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Ana María Fraile-Marcos and Lucía López-Serrano

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Stories as “med-sins”: Lee Maracle’s *Ravensong* and *Celia’s Song*

Q1 Ana María Fraile-Marcos and Lucía López-Serrano

University of Salamanca, Salamanca, Spain

ABSTRACT

This article posits the centrality of stories as agents of potential harm and healing in the revalorization of Indigenous epistemologies and contemporary decolonizing efforts. Reading in tandem the stories woven within the novels *Ravensong* (1993) by Salish-Métis author Lee Maracle and its sequel *Celia’s Song* (2014), it brings to light a model of community-centred health policing in the earlier novel that turns into a powerful call for decolonization and Indigenous resurgence in *Celia’s Song*. The use of illness tropes in these novels goes beyond exposing the damaging by-products of colonialism, manifested as a transgenerational epidemic of violence amongst the Indigenous population, to create powerful images of Indigenous resurgence and Indigenous–settler engagement. These analyses are contextualized within the current COVID-19 pandemic and draw on, among other sources, Lee Maracle’s own critical reflections on the cultural and healing roles of stories, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s writing on Indigenous resistance and resurgence.

KEYWORDS

Lee Maracle; epidemic; illness trope; Indigenous writing; resurgence; lateral violence

The COVID-19 pandemic first reported in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, and raging all over the planet since March 2020 exposes the ongoing vulnerability of Indigenous peoples throughout the world and the connection of disease to the history of colonization, occupation, and exploitation of their territories (Nagle 2020; Seymour 2020; Noakes 2020; Fellet 2020). United Nations (UN) expert José Francisco Cali Tzay points out that, besides the general health threat, COVID-19 is having a devastating impact on Indigenous peoples. [AQ1] Tzay draws attention to the fact that, taking advantage of states of emergency, many countries are pushing megaprojects that include mining as well as the construction of dams and other infrastructures that exacerbate the marginalization of specific Indigenous communities. As a result, chances are that, as in the past,

> Indigenous peoples who lose their lands and livelihoods are pushed further into poverty, higher rates of malnutrition, lack of access to clean water and sanitation, as well as exclusion from medical services, which in turn renders them particularly vulnerable to the disease. (Tzay quoted in Villacruel 2020, para. 6)

Q4 **CONTACT** Ana María Fraile-Marcos ✉ anafra@usal.es Department of English Philology, University of Salamanca, Salamanca, Spain

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In contrast, the Indigenous communities that are proving more resilient to the COVID-19 pandemic are those that, having achieved a higher level of sovereignty, manage their lands and resources, and can ensure access to food and health through their traditional crops and traditional medicine (Villacruel 2020, para. 9).

In her novels *Ravensong* (Maracle [1993] 2017) and its sequel, *Celia's Song* (Maracle 2014), Salish-Métis author Lee Maracle perceptively explores the intersections between, on the one hand, pandemics, planetary health, and Indigenous autonomy and, on the other, self-determination. Focusing on the twin fictional settings of a Stó:lō village in the Fraser river region of British Columbia, Canada, and its neighbouring settler town, Maillardville, these novels convey the sickening physical, psychological, and social impact of colonization on Indigenous people in North America. At the centre of the novels is also the notion that stories are instrumental in developing the kind of understanding that may lead to a sincere global move towards decolonization at large. Heeding Indigenous perspectives on storytelling, the present article suggests that these novels reveal the function of stories as either "bad medicine" (Justice 2018, 2) or healing mechanisms, opening the path towards decolonization, Indigenous resurgence, and social and ecological justice.

Stories are certainly central to the cosmogonies and epistemologies of many Indigenous peoples. Storytelling often contemplates the interplay between mind, body and spirit in a way that mainstream western health sciences tend to reject. The Laguna
Q5 novelist Leslie Silko (1977) reminds us that for her, people stories **[AQ2]**

> aren't just entertainment:
> Don't be fooled.
> They are all we have, you see,
> all we have to fight off
> illness and death.
>
> You don't have anything
> If you don't have the stories. (2)

Along the same lines, other Indigenous authors and scholars emphasize the healing character of storytelling. The Cherokee writer and critic Thomas King (2003) adheres to the idea that stories are "medicine, that a story told one way could cure, that the same story told another way could injure" (92). Similarly, in his powerful introduction to *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice asserts the influential nature of storytelling in constructing our understandings of the world. Following a line in the collection of poems *Blue Marrow* where Cree poet Louise Halfe conceptualizes stories as "med-sins" – that is, "agents of both harm and healing" (Halfe quoted in Justice 2018, 4) Justice underlines both the therapeutic and noisome consequences of narrative, observing that "diverse stories can strengthen, wound, or utterly erase our humanity and connections" (2018, i). The medicinal meaning of "story" in Indigenous contexts is also addressed by Lee Maracle herself. However, she is keen to counter the western stereotype that conflates stories and medicine in Indigenous cultures, explaining that

> [w]hen I was sick […] I did not search for the best storyteller in my nation; I searched for the best medical personnel […]. The oral knowledge is called Indigenous science in English, and story has nearly nothing to do with it. (Maracle 2010, 89)

Underlying Maracle's critique of the discrediting of Indigenous epistemologies that are embedded in oral stories is the fact that the term "story" in European languages may denote not just a fictional narrative, but also a widely circulated rumour, a lie, or a falsehood. Hence, for the Cartesian modern mind, Indigenous stories are "viewed as obstacles to progress" (Trennert 1998, 9).

