inconsistent: one moment he is praised and encouraged only to be condemned and scorned the next. This schizophrenic attitude results in his moral confusion. Xavier's return home completes the circle, geographical, spiritual, and narrative, whereas Elijah's estrangement and death result from his departure from Native tradition. As much as Xavier and his aunt Niska represent the continuation of the Cree tradition, Elijah's cultural hybridity testifies to its porous nature in the face of a morally compromised Western world.

Two narrative strands, Xavier's representing the trauma of war and his aunt Niska's recalling the Aboriginal history, are interwoven to show historical and cultural phenomena whose meaning is defined not only by their significance but also by their interrelatedness. Xavier tells the story of his and Elijah's participation in World War I, the experience, which signals local consequences of a global conflict. A different variation of a global-local dichotomy is presented by Niska, whose story follows the demise of Aboriginal people and their customs due to Western influences. In both stories, what helps the protagonists to survive is loyalty to ancestral tradition. The male voice recounts the atrocities of war and demonstrates their effects on the human psyche, whereas the female one heals the wounds and restores hope. The masculine is connected with domination, destruction and death, whereas the feminine represents the preservative force of nature, human life being part of it. The division of the narrative voice into masculine and feminine indicates the importance of gender balance in the same way in which

feeding Xavier's soul by telling him stories and his body by cooking him food signals the importance of symmetry between spiritual and physical for the concept of wholeness.

Boyden's narrative does not form a sequential chain of events, which would preserve their chronological order, but it employs nonlinear narrative that follows an elliptic structure. Passing from speaker to speaker, the meaning is not fixed but changes with each version, resembling the circle of life—a key symbol of Aboriginal tradition. The Cree concept of the Medicine Wheel illustrates the belief that life is a circle, with the eternal Spirit as the driving force behind the process in which death is not the last stage of a journey but its continuation:

Medicine Wheel concepts teach the idea of balance in human development in order to maintain the sustenance of all living beings, including all aspects of the planet, which is considered a living being. Healthy human development is inextricably linked with healthy environmental conditions, both physical and social, and it is possible to seek, and find, approaches to sharing together in the promotion of human development in healthy environments in a balanced manner. (Wenger-Nabigon 150)

The opening chapter destabilizes the idea of finality by showing how illusive this concept might be: Niska believes that Xavier died in the war, and she is meeting Elijah, whereas Xavier is convinced that his aunt is dead. Neta Gordon claims that “[t]his initial scene of resurrection, occasioned by a series of miscommunications, sets the stage for several scenes that deal with the process of sacred renewal” (127). What is more, even though Elijah is dead, in a way he survives by having his name adopted by Xavier. What appears to be over has its continuation, thus, testifying to the circular nature of events. Niska's final vision predicts Xavier's survival and the perpetuation of tradition through the next generation: “They are two boys, naked, their brown backs to me as they throw little stones into the water. Their hair is long in the old way and is braided with strips of red cloth” (Boyden 350). A reference to boys' long hair braided with strips of red cloth indicates the continuation of Native tradition, whereas the image of water locates them within the context of the natural environment. What the narrative suggests is that the communal survival depends not on direct bloodline succession but on a third degree relationship between an aunt and her nephew, which is more in keeping with the disruption in the Aboriginal social structure inflicted by forced assimilative practices.

The code-switching between English and Cree gives the narrative voices more authenticity, and the fact that there are Cree words not translated into English supposes the existence of this part of the tradition that is not

accessible to cultural outsiders (*wemistikoshiw* ‘white people’; *hookimaw* ‘a medicine (wo)man’; *Wakan Tanka* ‘divine presence’; *wendigo* ‘evil spirit’). Even though it is the first person narrative, it does not use the protagonist’s native language but the one, which is imposed by the colonizer. Peppering the English text with Aboriginal words resists the categories of the dominant culture by transcending the normative application of the imposed language. Hence, the employment of two distinct languages, on the one hand, reflects the fissure between the dominant and subaltern perspectives: the official, historical narrative and its private and subjective version. On the other hand, as a gesture toward redress and reconciliation, it testifies to their co-existence within the broad framework of Canadian literature. Poetical imagery, flavored with references to the natural world, is used when talking about Native history and traditions, whereas a gritty and realistic narrative account is reflective of a dehumanized and disturbing depiction of European battlegrounds. The semblance of order and continuity determined by changing seasons is contrasted with chaos and disruption specific to the time of war. Between diverse narrative voices and changing landscapes a meaning is constructed, which juxtaposes an alienating landscape of European battlefields with an embracing setting of eco-friendly Native stories. Furthermore, Boyden shows how the war experience may alienate the protagonist’s vision; when Xavier comes back home, the trees around Moose Factory no longer resemble the familiar foliage from his aunt’s stories but “look like the dead trees of Ypres” (123). The war’s destruction of the European landscape is presented as analogous to the Western destruction of Native land.

Boyden’s novel offers a departure from the historic accounts of Canadian military history that emphasize the nation-building effect of the Great War, marking it a crucial phase in the transition from colony to nation. Selecting the experience of the internally colonized as a focal point of the narrative, the author questions the myth of the Great War as a foundation for Canada’s sense of national identity. What emerges is the image of the country that suffers from social inequality and racial bias. Through his act of writing the author recreates the healing ceremony that brings back forgotten history and honors its heroes. Offering a discourse of healing, he also signals the maladies that plague the modern world: military conflicts, racial discrimination, and the destruction of the natural environment.

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