

# Literary activism and violence against Native North American women: The urgency for sovereignty

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## Abstract

The novels examined in the essay divide between those that illustrate and force recognition of the occurrence of violence against Native North American women (Moscioni), and those that also seek to find ways to dismantle the systems that create the conditions in which such violence can thrive and exist. Highway's novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998) links sexualized violence against indigenous women and children to contemporary and historical colonialism. Erdrich's *The Round House* includes a political proposal to reinstate tribal thinking into Native American societal structures concerning women. For Simpson, as for Highway and Erdrich, this engagement with indigenous thinking significantly counters the colonial, patriarchal attitudes that have allowed so much violence against indigenous women to go unchallenged and provides a way to begin an indigenous resurgence that includes and protects Native North American women and children.

In recent years literary activism in Native North America has been at the heart of a demand for further sovereignty. The rationale that gives such importance to literature and art in this process is the idea, as expressed by Leanne Simpson that 'we need to not just figure out who we are; we need to re-establish the processes by which we live who we are', literature being a significant arena in which this takes place. There is also an understanding that while the legal structures that hold in place colonialism in the Americas need to be continuously identified and dismantled, according to Glen Sean Coulthard, Leanne Simpson and Taiaiake Alfred, there is also a need to promote indigenous thinking that sees the connection between the self and the structures of indigenous society in order to combat and transcend colonialism. For Coulthard (influenced by Franz Fanon) 'Cultural self-empowerment' is 'insufficient for decolonization' on its own. He calls for an awareness of indigenous (self) identity that informs interactions with the legal and organisational societal structures. As Leanne Simpson herself portrays in her work *Islands of Decolonial Love*, legal structures are imbued with colonial sexual and patriarchal significance on a political and personal level most particularly for Native North American women. She narrates the focalized experience of a politically informed, self-aware First Nations woman picking up her

new Bureau of Indian Affairs identification card. As she receives the card she recognises her legal status connotes a negatively sexualized identity that is forced upon her: 'i read the plastic card with status indian printed beside my name, and the word slut is released, corroding my veins' (54).

Considering the lives of Native North American women, statistics provided by Amnesty International create the shocking realisation of the extent of violence against them: 582 First Nations women were murdered between 1989 and 2009; First Nations women are three times more likely to be raped than non-Native women; in Saskatchewan 60% of missing women are indigenous, despite only making up 6% of the population. Similarly shocking statistics regarding the United States are cited by Louise Erdrich in the notes of her novel *The Round House* (2012) in which she draws upon findings reported by Amnesty International in 2009 '1 in 3 Native women will be raped in her lifetime.... 86 percent of rapes and sexual assaults upon Native women are perpetrated by non-Native men; few are prosecuted' (372). In response to this, much Native North American literature depicts and brings to the reader's attention sexualised violence against First Nations in Canada and Native American women in the United States, whether in the home, community, reservation or the city.

Novels containing literary depictions of violence against indigenous women in North America engage to a varying degree with wider issues of Native activism. One of the best-known examples of a novel about the trauma experienced by a First Nations woman in fiction is the seminal *In Search of April Raintree* (1983) by Beatrice Mosionier. This novel, written over 30 years ago, yet still in print, follows the life of April and her sister Cheryl through troubled foster homes and into an uncertain adulthood, lacking in security and self-assurance. The Métis sisters both face their own forms of racialised, gendered violence by which they suffer domestic

abuse, violence against women on the streets, and gang rape. Eventually one of the sisters, April, commits suicide as a result of the trauma, replicating that of their mother before her. This novel provides a first person narratorial perspective on the violence and the resulting trauma. Both sisters suffer racialised sexual violence, particularly Cheryl who describes a horrific gang-rape with detailed images of her painful, damaged body and reported dialogue peppered with foul, racist phrases (140-146). It is Cheryl who remains at the end of the novel, trying to understand the events of their lives. Her search for 'April' continues after April's death and incorporates a desire to understand April's pride (and her own lack of it) in Métis culture. The novel suggests that April's community action and pride in her identity are the desired but more difficult route to take. As April is already dead when Cheryl comes to this realisation, the end of the novel reveals the point where Cheryl might individually begin again. However, the novel does not prioritise a communal and collaboration strategy for dealing with such violence, unlike later novels.