Maracle's storytelling in *Ravensong* and *Celia's Song* reveals the epistemological valence of stories in Indigenous contexts, emphasizing their centrality in the endeavour to address the problems that ail not only Indigenous societies, but also the contemporary world at large. Through a choral cast of characters that accompany sisters Stacey and Celia, *Ravensong* focuses on the 1950s historical flu epidemic that devastates the Stó:lō population of a segregated Salish village, whereas *Celia's Song* addresses more directly the stereotypes of welfare dependence, alcoholism, and violence that afflict the same community, highlighting the profound wounds of colonization and intergenerational or inherited trauma. We posit that when the two texts are read in tandem, *Ravensong* proposes a model of community-centred health policing that foreshadows *Celia's Song*'s powerful call for decolonization and Indigenous resurgence, revealing which stories are bad medicine and how they can turn into good medicine.

The illness trope as catalyst for knowledge and change in *Ravensong*

Maracle describes *Ravensong* as a "tale of the last epidemic in which we were not permitted to go to any hospital of our choice" ([1993] 2017, xii). The author draws on her own lived experience as a survivor of the flu pandemic that is referred to in the novel as "the Hong Kong flu" (Maracle [1993] 2017, 16) of 1954, and recreates its dire consequences for her Stó:lō community:

> In the 50s, seventeen of my teachers died in a single breath because we weren't allowed to go to the particular hospitals unless there were no white people in those hospitals […]. And doctors wouldn't come into our communities because they were afraid of us […] so we all died, our babies and our teachers, our elders. (Maracle 2004, 213)[1]

Due to the centrality of this historic episode in *Ravensong*, Maracle refers to this book in her 2017 preface as "non-fiction" ([1993] 2017, xii), thus emphasizing the connection between disease and systemic racism, verging on genocide, at the core of her story. However, the novel is more than the tale of the last flu epidemic, as its devastating effects on the Salish community can only be accounted for in the context of accruing previous epidemics that magnify the impact of literal and figurative colonial disease. Through young Celia's visions at the beginning of the novel, the historical decline of the Salish village is linked to the arrival of the Europeans and the diseases they brought with them, illustrating how disease acted in the manner of "biological weapons" (Episkenew 2003, 3) that speeded and facilitated the European colonization of the American continent. In Celia's vision, the Wolf clan's exposure to the European disease created a "new moral sensibility […] and the old culture died just a little after that" (Maracle [1993] 2017, 2). In the following decades, the successive epidemics that have devastated the village – smallpox in 1840, diphtheria in 1885, measles in 1905, influenza in 1918, tuberculosis from 1920 to 1940 (182) – only accelerated this process, and offered nothing to fill in the space of the old culture.

The quest for meaning and the construction of knowledge are articulated around the stories that emerge as an attempt to explain the multiple questions that concern the novel's characters. Celia's visions serve to bridge the gap left in the transmission of knowledge as a result of the decimation of Indigenous communities and they hint at the potential for healing and recovery that storytelling has as a device for community-building, fortifying intergenerational bonds. The same mechanism is at play at the end of *Ravensong*, when the reader finds out that the telling of the flu epidemic is prompted, some 25 years after the recounted events, by two crucial questions raised in the epilogue by young Jacob, Stacey's son and Celia's nephew. Jacob's first question, "Why did little Jimmy [Celia's son] shoot himself?" (Maracle [1993] 2017, 181), echoes Stacey's own haunting question at the beginning of the book about the suicide of one of her classmates at high school, a white girl called Polly. This parallel brings to the fore several key aspects of the novel. First, Jacob's inquisitive character sets him in a lineage of village thinkers, following in the tracks of his own mother, Stacey, and Dominic and Grampa Thomas before her (125). These characters' capacity to raise questions triggers the emergence of narratives that provide meaning and serve as good medicine for the community. As a result, the epistemological role of stories and their transformative impact on reality are underlined. Second, the suicides of the white girl and the Salish boy that occur 25 years apart also signal the contagion of the social illness that afflicts white society to the Salish community, weakening its traditional governing structures and leading to its progressive disintegration.[2] Furthermore, at the aesthetic level, the framing questions that create a circular narrative structure and elicit a polyphony of stories expose the novel's investment in ancestral forms of narrative that frequently conjure cyclic notions of time and feature collaborative storytelling. Thus, the story about the flu epidemic in *Ravensong* involves various tellers, attentive listening, and several months to unravel: "It took all winter for Celia, Stacey, Momma, and Rena to recount that summer. Young Jacob sat in silence listening to the women" (181). This engagement in storytelling signals the turn to traditional epistemological processes and constitutes the germ for communal healing and resurgence.

