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Mgr. Jana Marešová

Sky Woman, Trickster, Windigo: Reflections of Traditional Storytelling in Contemporary Canadian Indigenous Novel

Žena z nebe (Sky Woman), Šprýmař (Trickster), Windigo: Reflexe
tradičního vypravěčství v současném kanadském indigenním románu

Vedoucí práce: Klára Kolinská, PhD

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Introduction

Storytelling is an essential constituent of Indigenous cultures¹ in Canada. Stories have preserved values and shaped Indigenous communities and individuals for centuries until today. Traditional oral storytelling has served multiple purposes in the communities such as transmission of knowledge and value system, preserving personal and communal histories, ceremonial and spiritual guidance, and entertainment. This long and rich tradition creates a solid and abundant ground for contemporary literature. As with all cultural expressions, Indigenous storytelling embodies ontological and epistemological notions that are pronounced in present-day writing to varying degrees.

This work examines the way contemporary Indigenous writers of Canada work with the tradition of oral storytelling in their writing. At first, the role and importance of storytelling for Indigenous cultures and consequently for literature is discussed. The following analysis of individual novels is centred around three characters significant and recurrent in Indigenous storytelling – Sky Woman, the trickster, and the windigo – and it observes the meanings created by their employment in the narrative, studies the way oral storytelling shapes the narrative style, and the way Indigenous referential frameworks are manifested in this process. The criteria set for

¹ In this work I use the term “Indigenous” as the term denoting people native to Canada and phenomena related to them the most frequently as it is the most frequently used term in contemporary studies focusing on original inhabitants of North America and their culture. The term Indigenous applies to many other peoples around the world but I am using the term in relation to North America. In quotations other terms such as “Aboriginal”, “First Nations”, “Native”, which are used interchangeably with “Indigenous”, are kept as in the original. Let us clarify that the term “Indigenous” includes Métis and Inuit, contrary to the term “First Nations”. Since I mostly work with First Nations texts, my claims will be most relevant to them, however, general arguments can be applied to Métis and Inuit as well. Whenever possible, specific names of bands or communities will be given when discussing an author or a text, since it is considered the most appropriate and preferred way of naming the people and their literature and since it reflects the diversity and specificity of Indigenous cultures. Names defining national identities are used in the form the authors themselves use them. Therefore, several spellings of one nation or nation group might occur (for example, Anishinaabe, Anishawbe, Anishinaubae, Anishinaabeg). Unless referring to specific legal documents such as the Indian Act or to the stereotypical and misrepresentative images created about Indigenous peoples, I will not use the term “Indian” since it has many negative connotations and is regarded as pejorative.

As for the three characters discussed, I use the spelling predominant in secondary sources – Sky Woman, the trickster, the windigo. Indigenous style, as Gregory Younging describes it, would capitalize these terms, together with terms such as Oral Tradition, Traditional Knowledge, Protocols.

Since decolonization of language and the acts of self-determination are still in process, terminology related to Indigenous peoples is a work in progress. The terms used in this work reflect current use in the field but they will be undoubtedly very soon replaced by other, more appropriate terms.

the selection of these three characters were the frequency of their occurrence in recent texts and the fact that they are used on a scope wider than one nation so that more general conclusions about their significance in Indigenous cultures could be drawn. In summary, there are three main research questions: 1) How is oral storytelling reflected in contemporary Canadian Indigenous writing? 2) In which ways do these three characters contribute to the manifestation of orality in written texts and what meanings does their usage create? 3) What are the specificities of Indigenous narratives using oral tradition, and how do they differ, if they do, from Western narrative strategies?

The discussion is centred on contemporary novels, i.e. novels published around and mostly after the year 2000, with special attention to emerging writers who are not widely known in a Central European context. Since the scope of this work is limited, the focus is centred only on the genre of novel. The theoretical background is informed mainly by sources from Indigenous scholars, and the texts are analyzed through concepts based on Indigenous perspectives on storytelling. It is believed that such an approach would introduce readers to Indigenous theories and provide a different point of view on Indigenous literatures and storytelling than the readings based on hybridity and postmodernity frequently applied in recent decades. The selected texts come from diverse Indigenous nations which enables a wider and broader look into Indigenous writing; on the other hand, it also runs the risk of overgeneralization and the erasure of cultural specificities. This work should serve as an outline of tendencies across the cultures, rather than being an exhaustive and conclusive account of the storytelling of individual nations.