Since the 1980s there have been many more depictions of violence against women by North American indigenous writers of both sexes, and from both gendered narrative viewpoints. Acknowledging the widespread geographical extent of violence against indigenous women, from Alaska and Nunavut to the Mexican border, this essay will focus on texts within the central plains and shield geographical areas, in the territories of the Ojibwe, Dene and Cree, including the city of Winnipeg. Two writers in particular from this region provide the reader with narratives of violence that promote activism beyond the text: Tomson Highway (Cree) and Louise Erdrich (Turtle Mountain Chippewa). The novels examined in the essay divide between those that illustrate and force recognition of the occurrence of violence against Native North American women (Masionier), and those that also seek to find ways to dismantle the

systems that create the conditions in which such violence can thrive and exist.

Highway's novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998) links sexualized violence against indigenous women and children to contemporary and historical colonialism. Erdrich's *The Round House* includes a political proposal to reinstate tribal thinking into Native American societal structures concerning women.

Indeed, this difference in the treatment of the occurrences of violence in these novels replicates the divergent approaches to Native activism that have been explored in Native Studies in recent years. Coulthard and Simpson in particular, seek to move beyond the idea of 'recognition' as a goal for Native activism. Instead, they propose that Native North American people need to employ cultural sovereignty to counter colonial systems:

Building diverse, nation-culture-based resurgences means significantly re-investing in our own ways of being: regenerating our political and intellectual traditions; articulating and living our legal systems; language learning; ceremonial and spiritual pursuits; creating and using our artistic and performance-based traditions. (Simpson, 18)

Coulthard is suspicious of what can be gained by the recognition of Native American nations and individuals by the state. He considers that accommodation and recognition are not effective in challenging or removing systems of colonialism. Rather, he proposes decolonisation and 'the empowerment that is derived from this critically self-affirmative and self-transformative ethics of desubjectification must be cautiously directed *away* from the assimilative lure of the statist politics of recognition'. For Coulthard, the direction of Native American activism lies in:

a politics that is less orientated around attaining a definitive form of affirmative recognition from the settler state and society, and more about critically reevaluating, reconstructing, and redeploying Indigenous cultural forms. (49)

Aptly for this study, Simpson describes the politics of recognition as those of an abusive relationship. Controversially, she depicts the politics of recognition by the metaphor of a gendered, sexualised relationship between First Nations and the Canadian state, whereby the First Nations are the abused, female partner. This replicates imperial discourse that identifies the effeminised, colonised population, dominated by the powerful, male colonial state. It is also troubling in the suggestion of culpability of the victim in the violent control that they experience. She explains, 'He just wants to say sorry so she can feel less guilty about his behavior. He just wants to adjust the way he is abusing; he doesn't want to stop the abuse'. Simpson's main concern is that reconciliation has become 'institutionalized' and even though there are those who participate in recognition in good faith, the implication of political statements of recognition is that those receiving recognition 'no longer have a legitimate source of contention'. By accepting recognition, Simpson is afraid that other forms of colonialism can go unchallenged.

For these reasons, there is a danger in simply representing and acknowledging the extent of violence against indigenous North American women, without altering the systems that allow it to occur. It is significant that the extent of the violence has become internationally recognized without reducing the number of occurrences. The existence of a British Broadcasting Company website called 'Red River Women' that