Jacob's second question alludes to the broken dreams of the Salish village about building a school for their children that would provide a comprehensive education combining the best of settler and Indigenous cultures. When Stacey reminisces that she was not allowed to open a school on the reserve once she graduated in education at the University of British Columbia, Jacob's innocent question, "Why did anyone pay attention to them [the white authorities]?" (Maracle [1993] 2017, 182), brings up the asymmetries of power in settler-colonial societies as well as the consideration of what Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar and poet Leanne Betasamosake Simpson calls "generative refusal" (175–190), an apt strategy of resistance directed to dismantling the systems of colonial domination and supporting the radical resurgence of Indigenous people. Jacob's questions function as the act of "critical reading of settler colonialism and Indigenous responses" (Simpson 2017, 49) that prepare the village for the radical resurgence that will be enacted in *Celia's Song*. Our reading of *Ravensong* posits that in this move to resurgence, shame is mobilized as a transformative emotion that links stories to social change, thus showcasing the power of narrative to arouse affects that move to action.

Silvan S. Tomkins (2008) defines shame as "the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression and of alienation […] felt as an inner torment, a sickness of the soul"

(315). This negative emotion works as a “double play of concealment and exposure” Q6 (Ahmed 2004, 104) of the self, which is revealed to others and him/herself who is at fault. Even if the cause of bad feeling is attributed to oneself (“In shame, I am the object as well as the subject of the feeling” [106]) and is therefore “bound up with self-recognition”, shame requires a witness, as it is “about how the subject appears before and to others” (105); hence the connection between shame, moral development, and the reproduction of social norms, as shame usually works as a deterrent to distance oneself from a normative social ideal. The psychosocial nature of shame also draws attention to the act of shaming and to the social relationship between the alleged offender and those who are doing the shaming. Thus, besides the individual’s own ethical judgement, shame is dependent on the respect the individual holds for those doing the shaming. *Ravensong* offers several examples of the complex transformative power of shame and shaming.

A first instance of the psychosocial workings of shame and shaming appears early in the novel, when 17-year-old Stacey witnesses how their teacher Mr Jones – a figure of authority and respect – intercepts and reads in front of the class a note that reveals the sexual encounters of her classmate Polly with her boyfriend Herb. In an attempt to conceal her shame after being publicly exposed, Polly runs from the classroom; the boys laugh, and “Stacey blushed” (Maracle [1993] 2017, 18). Stacey’s involuntary physiological transformation shows the “stickiness” (Ahmed 2004, 4) of the emotion of shame, which is passed on to her through feelings of empathy for Polly and her own uneasiness for her unwitting participation in Polly’s humiliation. At the same time, Stacey eschews these feelings, reminding herself that “Polly is one of theirs” (Maracle [1993] 2017, 19), and therefore none of her business. Therefore, Stacey fails to “[p]icture [Polly’s] rootlessness” after “generations of lostness” and “spiraling down into shame” (28), as Raven – the village’s ancestral trickster figure – instructed. As a result, when Stacey learns of Polly’s suicide, she is overwhelmed with remorse for not having supported her more actively. In line with Sara Ahmed’s analysis of the workings of shame, Polly’s death appears as a logical outcome: if the subjects of shame attempt to extricate themselves from the badness they have become, “prolonged experiences of shame, unsurprisingly, can bring subjects perilously close to suicide” (2004, 104).

Steve, “the class intellectual” (Maracle [1993] 2017, 59), blames Polly’s dysfunctional family and abusive father for her loose behaviour. However, when he affirms that “[n]o girl who is loved at home would go out and look for sex” (60), Steve’s unawareness of his own ethnocentrism becomes obvious to Stacey, who seeing the contrast between his statement and her own community values – “we have no illusions that virginal behaviour is virtuous” (61) – wonders “[w]here do you begin telling someone their world is not the only one?” (61). Stacey’s realization of the challenges involved in engaging with the other’s culture will situate her in the moral position of shaming Steve later on in the novel, as we will see, contributing to his better understanding of Indigenous–settler relations.

The cultural gap between the Maillardville inhabitants and Stacey’s community is further underlined by the fact that the possibility of committing suicide is simply inconceivable in the Salish cultural context. Thus, when Stacey finally tells her mother about Polly, Momma is appalled: “This was beyond her knowledge, to kill yourself. It was so unthinkable” (Maracle [1993] 2017, 136). Little Jimmy’s suicide at the end of the novel shows the extent to which the Salish community has been metaphorically infected, in the 25-year span separating both suicides, by its contact with white town.