Storytelling in Indigenous cultures

This chapter starts by declaring the position of the author as a non-Indigenous person educated in Western liberal knowledge systems, which inevitably leads to limited insight into, and access to, Indigenous cultural codes and epistemologies. By declaring this openly, I hope to meet Wendy Rose's (Hopi/Miwok) requirement of demonstrating integrity and intent as a way of ethical research on Indigenous cultures.²

² qtd. in Renate Eigenbrod, *Travelling Knowledges: Positioning the Im/Migrant Reader of Aboriginal Literatures in Canada* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2005), 44.

The following section defines storytelling from an Indigenous perspective, specifically paying attention to aspects stressed by Indigenous scholars. Storytelling is a complex cultural, intellectual, political, social, and spiritual activity which carries and transfers knowledge in Indigenous cultures. As Niigonwedom James Sinclair (Anishinaabe) writes, storytelling is not “a simple one-dimensional act”, but a “process embedded in the continuance of our [Anishinaabeg] collective presence, knowledge, and peoplehood.”³ As such, storytelling is a continuing, ever-changing but enduring process, and stories as its manifestations are productions rather than products. Oral storytelling has been regarded as a pre-stage to written literature and, consequently, ancient stories were valued for their historicity. This, however, does not seem to be of essential importance for Indigenous scholars; Christopher Teuton (Cherokee), for example, writes that stories have value only in relation to living communities.⁴ This is the first aspect of the central notion presented in the thesis which can be used for interpreting Indigenous literatures: relationality. The concept of relationality secures both the continuation of ancestral memory in storytelling through requiring accountability to one’s ancestors and the introduction of new features through the necessity of relatability to contemporaries which creates the dynamism highlighted by Sinclair.

The equal role of the listener and teller forms another important aspect of storytelling. The teller carries the responsibility to answer to ancestral memory, abide by protocols, and make the story relatable to their audience, while the listener’s role lies in active listening and derivation of personal meaning without which the process is not completed. “The listener makes the story,”⁵ as Gerald Vizenor says. I call this process internalization – the act of storytelling is accomplished only when the listener internalizes the story and draws parallels to their life, which is a process that can take much longer than the storytelling itself. The reciprocity of the teller and listener constitutes another form of relationality in storytelling.

As for the roles of storytelling in Indigenous communities emphasized by Indigenous critics, the ability of stories to expand imagination and McLeod’s (Cree) concept of Cree

³ Niigonwedom James Sinclair, “Trickster Reflections,” in *Troubling Tricksters: Revisioning Critical Conversations*, ed. Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2010), 23.

⁴ Christopher B. Teuton, “Indigenous Orality and Oral Literatures,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Indigenous American literature*, ed. James H. Cox and Daniel Heath Justice (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 173.

⁵ qtd. in Kimberley M. Blaeser, *Gerald Vizenor: Writing in the Oral Tradition* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 25.

narrative memory is described. Since stories are “time portals where the past and present interact,”⁶ as Fixico (Shawnee, Sac and Fox, Muscogee Creek and Seminole) says, they require considerable imaginative skills from the teller and listener alike to be able to move across time spheres. Narrative memory is then more than remembering past but the ability of the listener to “echo”⁷ ancestral knowledge that gives opportunity to view the present in a different way and to envision other possibilities. Storytelling is a process characteristic of intersections and overlaps of time dimensions.

In terms of typology of stories, Indigenous sources usually distinguish between more complex, traditional stories that tend to be set in ancient times and more direct, factual stories. The dividing line, however, is not clearly set, and stories and characters might shift from one category to another. Margaret Noodin (Anishinaabe) talks about animacy of the former type of stories that are endowed with spirit and agency.⁸ This explains stories as spiritual entities who can choose when and by whom to be told. Since stories carry great cultural and spiritual significance, they are often protected by protocols defining who can tell a story, when it can be told, and to whom. Sacred stories or certain layers of their meaning might not be accessible to non-Indigenous people, or people from different communities.

The next section discusses Indigenous worldviews in connection to storytelling. The concept of relationality, which is considered “a condition of existence”⁹ by Teuton, is explained in more detail. Shawn Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree) explains that people are not *in* relationships, but people *are* relationships, since the world takes form only as we create webs of connections to it.¹⁰ Therefore, “reality *is* relationships or sets of relationships,”¹¹ (emphasis in original) as he summarizes. This also applies to ideas, which are not abstract or neutral but always relational.¹² Relationality represents the core value of the Indigenous worldview and is tied to respect, reciprocity, and responsibility, which are necessary for healthy and sustainable relationships;

⁶ Donald L. Fixico, “*That’s What They Used to Say*”: *Reflections on American Indian Oral Traditions* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017), 6.