draws some shocking events and statistics in the Winnipeg region to the British public's attention can create extra pressure on the Canadian government to act but the action may well simply remain in the form of 'acknowledging' the problem. The resource focuses upon the tragic story of two teenagers who have become emblematic of the implied disposability of the lives of First Nations females. Tina Fontaine and Felicia Solomon Osborne were girls who were sexually assaulted, murdered and thrown in the Red River in Winnipeg. There are still more First Nations women who have been found murdered and thrown in the Red River and still more who are missing across Canada. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police estimate that 1200 indigenous women have been murdered or gone missing between 1980 and 2012 (BBC). In response, an activist, Nahanni Fontaine (sharing a surname but not related to Tina), persuaded the city of Winnipeg to create a monument on the banks of the Red River with an inscription that begins: 'In honour of Manitoba's missing and murdered indigenous women and girls....' (BBC). Even with this raised awareness there is little confidence that the number of murders will reduce until colonial attitudes towards indigenous North Americans diminish. Like the novel by Mosionier, based in the same region, it adds to the recognition of the violence against First Nations women but does not provide ways to counter the systems that allow the violence to flourish.

Given the shocking prevalence of this violence, in recent Native North American cultural theory, for instance by Coulthard, it is considered impossible to discuss the colonial situation of indigenous North Americans without addressing the horrific levels of violence towards First Nations and Native American women. He notes that to understand the origin of such attitudes one must confront: 'the centrality of sexism to the colonial aims of land dispossession and sovereignty usurpation'. In response,

writers such as Louise Erdrich and Tomson Highway have produced novels that examine the wider implications and context of violence against Native North American women. Both novelists take the unusual choice to depict an act of violence against a female character in retrospect and from a distance. The description of the traumatised body rather than the violent act itself is presented to the reader. In Erdrich's novel *The Round House* we witness the condition of Joe's mother Geraldine after the sexual attack and attempted murder by Lark: 'There was vomit down the front of her dress and, soaking her skirt and soaking the gray cloth of the car seat, her dark blood'. This could have the disadvantage of reinforcing the objectification of the victim and the silence of her personal voice. However, in an essay titled 'Erdrich's Crusade: Sexual Violence in *The Round House*' Julie Tharp notes that this adds realism to the text as few victims of such violence are able or wish to talk with clarity and detail about their trauma. Thus 'The reader must experience her injury, her horror, instead as a sympathetic, close observer. As a witness'. More significantly, this objectification of the victim forces the reader to acknowledge the traumatised body as emblematic of a systemic violence that is not directed towards individuals but towards Native North American women as the focal point of violent colonial control. Geraldine is able to slowly rebuild her life following the attack but the focus of the narrative perspective from her teenage son makes clear to the reader that such sexualized violence has further traumatic effects in generations of families and communities beyond that of the immediate victim. Indeed, Coulthard considers 'The violence that Indigenous women face is both systematic and symbolic'.

Thus, to counter violence against Native North American women is to counter colonialism itself. Indigenous feminism as outlined by Shari Huhndorf and Cheryl



Suzack considers this to be indicative of the colonial need to control the means to reproduce the indigenous population:

For indigenous women, colonization has involved their removal from positions of power, the replacement of traditional gender roles with Western patriarchal practices, the exertion of colonial control over Indigenous communities through the management of women's bodies, and sexual violence. (1)

For Native American and First Nations activists the protection of indigenous women and their inclusion in the re-establishment of sovereignty is crucial. Coulthard finds influence in the work of Taiaiake Alfred to call for a '*cultural resurgence*' by 'self-conscious traditionalism' by which:

Indigenous people, in particular Native men, commit ourselves *in practice* to uprooting the symbolic violence that structures Indigenous women's lives as much as we demand *in words* that the material violence against Indigenous women come to an end. (177)