Signifying a sick society, Polly's suicide unravels the imagery of illness. Her death makes Stacey wish "to cut the whole world of white town down the middle, surgically removing whatever it was that kept them rooted to their lifeless selves" (Maracle [1993] 2017, 28–29). Stacey's disposition to cure white society of "whatever" is ailing it makes her actions crucial for the future of all, especially at this juncture when, according to Raven, white people "are heading for the kind of catastrophe we may not survive" (35). Even though for centuries Raven has tried several strategies, including bringing whites "to Raven's shore [America]" (174) so that their collaboration with Indigenous people could change them, she has not succeeded yet, for these people "had behaved even worse than first anticipated" (174): "They gobbled up the land, stole women, spread sickness everywhere, then hoarded the precious medicine which could heal the sickness" (174). Thus, the European conquest is also explained through the imagery of colonial disease that has provoked Indigenous people to disregard the ancestral law of the land that requires kinship bonds and collaboration, leading them to disengage from "the others' world" (34). Raven's take is best seen in the passage when she reprimands and tries to shame Momma for opposing Gramma's hospitality towards the famished settlers who knocked on her door during the Depression years. Momma describes them as "stupid and without shame'" (42), to which Raven responds: "Shame on you, Momma, […] The law, the law, must always be obeyed, particularly when it is difficult. […] You could have taken the time to teach these men when first I brought them here" (43). However, Momma does not heed Raven, hindering her plan to enlighten whites with the help of her Salish people. Without shame on either side, no rapprochement is possible.

In the novel's present, "Raven saw the future threatened by the parochial refusal of her own people to shape the future of their homeland" and by their retreat to their "imagined confinement" (Maracle [1993] 2017, 33). Of course, as Dian Million (2013) argues in her study of "emotional colonialism", the confinement of Indigenous people was more than something they imagined. Canadian society, Million claims, remained highly segregated until the end of the 20th century via "an apartheid system" (47), although "[a]fter World War II this separation maintained by visceral felt discourses on race and raced sexuality, backed by actual or implied physical violence both in and between Indian and white communities began to break down" (47). Nevertheless, Maracle's emphasis is on the agency and subjectivity of Indigenous people that allows them to overcome their segregation. Like Raven, Dominic, the village thinker, believes that "[t]he world needs a combined wisdom, not just one knowledge or another, but all knowledge should be joined. Human oneness, that's our way" (Maracle [1993] 2017, 57). Astride the Salish and the settler worlds, Stacey's position holds the promise of realizing this design, which seems closer to hand than ever when she announces her plan to open a school in the village to provide quality education for the villagers' children and avoid the horror of residential school (49). This capacity to plan for the distant future is transformative and unique. However, Raven has also grown impatient with Stacey, who seems "unable to say the words that might jar white town from its own sleep" (34).

Defending the idea that "Death is transformative" (Maracle [1993] 2017, 73), Raven devises the flu epidemic as a catalyst that may precipitate a paradigm change whereby the villagers would go "across the bridge" (33) and both communities may share their knowledge and cooperate for the betterment and care of all. As Judith Leggatt (2000) points out in her analysis of the cross-cultural understandings of pollution and disease in *Ravensong*, “just as Western medicine is ineffective in diagnosing and treating the spiritual malaise of the white residents of Maillardville, so Salish medicine is ineffective on the new diseases” (168–169). Raven’s epidemic is intended to highlight a path for the white villagers to overcome “the shame at their inaction” (171) and actively help the Salish village, thus working against the social disconnection that ails them. However, this risky move proves disastrous for the Salish community, for when the flu hits the region the villagers lack the technical resources to fight the epidemic and the hospitals refuse to take Indigenous patients. In Stacey’s view, “[u]nder the shabby arguments about hospitals being full and doctors already overworked lay an unspoken assumption: white folks were more deserving of medical care. There is a hierarchy to care” (58). The villagers’ resentment is epitomized by the transformation of Momma’s cautious reluctance to engage with the people of Maillardville into outright rejection. As Stacey notes,

> [t]he epidemic had made Momma steely in her unforgiveness of these people. They had watched the villagers die. One day they would all pay for watching a people die. […] “They aren’t human,” she had told Stacey a while back, categorically dismissing them all. (Maracle [1993] 2017, 176)

Curtailing the possibility of reciprocal engagement, Raven’s plan proves a short-term fiasco.