⁷ Neal McLeod, *Cree Narrative Memory* (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing, 2007), 11.

⁸ Margaret Noodin, *Bawaajimo: A Dialect of Dreams in Anishinaabe Language and Literature* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2014), 20-21.

⁹ Teuton, “Indigenous,” 167.

¹⁰ Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2008), 80.

¹¹ Wilson, *Research*, 73.

¹² Wilson, *Research*, 74.

Wilson and Archibald call these essential teachings the “Rs”¹³ of Indigenous epistemology and methodology. Interconnectedness and relationality of creation are reflected in the common expression used by Indigenous scholars and writers: “all our relations”, in which human relations extend to the animal world and other-than-human beings. Similarly, the widespread symbol of the medicine wheel explicates the codependence of the four sections signifying aspects of human personality, cardinal directions, seasons, etc., which must be in balance so that a person becomes whole.¹⁴ The wheel is also used to illustrate the Indigenous holistic approach to research, with spirituality as its indispensable feature. The perception of the physical world and the spiritual realm as one has been recognized as a distinct feature of Indigenous literature as well.¹⁵ This challenges the Western division of the real and the supernatural/fictitious since supernatural beings are considered a part of reality. Moreover, stories are animate and words have spirit, which leads to the belief in the transformative and performative power of words; they can shape or even create reality and must be used responsibly.¹⁶

Cyclicity of time represents another well-known feature of Indigenous worldviews, and subsequently writing. Not only is this apparent in the depiction of time spheres as permeable, but also in the way meaning is derived from stories - not in a cause-effect (story-meaning) manner but by going back to the story repeatedly and gradually adding layers of meaning.¹⁷ The overall aim towards balance in Indigenous epistemologies is also reflected in the plot structure of Indigenous stories that are more balance-based than conflict-driven.¹⁸ While this might seem as an oversimplification of the diversity of Western and Indigenous narratives, it is true that all the novels discussed in this work portray a return to the “standard” state of things and not necessarily achieving a downright improvement, or progress of the protagonist’s situation.

Since stories carry Indigenous ontological and epistemological notions, they can be used as theories about human experience and understanding of the world. Stories represent a tool for

¹³ Jo-Ann Archibald, *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008), 1 and Wilson, *Research*, 77.

¹⁴ Bob Cardinal, Enoch Cree Nation. Treaty No. 6 Territory. Enoch. Conversation after a sweat lodge ceremony. January 8, 2015.

¹⁵ Daniel David Moses et al., *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), xii and Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2018), 123.

¹⁶ Fixico, “That’s,” 33, Lee Maracle, *Memory Serves and Other Essays* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2015), 161.

¹⁷ Wilson, *Research*, 6.

¹⁸ Drew Hayden Taylor, “Alive and Well: Native Theatre in Canada,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 31, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 32.

both understanding the experience of meeting an obstacle and finding a solution.¹⁹ The power of stories to trigger imagining new possibilities can result in reshaping reality. The perception of story as theory is governed by the principle of relationality, too. Theory does not exist for itself, but is valid only when having an impact on the community.²⁰

The last section of this chapter examines the correlation of oral and written storytelling. While theorists recognize the limitations of the written word because of the loss of dynamism and “emergence”²¹ between the teller and the listener in real time, they commonly argue that orality is inherently incorporated into texts, which dismantles the Western binary opposition in which the written took dominance.²² In general, it can be said that the principles of oral storytelling such as relationality, internalization of the story, and the permeability of the commonplace and the spiritual are transferred to written storytelling. I argue that the presence of these concepts goes beyond the implementation of certain literary devices connected to orality, such as multiple narrators, and that each work as a whole - its structure, themes, and narrative techniques - is informed by these principles. Of course, it is necessary to mention that not all Indigenous texts work with orality, but if they do, orality shapes and determines the way the text is narrated.

Storytelling and appropriation

Even though Indigenous literature has been thriving in recent years, the space for Indigenous voices in Canada is still limited in consequence of former colonial policies and ongoing social inequalities. Moreover, Indigenous artists often compete for opportunities with non-Indigenous writers appropriating Indigenous stories, experience, or identities. Instances of appropriation reoccur in Canadian literary circles every few years, and with each of them the contentious issue of appropriation divides the Canadian literary sphere, uncovers the lack of awareness about the colonial damage to Indigenous cultures in mainstream society, and cultural

¹⁹ Maracle, *Memory*, 231.

²⁰ Christopher B. Teuton, “Theorizing American Indian Literature: Applying Oral Concepts to Written Traditions.” in *Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective*, ed. Janice Acoose et al. (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008), 209.