One of the most challenging aspects of decolonization is to untangle traditional gender roles from the colonially imposed patriarchal structures that exist in indigenous communities. For Coulthard, violence against Native North American women by indigenous and non-indigenous men is not countered due to the absorption of colonial patriarchal thinking into tribal communities. Coulthard asserts that in order to halt the systemic violence against Native North American women that indigenous

society must ‘stop practicing it in its more subtle expressions — in our daily relationships and practice in the home, workplaces, band offices, governance institutions, and, crucially, in our practices of *cultural resurgence*’. However, Huhndorf and Suzack observe that ‘Those who struggle for gender equality are often seen, sometimes erroneously, as opposing traditional Indigenous practices and forms of social organization’ (2). This attitude, however, is not shared by the novelists considered in this study who, instead, seek to find just treatment for indigenous women by promoting indigenous traditions and thinking in contemporary life. Simpson proposes a different kind of political activism, one that is personal and political, based on self and communal affirmation, a ‘resurgence’ of indigenous tradition and spirituality. Both Simpson and Coulthard are influenced by the work of Taiaiake Alfred, to strengthen self-identity in relation to First Nations traditions and spirituality. Simpson summarises his influence on Native Studies, that he ‘refocuses our work from trying to transform the colonial outside into a flourishing of the *Indigenous* inside’ (17).

It is exactly this ‘flourishment’ of the inner lives of the central characters, overcoming the trauma of their younger lives, that is the climax of Highway’s novel *Kiss of the fur Queen*. The novel is a challenging read. Stylistically it is imbued with rich imagery and dream-like descriptions, particularly of the eponymous Fur Queen. The novel is focalized through the two Okimasis brothers (Ooneemeetoo/Gabriel and Champion/Jeremiah) from childhood through to early adulthood. The novel follows the life of the brothers who are taken from their home in northern Manitoba to a religious residential school for First Nations children, where they are abused by priests. They then move into the city of Winnipeg where they find differing creative avenues to move beyond their trauma. Their creative expression reaches its zenith

when they collaborate in a show that is an expression of Cree spirituality in dance and music. The show is halted when Ooneemeto (renamed Gabriel by the priests) shows signs of having developed AIDS (through reckless sexual behaviour) and is unable to dance. This continues the thematic development of the link between sexuality and suffering, joined through the boys' experiences of Catholicism. From the start of the narrative the two prominent themes that run through the novel are sexual violence and religion. Gabriel in particular finds it difficult to divide the Catholic imagery of transubstantiation from the predatory consummation of flesh by the abusing priests. Thereby, Gabriel's sexual attitudes are particularly complex, as Sophie McCall argues, he embraces his homosexuality yet still associates sexual pleasure with pain (66-67). His brother Champion (renamed Jeremiah by the priests) alternatively buries his trauma and tries to maintain a connection to Catholic practice. Jennifer Henderson carries out a subtle analysis of the complexity of the differing coping mechanisms that the brothers adopt. She recognizes that 'Gabriel seems more receptive to the lessons taught by female characters in the novel', yet it is Jeremiah who empathises with the women whose violation he witnesses (193). In fact, she argues, the differing approaches are really reflective of the varying acceptance of First Nations spirituality by the brothers. Gabriel is more receptive to the female figures of First Nations spirituality yet not Cree women, Jeremiah holds to his Catholicism but associates his suffering with that of the First Nations women that he meets.

Nonetheless, for both brothers the recurring figures who help them through their transformations and traumas are women. Moreover, the allegiance that the boys feel towards abused First Nations women is of utmost significance in the text. At the climax of Jeremiah's story, when he performs a piano concert and wins a significant competition, he has a transcendental experience involving the images of three Cree

women. While Jeremiah plays the music his thoughts are transported to images of his brother and he appears to experience an emotional breakdown during the recital.

Afterwards, we see him drunk in Hell Hotel, a bar with a desperate clientele. Here he is rescued from self-harm by a vision of a female figure. The woman's identity shifts between several people; two missing Cree women from his home region, Mistik Lake, found murdered on the streets of the North Main area of Winnipeg, and the dream-like character of the Fur Queen. The two women, Evelyn Rose McCrae and Madeline Jeanette Lavoix, are found having suffered particularly gendered violence: 'Evelyn Rose McCrae smiled her gap-toothed smile; long-lost daughter of Mistik Lake, her womb crammed with broken beer-bottles'.