Yet storytelling and shame intersect again at this point to give some hope for reconnection in the future. If Stacey is perceived as the bridge-crosser, literally going across the bridge separating her village from Maillardville, her white classmate Steve attempts a similar crossing in reverse. Steve’s interest in reaching out to the Salish villagers has its source in his admiration of Stacey’s determined refusal to serve detentions for being late to school after staying up all night helping her mother with the sick during the flu epidemic. Her refusal to accept the institution’s terms “without raising any kind of fuss about it” (Maracle [1993] 2017, 58) gives Mr Johnson, the school principal, “quite a lesson in sociology” (60), earns his respect, and releases Stacey from his authority over her. Her resistance can be understood in the context of what Simpson calls a “generative refusal” of colonialism, “refusing colonial domination, refusing heteropatriarchy, and refusing to be tamed by whiteness or the academy” (Simpson 2017, 33). Ultimately, generative refusal is the germ of radical political resurgence, meaning “an extensive, rigorous, and profound reorganizing of things. […] It has always been a rebellion and a revolution from within” (49), an engagement with Indigenous systems that may change Indigenous peoples and dismantle the systems of colonial domination.

Stacey’s refusal opens a space for the redirection of the shame inflicted by colonialism on the Indigenous subject to the colonizer, thereby hinting at the possibility of the reciprocal recognition of their respective communities. This development is best illustrated during one of Steve’s visits to the village. In his attempt to befriend Stacey, he presents one of the village elders with a couple of fold-up canvas chairs. When Ella marvels at their functionality, Steve explains that the idea comes from Indonesia, where “[s]ome white men saw them, patented them, built them, and sold them” (Maracle [1993] 2017, 167). Ella quickly contextualizes the story in the history of European imperial exploitation, observing: “So they even steal ideas” (166). Stacey expounds on Ella’s remark by introducing the notions of shame, colonial hierarchy, and illicit appropriation as she wonders “how they managed to shamelessly steal the thinking of so many different people whom they called inferior” (167). When Steve confesses that he had never thought about this before, Stacey makes him ashamed for not having cared for her people during the epidemic:

> “How did it feel to watch us die, Steve?” . . . Steve blushed. His father was one of the white doctors who could not possibly be expected to cross the river to treat “those” people. He had so easily persuaded his son of the interests of his patients, his workload . . . […] “Shame, Steve. You are now feeling shame,” she said without any emotion whatsoever. (169)

Steve’s shame, therefore, stems from his realization that he does not measure up to Stacey’s moral ideals, as she exposes his own complicity with the uncompassionate behaviour of white society and the global history of colonization. Remarkably, being “uncomfortable with his shame” (169) holds the potential for Steve’s transformative action. If, as Ahmed argues, at the national level “[s]hame becomes crucial to the process of reconciliation or the healing of past wounds” (2004, 101), Steve’s individual shame prefigures the possibility of bringing about the collective, transformative shame of the Canadian nation state for its acts and omissions regarding the pain and loss caused to Indigenous others. Thus, despite Raven’s failure to transform the white town through mutual engagement between cultures and the sharing of their distinct knowledges, Steve’s epiphanic shame foreshadows a turning point in settler–Indigenous relations. **[AQ4]** As Raven herself acknowledges,

> [e]pidemic after epidemic had not birthed the shame Raven had hoped for among the people of white town, so the villagers remained staunch in their silence. It was not until this last flu epidemic that finally the seeds of shame were sewn. […] Stacey had been the one to sew this seed in the heart of young Steve. (174)

The spread of the infection that afflicts white town, represented by Polly’s suicide and the town’s insensitivity towards the pain of its Salish neighbours, extends to the village through the visceral shame instilled by colonialism. This is best conveyed in the novel by the story of the drunkard and wife-batterer known as “the old snake”. He had tried to join the army during World War II and, being rejected, took a job in the construction of the railroad for six years, until the white soldiers returned and he was fired so that they could be employed. The symbolism of these two episodes reveals the disregard of the Canadian nation state for his nation-building contribution and his expulsion from the Canadian polity, and it stresses the “pecking order enforced within racially informed status and shaming hierarchies” (Million 2013, 47). His humiliation confirms Dian Million’s observation that “[i]t *felt* shameful to be an Indian in Canada for most of that nation’s history” (46). **[AQ5]** Pondering the role of shame as a tool of settler colonialism, Simpson equally argues that “[w]e are made to feel ashamed for being Indigenous” (2017, 187), adding that in order to cope with that pain, one can either turn inward, a process which often leads to “self-harm, drugs, alcohol abuse, or depression and anxiety”; or the shame can be turned outward “into aggression and violence” (188).