²¹ Leanne Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle’s Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing Books, 2011), 34.

²² Smaro Kamourelis, “Afterword: ‘Different but the Same’,” in *Memory Serves and Other Essays*, Lee Maracle (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2015), 253 and Teuton, “Indigenous,” 173.

production, and painfully reopens the debate on the criteria of Indigeneity. On the basis of three cases from recent years, this chapter outlines the main aspects of appropriation of Indigenous stories, its connection to self-representation and freedom of speech, and presents suggestions from Indigenous scholars and artists for a more respectful and cognizant relationships among the members of the Canadian literary and cultural communities.

At first, the historical context of appropriation (“salvage research”²³ and the insensitive handling of Indigenous stories by early researchers) and the colonial policies such as the Indian Act leading to the absence of Indigenous voices are outlined. Furthermore, Younging’s (Opaskwayak Cree) explanation of the colonial perception of knowledge is mentioned. Indigenous knowledge, including stories, has been approached in a similar way as Indigenous land, and Younging uses the term “gnaritas nullius” (“no one’s knowledge”) to illustrate the correlations of colonial approaches to land and knowledge in which ownership of Indigenous knowledge is disregarded.²⁴

The gap created by these practices was very often filled by non-Indigenous writers telling stories of Indigenous experience. In reaction to that, and once the restrictive policies were lifted, Indigenous artists started to demand that non-Indigenous writers “move over” and to call for control over Indigenous representation,²⁵ as, for example, Keeshig-Tobias (Anishinaabekwe) articulated in her seminal article “Stop Stealing Native Stories”²⁶ from 1990. Gregory Younging then explains the other cause of the disagreement around the right to write about Indigenous experience. According to him, Western and Indigenous epistemologies differ significantly in terms of access to knowledge and intellectual property rights. In the Western understanding, knowledge not claimed by or assigned to an author belongs to the public domain and thus is freely accessible and reusable, and all knowledge aims for the public domain after a certain time for the benefit of all, whereas in the Indigenous system “certain aspects of Traditional Knowledge are not intended for external access and use in any form,”²⁷ he writes. The idea of

²³ research aiming to “record the cultures of peoples who were thought to soon become extinct”, Wilson, *Research*, 48.

²⁴ Gregory Younging, *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples* (Edmonton: Brush Education, 2018), 132.

²⁵ Fee, “Trickster Moment,” 61-2.

²⁶ Lenore Keeshig-Tobias, “Stop Stealing Native Stories,” *The Globe and Mail*, May 19, 2017, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/cultural-appropriation-stop-stealing-native-stories/article35066040/>.

²⁷ Younging, *Elements*, 123.

restricted knowledge is often confused with limitation of free speech. In recent decades Indigenous writers and storytellers have been fighting for space to tell Indigenous stories, and have tried to explain their objections to appropriation.

The controversies arising around cultural appropriation usually follow two patterns – appropriation of stories and identity frauds. In the former, non-Indigenous writers use/write/adapt Indigenous stories without authorization by, or credit given to, elders/storytellers/communities, or alternatively use Indigenous experience or voice without considering Indigenous requirements of relationality and accountability. The latter concerns individuals assuming Indigenous identity without having solid Indigenous ancestry or without being claimed by a particular Indigenous community, and using their fabricated heritage to get access to positions of power or projects designed for Indigenous peoples. The controversies falling into this category of so called “pretendians” are especially painful since the complicated issue of definition of Indigenous identity and the criteria of belonging are discussed anew.

The following section presents three case studies from recent years (The Appropriation Prize affair and the cases of Michelle Latimer and Joseph Boyden) all directly or indirectly connected to this research, and focuses on the reactions of Indigenous scholars and artists to them. In short, broader and safer space for Indigenous voices is demanded, accountability to a community is required when talking about Indigenous experience, honesty about one’s Indigenous ancestry is called for, and establishing closer relationships with Indigenous communities is needed. Indigenous scholars stress that the core of the conflict is not about free speech, but rather about inequality in opportunities and about support for Indigenous artists.

The issue of appropriation exemplifies the long-lasting and far-reaching consequences of cultural colonialism, and shows that decolonization is still an ongoing process. It is important to mention appropriation when discussing Indigenous storytelling, because storytelling as a means of self-representation and cultural preservation was one of the cultural practices hit by colonial policies. The persisting misunderstandings in regard to ownership of stories, knowledge, and the right to speak about Indigenous experience demonstrate the rifts between the Indigenous and Western perspectives. Understanding of relationality and responsibility, values highlighted in this work as cornerstones of Indigenous epistemologies, is essential to comprehend the requirements Indigenous writers articulate to amend and prevent appropriation. When stories or

voices are appropriated, it signals all the more that this core concept is misread or disregarded in non-Indigenous society.