According to Jennifer Henderson, these murders resemble those carried out in Manitoba in the 1970s. She cites the case of Helen Betty Osborne in 1971 who was attacked and killed in the city of The Pas in Manitoba having been stabbed with a screwdriver. Highway replicates the details of the attack in the figure of Madeline Jeannette Lavoix 'skewered in the sex by fifty-six thrusts of a red-handled Phillips screwdriver, a rose of legend'. Highway's novel is best known for drawing the reader's attention to the prevalence and aftermath of sexual abuse in residential schools. However, by creating a link between the sexual attacks on First Nations women and sexual abuse of children in residential schools, the novel makes a clear argument to consider sexual violence against women and children as connected forms of institutionalised colonial control. It is a form of control that robs women of their potential as mothers by taking away their children, capitalising on the children's vulnerability, and then rendering the women incapable of further childbearing by targeting violence toward their sexual organs.

It is clear from the Afterword of Erdrich's novel *The Round House* that her novel was also inspired by real-life events, and in particular a need to address gaps in the legal protection of Native American women from sexual violence. She states 'This book is set in 1988, but the tangle of laws that hinder prosecution of rape cases on many reservations still exists'. In fact, as Julie Tharp notes, Erdrich wrote what could be viewed as a companion piece as a newspaper article for the *New York Times* regarding the need for further campaigns to improve the coverage of the Violence Against Women Act for women in minorities, and particularly Native American women (27 February, 2013, Tharp). It is the husband of the woman assaulted in *The Round House* who admits 'The problem with most Indian rape cases was that even after there was an indictment the U.S. attorney often declined to take the case to trial for one reason or another'. In fact, when Geraldine is waiting for the police to arrive to take her statement her husband and son conceded they are unsure 'which police' they are waiting for, given the attack took place on land that is under unclear jurisdiction. For this reason, Erdrich's book is often considered to be a piece of political activism in the guise of a crime mystery (Luscombe, Tharp).

The fact that the female voice is limited by narrative choices in this text is of particular interest. There are three victims of violent racist, sexualized attack in this novel: Geraldine, who is able to reveal some aspects of the attack and Myla and her baby who actually disappear. Myla becomes the epitome of murdered Native American women, her body never found. In this way, the silence and invisibility of Myla as a victim is emblematic of the silence that surrounds the deaths of many Native American and First Nations women. It emerges that Myla was probably murdered to cover up an affair that she has with a politician, Governor Yeltow, an affair that results in the birth of her baby. This clearly illustrates the identification of

colonial control of Native American populations by gendered sexual violence as, in Myla's case, it is used to silence any damaging revelations that could be used against the U.S. authorities.

Erdrich carefully negotiates the space between her text as activist testimony and fiction. In her afterword she states 'The events in this book are loosely based on so many different cases, reports, and stories that the outcome is pure fiction'. For instance, a worker who idealises both his political employer and Myla is the prime suspect—his motivations are a mixture of a desire to protect his powerful employer from blackmail, added with sexual jealousy for Myla. As Tharp identifies, there are striking similarities between the 1974 case of Jancita Eagle Deer in relation to her employer William Janklow (who became the governor of South Dakota, 1979-1987). After bringing a case against him for rape, Jancita 'was killed in a suspicious hit-and-run' and her step-mother was later beaten to death (Tharp).

Similarly, a careful construction of the fiction allows Erdrich to comment upon aspects of law. The fact that Geraldine's husband is a lawyer who discusses his work with his son, and she a tribal administrator, cleverly allows the discussion of limitations in the U.S./Tribal legal systems as a part of their everyday family dialogue. Bazil makes astute comments regarding the gaps that are created in the imperfect relationship between the U.S. federal and the tribal courts jurisdiction. A retrospective narratorial interjection made by Joe reinforces one of these points of law regarding Public Law 280 (1953):

which gave certain criminal and civil jurisdiction over Indian lands within their borders. If there was one law that could be repealed or amended for Indians to this day, that would be Public Law 280. (166)