In the novel, the old snake turns his shame both inward, becoming an alcoholic, and outward, severely beating his wife, a behaviour that can be explained by his adhering to the settler story of patriarchal social hierarchy. As Stacey observes, “[t]he old snake had brought a piece of white town with him to the village" (Maracle [1993] 2017, 135). As other young men emulate him, the sickness that afflicts white town spreads, and the traditional social fabric of a community where women had so far held distinct positions of authority and respect is dramatically altered. When, after years of abusing his family, the old snake rapes his eldest daughter and his wife Madeline shoots him, the vitality of the community's ancestral structures is put to the test. Avoiding calling the police, the villagers eschew the retributive justice model enforced by the settler state that would have Madeline charged with murder, leaving her two daughters orphaned. Instead, they find a way to practise a kind of restorative justice that is attuned to their ancestral values and customs. Their unprecedented decision proposes that Madeline and her two daughters stay in the village and be taken care of, while the snake's life will be saved, but he will have to leave as soon as he recovers. By having his life saved, Stacey reflects, the snake is given "another chance to alter the text of his story before he left this world" (147). Described in terms of shame and story-making, the ousting of the old snake reinforces the authority of the village's values. As he crosses the bridge on his way out,

> Stacey knew the old snake felt deep shame. Shame so deep he had not defended himself. Shame so deep he left quietly as soon as he was able to walk. His assumption of dignity was to assure the people he had no quarrel with their decision. He had not wished to add the coercive force of guilt on top of his crime against womanhood onto the shoulders of the community. (170)

The old snake's story turns the "bad med-sin" story of modern heteropatriarchal and racist ideology into a good medicine story, showing the strengths of a community whose members still respect its ancestral tenets even if they feel besieged by colonialism.

However, 25 years into the future, the transformation Raven intended has not happened. Foreshadowing the tragic events that will befall the village in *Celia's Song*, Raven offers the prognosis that "[u]ntil the villagers began to feel as ugly inside as the others, none could come forward to undo the sickness which rooted the others to their own ugliness" (Maracle [1993] 2017, 174). Sure enough, 25 years later Stacey recognizes the falling apart of her community as an epidemic in its own right: "Now we are caught in an epidemic of our own making and we have no idea how to fight it" (181). The new epiphany brought about by young Jacob's innocent prescient question "Why did anyone pay attention to them?" (182) awakens the women to generative refusal and prepares them to reclaim and reconstruct their traditional systems of knowledge before engaging the settlers. The novel ends on a note that reinforces the value of stories and storytelling as epistemological tools: "Jacob wasn't sure what wheels he had turned in the women's minds but he knew the story was not over" (182). Hence, the ending anticipates the way in which events unravel in *Celia's Song*.

Stories that heal: Imagining Indigenous resurgence in *Celia's Song*

During the flu epidemic in *Ravensong*, Stacey and her family fought for survival. Abandoned by the white doctors who "would not risk [their] medical practice for a bunch of scraggly assed Indians" (Maracle 2014, chap. XVII), the villagers exhausted themselves in order to ensure the survival of their community against the epidemic that threatened to destroy them completely.[3] However, 25 years later, the underlying racism that rendered the Indigenous village so vulnerable to the disease in the first place still permeates Indigenous relations with its white neighbours. Functioning as an open wound, the unaddressed by-products of colonialism and dispossession have festered untreated and manifest themselves as an epidemic of suicide and lateral violence that endangers the survival of the Indigenous community once again, exposing its extreme precarity and forced dependence on colonial institutions. Finding themselves "in the middle of a different crisis" (chap. XVII) of suicide, substance abuse, and family violence, Celia and her nephew Jacob spearhead a movement towards radical resurgence that focuses on restating self-sovereignty for Indigenous nations, and trying to heal the ailment of their community through the good medicine of their traditional practices.

In *Celia's Song*, the roots of lateral violence and suicide are traced to their source in the shame caused by dispossession, a concept defined by Simpson as the "removal, murdering, displacement, and destruction of the relationship between Indigenous bodies and Indigenous land" (2016, 25) and "the meta-dominating force in our relationship to the Canadian-state" maintained by the persistent system of settler-colonialism (2017, 49). Métis scholar Jo-Ann Episkenew similarly understands "violence, rarely against the settler but against oneself, one's family, or one's community, and addiction as a form of self-medicating to temporarily ease the despair of personal and political powerlessness" (2003, 8), thus establishing a firm link between the damages caused by colonial domination and the crisis of suicide and violence that plagues Indigenous communities. Lee Maracle explores this complex issue by depicting the confluence of social marginalization, extreme precarity, substance abuse, and inherited trauma in an instance of extreme violence against five-year-old Shelley, a girl from the village who is brutally abused and almost murdered by Amos, her mother's boyfriend. Both Amos, who is revealed to have been sexually abused himself as a child in Residential School,[4] and Shelley's mother, Stella, who has been systematically mistreated all her life, illustrate Canadian society's collective failure to address the ill-effects of dispossession and its consequences in the reproduction of the chains of lateral violence among Native peoples. For Maracle, these expressions of lateral violence are "about our anti-colonial rage working itself out in an expression of hate for one another" (1996, 11) and "a cover for systemic rage" (12). While exposing the terrible devastation from which the epidemic of suicide and intergenerational violence emerges, Maracle rejects simplistic and racially charged stereotypes of addiction and abuse.[5] However, far from discarding individual responsibility, she emphasizes a sense of accountability to society at large.