Sky Woman

Sky Woman opens the examination of traditional characters in contemporary writing. The Sky Woman story is one of the creation stories in Indigenous North America, and as such it lays the “theoretical framework” and “ontological context”²⁸ of Indigenous worldviews and, by extension, storytelling. The story tells of a woman in the sky who falls down towards the ocean-covered earth and animals save her from drowning by putting her on a turtle’s back. In return, she creates land for all from a piece of mud a muskrat brings her from the depths.

The story is part of so-called Original Instructions,²⁹ teachings of essential ethics, and embodies principles of reciprocity, respect, relationality, responsibility, and creativity. I call these principles “enstoried”, since they are rooted within the story, inform its themes but also the structure and derivation of meaning, and form the core teachings of the Sky Woman story regardless of the version narrated. The interactions of Sky Woman and the animals are reciprocal – the animals save her life and, in reciprocation, she creates land for all. The fact that the act of creation is communal leads to respect, because each creature contributes to the well-being of all and thus deserves respect. Their actions also build mutual relationships. Responsibility is dual – to the rest of creation and to oneself. As Leanne Simpson (Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg) explains, individuals should imagine themselves as the muskrat diving deep down to recognize their gifts and abilities³⁰ with which they can give back to the community and also recreate their world.

The Sky Woman story has often been contrasted with the biblical story of creation. Vanessa Watts, an Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee scholar, explains the disparities between these two referential frameworks and introduces the term Place-Thought, which signifies land’s animacy and agency, and the inseparability of place and cognitive processes.³¹ In this view, Sky

²⁸ Simpson, *Dancing*, 32.

²⁹ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 7.

³⁰ Simpson, *Dancing*, 144.

³¹ Vanessa Watts, “Indigenous Place-Thought & Agency amongst Humans and Non-Humans (First Woman and Sky Woman Go on a European World Tour!),” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, vol. 2, no. 1 (2013): 21.

Woman becomes part of the land and therefore the premises she carried with herself are embodied in humans, or as Watts says: “our flesh is literally an extension of soil.”³² This means people carry Sky Woman’s thought in their bodies, they are inseparable from her because they are born from her body, land. In consequence, humans are closely connected to the spiritual through Place-Thought and their affinity to Sky Woman and all creation, not only humans, is endowed with agency and cognitive processes coming from Sky Woman’s body. Indigenous worldview is therefore in her view characteristic for egalitarianism, cooperation, and balance whereas biblical universe is centred around hierarchy, individualism, and adherence to external rules.

Thomas King often dedicates his novels and short stories to such contrasting. *The Back of the Turtle* is no exception; however, the focus of this novel is more inclined to restoration of communality and Indigenous identity rather than to the inspection of differences between Western and Indigenous perspectives. The Sky Woman story permeates the whole narrative in the form of allusions, themes, and characters’ features as well. Moreover, the story as such is retold as a part of the novel, the part which enables character development and moves the plot forward. The act of telling as such mirrors the Rs: it is communal, reciprocal - the listeners are encouraged to participate; and relational - it helps to build closer relationships among the participants. Due to this, the themes promoted by the Sky Woman story, ability to (re)create and importance of relationships, materialize in the lives of the characters as they are able to heal themselves as well as their environment. King’s novel showcases the principles of Indigenous storytelling by implementing the act of telling a story within the text, and as such it simultaneously emphasizes the enstoried principles via the thematic focus of the novel.

Lesley Belleau stresses in her novel *The Sweat* the interconnection and even fusion of Sky Woman and her female characters, which exemplifies Watts’s approach to Sky Woman and demonstrates not only the significance of creation stories for individuals, but also shows that relationality works across generations, time scopes, and physical and spiritual realms. In addition, sexuality is accentuated in the novel and sexual energy is portrayed as force for creation of thoughts as well as new life. The narrative revolves around the importance of facing trauma, personal healing, and letting oneself be part of a community, which aligns with the R-principles.

³² Watts, “Indigenous,” 27.