Bazil makes it clear that his work extends beyond his outrage at his inability to find justice for Geraldine. He tells his son Joe 'We are trying to build a solid base here for our sovereignty' (268). Erdrich continues Bazil's statement by writing his central argument in italics for emphasis '*We want the right to prosecute criminals of all races on our lands within our original boundaries*' (269). This is an authorial interjection breaking the usual realism of direct speech. The result, compounded by the inclusion of an 'Afterword', is that the reader is reminded that this book refers beyond the story to the actual lives of contemporary Native Americans. The text, although a compelling coming-of-age/mystery novel, is, moreover, politically significant. What closure exists in this story is created by the proposal of an alternative source of legal precedent. Upon hearing that the attacker, Lark, has been killed, Bazil considers that his death was covered by 'Traditional precedent'. Where the failures of the current federal and tribal legal systems are brought to the fore in the text, and our sympathies lie with the two adolescent perpetrators of the revenge killing (Joe and his friend Cappy), it seems acceptable in the logic of the narrative that 'It could be argued that Lark met the definition of a wiindigoo, and that with no other recourse, his killing fulfilled the requirements of a very old law'. Joe, who is saved by his father's adoption of traditional tribal law finds it difficult to absorb that the ideas that his grandfather ruminated in his sleep could be relevant, saying: 'it was beyond me at the time to think of Mooshum's sleeptalking as a reading of traditional case law'. Still, the interjection 'at the time' suggests a later acceptance of this idea, and provides a suggestion for the reader to consider that fuller sovereignty could be gained by the restoration of such traditional tribal law.

Both texts draw upon versions of the traditional figures of the Weetigo/Wiindigoo, a character that is shared by tribal cultures in the central plains and tundra regions and particularly across the Cree and Ojibwy language groups. Although the spelling varies (accordingly to the different languages of the tribal nations), the central concept of the Weetigo/Wiindigo/Wiindigoo as a flesh-eating monster remains. In both texts ‘flesh eating’ is interpreted to include ‘consuming flesh’ in monstrous sexual acts. In *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back* Leanne Simpson borrows her understanding from Elder Basil Johnston when she explains the Wiindigo ‘symbolizes the potentially addictive part of the human condition’. The heroic task of Joe, his friend Cappy and the Oskimasis brothers is to overcome the weetigo figures and the related addictive and damaging behaviours on behalf of their family and community. In Highway’s novel the brothers grow in confidence and manage their traumatic memories of sexual violence by drawing upon the linked stories of Weetigo and Weesageechak. Sophie McCall produces a very astute reading of the text by identifying instances when the boys refer to the story in which Weesageechak, in the guise of a weasel, crawls up the anus of the weetigo where it eats out the entrails of the flesh-consuming monster. By doing so, Weesageechak becomes a flesh-eater, taking on some of the monstrous characteristics in order to overcome the monster itself. McCall observes ‘The Weetigo becomes both the source of subjection and a propelling force that demands action, and as such it shares common ground with Weesageechak, with its endless capacity for transformation’ (68). Joe’s friend Cappy appears to be Weesageechak in Erdrich’s novel. He is the one who actually shoots Lark, and after the killing, dies himself in an act of reckless destruction when he crashes the car he is driving. It is a moment that changes Joe’s life forever. His parents instantly become ‘old people’ and Joe moves abruptly into adulthood.