Intermixing her narration of the present crisis of the village with snapshots of the destruction of Indigenous traditional practices, the author exposes the relationship of forced dependence created by the settler state during centuries of colonial policy. Its actions, justified by civilizing rhetoric, have effectively worked to erase Indigenous agency by, among other measures, regulating access to natural resources and imposing western mores and religion that demote Indigenous knowledge to a status of inferiority and threaten its existence. In *Celia's Song*, Maracle traces the poverty, precarity, and loss of knowledge the villagers experience to the clear-cutting practices[6] that have greatly worked to facilitate Canada's position as a powerful international economy. For the villagers, "[n]o trees in the last century […] means no means of acquiring sustenance. No one knows how to carve the hooks or the bowls or make the clothing, and weirs are still illegal to use" (chap. I). In this way, Maracle links Indigenous precarity with the criminalization of resource-gathering practices. The consequent forced dependence on the settler state facilitated colonial policies intended to foster assimilation, such as the Residential School System and, since the 1960s, the increased displacement of Indigenous children to white foster homes, known as the "sixties scoop".[7]

However, well-meaning policies intended to involve Indigenous communities in the governing structure of Canada have also contributed to the dismantling of their autonomy, as *Celia's Song* illustrates. For instance, a conversation between Ned and Judy, Rena's German-born partner, reveals the pernicious effects of receiving the right to vote in 1960, as it superseded and obliterated the interactive decision-making processes that traditionally took place within Indigenous communities. Momma succinctly indicates the inability of enfranchisement to solve the situation suffered by Indigenous communities under Canadian rule when she states "We ran out of wood and they gave us a vote. [...] Wasn't that some wonderful piece of nothing?" (chap. VII). Stacey similarly ponders the feelings of rootlessness and alienation brought about by the right to vote when she reflects that "[t]he vote was silent, ominous in its lack of community and collaboration, [it] was powerful in its ability to silence the village and isolate each from the other" (chap. VII).

Although granting the right to vote to Status Indians may be read as Canada's effort to right some of the wrongs committed against the Indigenous communities by giving them a voice in the country's democratic process, Maracle's text is wary of the dangers hidden in any engagement with the settler state when it comes to healing the wounds of colonialism. Sharing this position, Simpson warns that

> [e]ngagement with the system changes Indigenous peoples more than it changes the system. This can be destructive in terms of resurgence because [...] we are trying to center Indigenous practices [...] and grow those actions and processes into a mass mobilization. (2016, 25)

In particular, Simpson points out that government actions intended to "account for past injustices" (2017, 237) against Indigenous peoples may mean a deployment of "politics of grief" that "can be read as compatible with settler colonialism because it fits within an inclusive narrative of Canada as a multicultural society [and] can effortlessly be co-opted by liberal recognition" (51). Rather than looking for recognition – legal or otherwise – from the settler state, Simpson states that Indigenous resurgence must stem from a place of generative refusal that sets the responsibility of rebuilding on "Indigenous practices – ceremony, politics, decision making, leadership, language, gender, and land" (237), thus fundamentally changing the power dynamics between Indigenous communities and the state.[8]

Simpson's theories of "self-determination and change from within rather than recognition from the outside" (2017, 22) find expression in *Celia's Song*'s powerful imagining of Indigenous resurgence. As in the previous novel, where the old snake abuses his own daughter and his wife attempts to kill him, the community faces an iteration of lateral violence after Jimmy's suicide and Amos's vicious abuse of little Shelley. As with the instances of abuse that happened 25 years before, the villagers must decide whether to let the Canadian justice system deal with the crisis or go against the law and handle the situation themselves. On this occasion, their sense of responsibility, understood not as guilt but as a duty to themselves, is finally awakened by Stacey, who reminds them of their shared accountability to each other's well-being by stating:

> We are patching a child who has been tortured by one of our own. Someone of us birthed the child who became the beast who did this. […] We need to have some grave doubts, not about what we are doing now, but what we have been doing." (chap. XIV)

In response to Stacey's prompting, the villagers take up the mantle and address the crisis they face. Instead of handing over Amos to the white justice system, they begin a long process of reviving their traditional practices of self-government, retrieving the necessary tools not only to manage the present crisis, but to lessen the ill-effects of colonial trauma. Jacob, Celia, and their family do this by rebuilding a longhouse, the "[f]irst one erected in decades" (chap. XXII), that will stand as the ceremonial centre of the village and serve as the stage for Amos to publicly face the consequences of his violence. Although the decision to self-administer justice may cost them dearly, since Amos and his accomplice die during the ceremony and the participants risk being charged with murder, Celia and Jacob are firm in their intent to radically assert their own self-governance in an attempt to heal their community. Continuing with the illness trope that links *Ravensong* and *Celia's Song*, Celia reflects that "[t]he deaths of the two men had been good for the village, […] it signified the birth of their beautiful smokehouse and its feasting ways, as well as the end of their sickness" (chap. XIV). By radically challenging Canadian law in order to follow their customs and rebuild the torn social fabric of the community, the villagers assert their independence, revalorize their epistemological knowledge, and start the process of dismantling colonial domination.