Trickster

The trickster has undoubtedly been the most critically examined traditional character of Indigenous literatures. While heightened attention to the trickster in the last decades of the 20th century contributed to a wider recognition of Indigenous texts and writers, scholars also point out that the character has been often misinterpreted and turned into a universal and static sign that critics searched for in all texts.³³ The ambiguity of the trickster fitted well in the times of emphasized sexual and gender multiplicity, and the overall subversive tendency characteristic for postmodernity and deconstruction.³⁴ However, the trickster hunt sidelined the author's agency and cultural specificity. Moreover, whereas the postmodern subversive quality, inherent in the trickster, stems from "modernist angst" and revolt against past, in Indigenous perception the trickster "is an integral part of an ongoing tradition."³⁵ Therefore, a more culturally specific approach and definition of "the moment of the trickster",³⁶ i.e., the transformative moment in the narrative, rather than mechanic labeling of characters has been called for.

To answer this call, this work examines the trickster on the basis of definitions provided by Indigenous scholars. The trickster teaches the enstoried principles by embodying human weaknesses and by warning against their results in a humorous way – frequently he falls prey to his appetites and manages to save himself with abilities he is unaware of possessing.³⁷ As such, the trickster is more often being tricked than tricky. Apart from that, the trickster also serves as a reminder of the need to constantly re-examine and challenge accepted notions and ways of thinking by its ability to shapeshift and to move across categories and characteristics such as gender. The latter is especially important for Gerald Vizenor, for whom the trickster inhabits the

³³ Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra, *Learn, Teach, Challenge: Approaching Indigenous Literatures* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 118 and Kristina Fagan, "What's the Trouble with the Trickster?: An Introduction," in *Learn, Teach, Challenge: Approaching Indigenous Literatures*, ed. Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 8.

³⁴ Fagan, "What's," 13.

³⁵ Judith Leggat, "Quincentennial Trickster Poetics," in *Learn, Teach, Challenge: Approaching Indigenous Literatures*, ed. Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 227.

³⁶ Margery Fee, "The Trickster Moment, Cultural Appropriation, and the Liberal Imagination in Canada," in *Learn, Teach, Challenge: Approaching Indigenous Literatures*, ed. Deanna Reder and Linda M. Morra (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2016), 71 and Sinclair, "Trickster," 25.

³⁷ Basil Johnston, *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway* (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1995), 94.

liminal spaces between concepts and notions, being “a loose seam in consciousness,”³⁸ and teaches us to reconsider all set, preconceived notions and thus liberate our minds. On the other hand, Craig Womack reminds us that there are negative sides to the trickster, too, and that the figure should not be idealized.³⁹

By orchestrating his mischievous tricks, Slipperjack’s *Weesquachak* teaches the central couple about their weaknesses, and by exposing them to numerous, often traumatic obstacles, he makes them realize and work on their shortcomings as they learn to communicate better and appreciate one another’s individuality. The trickster primarily focuses on satisfying his own needs as is typical for him, but the mishaps he inadvertently creates function as transformative moments for the characters. Internalization of his teachings is needed for character development, successful resolution and instillment of enstoried principles. Slipperjack’s depiction and use of the trickster can be considered a modern adaptation of the traditional trickster stories, as her *Weesquachak* retains characteristic features; however, he does not occupy the central stage, and his presence is often suggested rather than stated directly.

The trickster in Taylor’s novel *Motorcycles & Sweetgrass*, on the other hand, is employed as one of the main characters and interacts closely with other beings - human, spiritual, and animal. He himself transforms and changes appearance as well as triggers transformations of interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. The chaos Nanabush (the trickster) creates forces the characters to reconfigure their beliefs and norms. The acceptance of chance and imperfections as an integral part of creation is portrayed as the main difference between Indigenous perspective and Christian beliefs, which is depicted by Nanabush’s dialogue with Christ. The narrative bridges these differences by laughter. The trickster enables the characters to reconnect with their culture, build stronger relationships and teaches about the human ability to reconstruct their world by disrupting fixed rules and dead ends, the quality that Vizenor stresses as key in the trickster.

While the former two texts depict the trickster’s deeds as risky and sometimes painful, Robinson in her novel *Son of a Trickster* puts emphasis on the outright danger and serious harm

³⁸ Gerald Vizenor, *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 196.

³⁹ Craig S. Womack, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 301.

his actions can cause. Similarly to Taylor's and Slipperjack's characters, the protagonist in this narrative suffers from disconnection from spirituality and Indigeneity. Nevertheless, spirituality in this narrative is not idealized, and transformativity is often linked to violence. This technique enables Robinson to challenge the often romanticized perception of Indigenous spirituality, to re-examine the trickster figure, and to present a more complex picture of interconnectedness. Spheres and realms are permeable, but that does not mean the process is uncomplicated and risk-free. Still, the pain inflicted by the trickster enables the protagonist to realize his spiritual abilities and restore his family relationships.