The story of Weetigo and Weesageechak also provides the central framework of Highway's novel whereby Gabriel experiences child sexual abuse from a Weetigo-like-priest, he then grows into an adult who finds an outlet for his emotions creatively in dance, yet also finds he gains a Weetigo-like pleasure in brutal sexual experiences, resulting in him contracting HIV. McCall observes that 'Gabriel simultaneously transforms the abject scenes of his childhood, precisely through his embrace of his inner Weetigo'. At these crucial moments in the novel the Fur Queen appears, dressed in white fur, described as arctic fox but equally reminiscent of the white coat of the weasel. Crucially, like Weesageechak, the Fur Queen herself combines protective and monstrous aspects. For instance, Gabriel is gladly led by her as he is taken on a journey from life into death. Yet, the Fur Queen has blood smeared across her mouth. Is she stained with blood from metaphorically eating away the flesh-devouring illness with which Gabriel suffers, or is she a deathly monster, hungry for bodies? The two versions co-exist. Gabriel finds release in his journey into death. Jeremiah is left to learn from his brother's creativity, embrace of traditional Cree culture and of his understanding of death in Cree spirituality. The novel ends with Jeremiah witnessing Gabriel carried away by the Fur Queen and being drawn into a complicit relationship with the Fur Queen himself: 'Rising from his body, Gabriel Okimasis and the Fur Queen floated off into the swirling mist, as the little white fox on the collar of the cape turned to Jeremiah. And winked'.

Notably, the Fur Queen carries Gabriel away at the point where Jeremiah has decided to reject Catholicism and bring Cree religious ceremonies into the hospital room. The farcical death-bed scene that ensues, including a priest trying to get entry and yelling through the door, while the fire alarm is set off by the burning herbs, brings light relief in this otherwise tragic moment. However, the scene has deep

significance: Jeremiah and Gabriel are reunited by their rejection of Christianity and shared re-adoption of Cree ceremonies. Henderson notes this significance, stating ‘First Nations cultural production is given a kind of moral agency—that is, it is made to function as the ethical disruption of postcolonial discourse’. Hence, in both texts the Weetigo represents Euro-American colonialism and its resulting sexual violence against women and children. Both texts rely on the appearance of Weesageechak to battle the Weetigo and find space for the influence of tribal thinking and ceremonies in the lives of the contemporary Native North American characters.

What these novels propose is that it is possible to counter the traumatic effects of colonial sexual violence against women and children by drawing upon tribal belief. Moreover, to counter the occurrence of such violence relies more pragmatically upon the improvements of jurisdiction by drawing further upon tribal belief systems, to strengthen the possibility for justice on tribal lands and for indigenous women away from tribal communities. In 2012 Erdrich’s text contributed towards the success of the campaign to bring in an amendment to the Violence Against Women Act to further its coverage of immigrant, LGBT and Native American women. However, as the international press continues to reveal, Native American and First Nations women are still being brutally attacked and left without justice or even recognition. Ultimately, only fuller sovereignty for both sexes can alter the fact that indigenous women remain the focal point for the colonial battle that ensues between tribal and dominant cultures in North America. In the life of the narrative beyond the text, writers such as Erdrich and Highway play their part by raising awareness but moreover by illustrating how tribal belief and tradition can provide a framework to protest, campaign and move closer to effective legal sovereignty. Geraldine, Joe and the Okimasis brothers construct their lives so that they find ways ‘to live who we are’, using Leanne

Simpson's phrase. Gabriel and Jeremiah, in particular, are able to find avenues for a creative resurgence of their Cree identity (through dance, music and ceremony). They take part in a reassertion of personal identity loosed from the restrictions of Euro-American colonial structures and religion. Ultimately, the strategies of legal and cultural sovereignty offered in these novels have similarities with Alfred's call for 'the new warrior's path' whereby the 'Onkwehonwe' ('original people' in the Haudenosaunee language) will reconnect to their culture and land: 'We need to rebel against what they want us to become, start remembering the qualities of our ancestors, and act on those remembrances' (32). Leanne Simpson, in *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* concurs:

We need to be able to articulate in a clear manner our visions for the future, for living as *Indigenous Peoples* in contemporary times. To do so, we need to engage in *Indigenous* processes, since according to our traditions, the processes of engagement highly influence the outcome of the engagement itself. (17) [italics in the original]

For Simpson, as for Highway and Erdrich, this engagement with indigenous thinking significantly counters the colonial, patriarchal attitudes that have allowed so much violence against indigenous women to go unchallenged and provides a way to begin an indigenous resurgence that includes and protects Native North American women and children.

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