In conclusion, in both *Ravensong* and *Celia's Song*, Maracle creates a provocative and challenging account of colonial trauma that puts its emphasis not on victimhood but on resilience and healing. Thus, the author follows the tenets of Salish storytelling, that see transformation and agency as "the point of the story" (Maracle 2015, 88). The women of the village start the process of resurgence by telling Jacob the story of the first epidemic. Throughout a collaborative process of storytelling that fosters community building and the transmission of knowledge, Jacob acquires the necessary context to understand the history of his people's relations to the Canadian state and starts envisioning a form of resurgence that is rooted in Indigenous epistemology. By imagining a path to a true postcolonial state of Indigenous sovereignty where the villagers are well on the way to "reconcile the new life with the old story" (chap. XVII), the author reclaims stories of Indigenous exploitation and decimation at the hand of colonizers, and of isolation and lateral violence (bad med-sins), and transforms them into sites of resurgence, thus creating a healing narrative that exposes the hidden harms of colonial shame and explores mechanisms to reinstate Indigenous agency outside the channels approved by the settler-state. This process exposes how "bad med-sin" stories can function as catalysts for "networked emergence" (Simpson 2017, 21) when they trigger communal responsibility and systemic change instead of recognition, thus challenging Canada's response to disclosure initiatives of Indigenous suffering such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As if responding to Episkenew's question "what else can Canada do?" (2003, 190), Maracle's novels emphasize the need to engage with Indigenous storytelling, allowing this practice to fulfil its "socio-pedagogical function as well as an aesthetic one" (Episkenew 2003, 193). Using shame as a catalyst, Maracle also signals towards possible decolonial forms of alliance that veer away from paternalistic integration initiatives and fully acknowledge the agency and knowledge of Indigenous

Nations to begin the path of undoing the wrongs of colonialism. Thus, *Ravensong* and *Celia's Song* enact the transformative and healing potential of Indigenous storytelling.

Notes

1. What Maracle may have in mind is the 1957 flu pandemic, also called the Asian flu pandemic. It is the 1968 flu pandemic that is also known as the Hong Kong flu.
2. Anishinaabe journalist and author Tanya Talaga (2017, 2018, 4) links the alarming rise of youth suicide in Indigenous communities in Canada to the severing of land, family, and cultural connections caused by colonization.
3. Subsequent references are to this 2014 Kindle edition of *Celia's Song* and will be cited parenthetically by chapter number.
4. On post-traumatic stress response (PTS) and its intergenerational effects, see Episkenew (2003, 44–53).
5. Maracle's books are part of the upsurge of Indigenous writings that seek to make sense of the abuse caused by Canada's colonial policies. Among them, Thomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1999), Robert Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls* (2003), and Richard Wagamese's *Indian Horse* (2012) specifically concern themselves with the traumatic after-effects of the Residential School system upon Indigenous individuals and communities.
6. According to the National Resources Defence Council, a million acres of Canadian Boreal Forest – home to more than 600 Indigenous communities – is clear cut each year, with disastrous climatic consequences (Axelrod 2017).
7. Reports created by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Canadian National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation can be accessed online (https://nctr.ca/records/reports).
8. Indigenous-led initiatives like "Rethink150: Indigenous Truth" have worked to counter the hegemonic narrative of Indigenous–settler relations in Canada and seek to open up a space for an Indigenous perspective on the future of the cross-cultural relations within the country.

AQ1. The phrase 'alerts that' has been changed to 'points out that'. Please check that this conveys the intended meaning.

AQ2. Please check 'people stories' and amend if necessary (e.g. 'people's stories').

AQ3. The citation '2017, 16' has been changed to 'Maracle [1993] 2017, 16' so that the years match the reference. Please check that this is correct.

AQ4. You refer here to 'the white town' but elsewhere in the text you use the term 'white town' (without 'the'). Please check for consistency.

AQ5. Please indicate whether the emphasis on '*felt*' has been added or is in the original text.

Disclosure statement

Q7 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Q3 *Ana María Fraile-Marcos* is associate professor at the University of Salamanca, where she teaches English Canadian and postcolonial literatures. She is the principal investigator of the research project "Narratives of Resilience" and her research interests include African American, Indigenous, and Canadian literatures. Her latest edited book is *Glocal Narratives of Resilience* (2020).

Lucía López-Serrano is a PhD candidate and research fellow at the University of Salamanca. Her research interests span the medical and health humanities and she is the coordinator of the International Early Career Researchers' Medical Humanities Network.

ORCID

Q2 Ana María Fraile-Marcos http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2277-6446

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