Windigo

The windigo teaches by embodying oppositional values to the enstoried principles. With its boundless self-centredness and insatiable cravings, the windigo materializes the human tendency to be selfish, and the windigo stories talk about the consequences such behaviour has for communities as well as for the afflicted individual. The change of the signification of the windigo in recent decades illustrates the way traditional storytelling reacts to current issues and exemplifies the way stories function as theories, transforming to provide guidance for current obstacles.⁴⁰ The figure transferred from a giant, man-eating monster to a representation of colonial exploitation and consumerism, while the vices it warns against remained unchanged. Kimmerer identifies gratitude and creating plenty by sustainable living, values based in relationality, as the antidote to the windigo.⁴¹ Moreover, the windigo stories function as theories of trauma since the cycle of trauma, as well as the windigo's hunger, originates from the sense of incompleteness and disconnection from community or one's self, leading to indulgence or abuse.⁴² All incarnations of the windigo show that loss of balance and detachment from the rest of creation are the source of the evil; it is not external and self-contained.

Tomson Highway presents the windigo in his novel *Kiss of the Fur Queen* in multiple forms and through multiple characters. While the priest at the residential school serves as the epitome of the colonial force and the ideological abuse of religion, the struggle of the Okimasis brothers expresses the weight of personal and intergenerational trauma, the cycle of abuse and

⁴⁰ Maracle, *Memory*, 231-233.

⁴¹ Kimmerer, *Braiding*, 376.

⁴² Suzanne Methot, *Legacy: Trauma, Story, and Indigenous Healing* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2019), 272.

also the self-destructive power of desire. The windigo stories retold and alluded to in the text also serve as theories of healing for the brothers; the moment they internalize them, they are able to live by the enstoried principles and break the traumatic cycle.

Waubgeshig Rice chooses to play on the terrifying quality of the windigo in his dystopian or post-urban novel *Moon of the Crusted Snow*. The author makes use of both the traditional description of the windigo's appearance and behaviour, creating a manipulative and intimidating antagonist in Scott, while simultaneously referring to the exploitative nature of colonialism represented by him. The overall message of the work, however, lies in the promotion of Nishnaabe values of communality and relationality as a way towards a sustainable lifestyle.

Conclusion

Traditional storytelling represents an essential part of contemporary Indigenous literature; not only in terms of thematic content, but also as a significant aspect of narrative structures determined by Indigenous frames of reference. Despite the fact that not all Indigenous authors work with traditional storytelling in their writing, a considerable number of them do, and storytelling and the values it carries frequently constitute a fundamental component of their literature. Reasons for this increased attention to traditional storytelling in contemporary writing seem to be multiple, and functioning on two levels. Firstly, authors continue in the ancient and rich tradition of storytelling that has formed the core of their culture, and this shapes the narratives; their writing is an expression of their culture and worldview. On the second level, the attention to traditional storytelling might be heightened in the texts to amend the disruption of Indigenous cultures caused by colonialism. I intentionally separate these two, since I do not want to centre Indigenous writing solely around colonialism. While it is true that the plots and themes in the novels often deal with the aftermath and various psychological and cultural consequences of colonial history, this project aims to show that the values and principles of narrative techniques of Indigenous texts are not defined by the contact.

Storytelling and oral tradition form key components of Indigenous cultures. Thanks to the wider availability of Indigenous theories on storytelling, it is now possible for a non-Indigenous reader to understand its importance from their perspective. The presented approach through enstoried principles can be one way in which to read Indigenous literature. This work hopes to

introduce Central European readers to the basic aspects and functions of three frequently used characters. All three of these characters embody the enstoried principles – they advocate relationality, reciprocity, and respect. These values must be internalized to be effective and transformative. All these characters are also transformers – they shapeshift and/or have the ability to transform the world. Internalization, transformation, and dynamism are key aspects of Indigenous storytelling; the characters do not only teach these aspects; they embody them. Oral storytelling and its reflections in written texts should not be taken as a special feature of Indigenous literature, but rather as a core element of it, which influences not only the themes, but also the structure of the text and the entire referential framework the text manifests.

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OVERVIEW OF ACADEMIC ACTIVITIES

Selected conference papers and talks

- February 2020: paper titled “Windigo in Contemporary Canadian Indigenous Fiction” presented at 11th Brno International Conference of English, American and Canadian Studies “Breaking Boundaries”, Brno, 12-14 February, Czech Republic
- October 2019: paper titled “Czech Immigration to Canada and Indigenous Peoples” at the conference “Transatlantic Dreams: Understanding Central European Emigration to Canada”, Halifax, 27-31 October, 2019
- April 2018: paper titled “Indigenous Literary Re-Generations: Traditional Storytelling in Contemporary Canadian Indigenous Fiction” presented at the 19th Biennial Association of Canadian Studies in Ireland (ACSI) Conference, Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland
- October 2017: paper titled “Indigenous Identity in Today’s Canada: Reflections in Contemporary Texts by Indigenous Writers” presented at the international Canadian Studies conference "The Americas in Canada - Les Amériques du Canada" which was held at Masaryk University" the Czech Republic
- April 2017: paper titled “Old Stories, New Settings: The Elder Brother and Windigo in Contemporary Canadian Indigenous Literature” presented at BACS 2017 Annual Conference – Canada 150! organized by British Association of Canadian Studies, London (UK)
- June 2016: paper titled ““Stories Are How We Grow as a People Together’: Community Renewal in Richard Van Camp’s Work” presented at CINSA 2016: “Reconciliation through Research”, First Nations University, Regina (Canada)
- May 2016: paper titled “Pain and Laughter: Humor and Suffering in Richard Van Camp’s Short Stories” presented at “the 37th American Indian Workshop”, University of Southern Denmark, Odense (Denmark)
- October 2015: paper titled “Under the Northern Lights: The North Narrated by Richard Van Camp” presented at “the 7th Triennial International Conference of the CEACS: Beyond the 49th Parallel: Canada and the North – Issues and Challenges” organized by Central European Association for Canadian Studies, Zagreb (Croatia)
- July 2015: paper titled “From Hope to Rejection: Literary Perspectives of Two Generations on Reconciliation” presented at the international conference “Survivance & Reconciliation: 7 Forward / 7 Back” organized by Canadian Indigenous/Native Studies Association, Montreal (Canada)
- May 2015: paper titled “Myth as a Narrative of Resurgence and Recovery in the Works of Emerging Canadian Indigenous Writers” presented at the international conference “Highway 2 Conference: Making Inroads” (University of Lethbridge, Canada)

- April 2015: paper titled “Resurgence and Reciprocity: Creation Myth in The Back of the Turtle by Thomas King” presented at a research seminar organized by Canadian Literature Centre at the University of Alberta (Canada)

Invited talks

- “Indigenous Storytelling in Drama and Fiction.” (joined lecture with Klára Kolinská, PhD.) Masaryk University in Brno, April 8, 2019.
- “Současná indiánská a inuitská literatura v Kanadě.” Dny Kanady, Městská knihovna v Praze, November 8, 2017.

Publications

- entries “Big Water Snake” and “White Deer” in the publication *American Myths, Legends, and Tall Tales*, published by ABC-CLIO (California), published in August 2016, ISBN: 978-1-61069-567-1
- editing an issue of PLAV (a monthly focusing on translations of world literature) dedicated to First Nations authors of Canada and translation of one of the short stories in the issue (*Na křídlech této modlitby* by Richard Van Camp) and an interview with Richard Van Camp, published November 15, 2016
- paper titled "Sky Woman and Windigo: Characters from Oral Storytelling in Contemporary Canadian Indigenous Literature" for publication *ELT - Foundations/Versatility* published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing, January 2018
- paper titled "Storytelling in Indigenous Cultures of Canada". English Language Teaching through the Lens of Experience. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing. October 2019. ISBN-13:978-1-5275-3718-7

Teaching experience

- since February 2016: lecturer of anglophone literatures at Purkyně University, Ústí nad Labem (Czech Republic)
 - courses: American Literature 1+2, Literature of Commonwealth, Recent Issues in Literature, British Literature
- “Contemporary Canadian Indigenous literature” – lecture and seminar. University of Latvia (Riga), May 15-17, 2018.

Awards and grants

- March 2018: ICCS (International Council for Canadian Studies) Graduate Student scholarship, award for a 5-week research in University of Alberta library

- July 2017: research at British Library, London (UK) financed by Eccles Centre for American Studies
- September 2014 - August 2015: Doctoral Research Assistant at the Wirth Institute for Austrian and Central European Studies, University of Alberta (Edmonton, Canada)

Membership in academic associations

- since April 2018: membership in Association of Canadian Studies in Ireland (ACSI)
- since March 2015: membership in Canadian Indigenous/Native Studies Association (CINSA)
- since April 2015: membership in Central European Association for Canadian Studies (CEACS)