

## Surviving My Mother's Legacy

### *Patriarchy, Colonialism, and Domestic Violence in Lee Maracle's Daughters are Forever*

*This paper examines the role of the mother figure in Native Canadian women's fiction. Lee Maracle's *Daughters are Forever* addresses the issue of multiple marginalization experienced by Native women, and explores the violent impact of Western patriarchy and colonialism on the relationship between mothers and daughters in Aboriginal societies. Maracle's text demonstrates a link between the mother's legacy, cultural legacy and the legacy of trauma experienced by Native women in the past and in the twenty-first century. Specifically, Maracle's text exposes the socio-cultural and historical processes and structures that have shaped Native women's subjectivity and that underlie the cycle of domestic violence and abuse within Native Canadian families and communities.*

#### **Web of Continuity: The Mother Figure In Native Women's Literature**

The Mother, the Grandmother, recognized from earliest times into present among those people of the Americas who kept to the eldest traditions, is celebrated in social structures, architecture, law, custom, and the oral tradition. To her we owe our lives, and from her comes our ability to endure, regardless of the concerted assaults on our, on Her being, for the past five hundred years of colonization. She is the Old Woman Spider who weaves us together in a fabric of interconnection. (Allen, 1986: 11)

Lee Maracle's *Daughters Are Forever* is haunted by history and memory, and by a mother figure that embodies both. The mother figure is central to Native North American oral and written cultures. Identified throughout various

Native oral traditions as the Earth Woman, the Serpent Woman, and the Old Spider Woman, the mother's multiple manifestations position her as the site at which all things are interconnected. In Native women's literature, the figure of the mother is often represented as the bearer and protector of Native cultural traditions, values and practices who, as Native-American writer Paula Gunn Allen (1986) suggests, "weaves the threads of the ancestral past through the maternal legacy to the present and future, and forges bonds between women by connecting distinct patterns of female experience" (11). In forging these bonds, the mother's web functions as a survival mechanism, a perpetuating force of female agency that enables the resilience of Native peoples and the continuity of Native cultural traditions. Similarly, Maracle posits that cultural survival is possible through the chain of cultural transmission, in which every woman partakes:

Tradition is on-going commitment, and in women's own terms. The story is beautiful, because or therefore it unwinds like a thread. A long thread, for there is no end, another opening, another "residual deposit of duration." Every woman partakes in the chain of guardianship and of transmission-in other words, of creation. (2002: 149)

In this essay, my aim is multifarious: I argue that Western colonial and patriarchal forces, resulting from European contact, impose a radical break in the maternal legacy to which Maracle refers above. Consequently, this break disrupts the continuity of tradition and threatens the survival of Native cultures. Furthermore, I draw from Jeffery C. Alexander's (2004) claim that "trauma is a social and political process" (32) to explore the enduring effects of the original trauma that Aboriginal societies experienced after first contact. Violence against Aboriginal women and the disruption of family and community is represented in Maracle's novel as one of the principle outcomes of Native and Western colonial relations. Maracle demonstrates that the violence and abuse experienced by Aboriginal women is rooted in social and historical processes, and that there is a direct correlation between the historical experience of Native Canadians and current patterns of domination and violence within Native Canadian communities. Specifically, Maracle illustrates the extent to which patterns of violence constitute a breach of trust between female intergenerational relationships. I posit that the trauma that resides within Aboriginal women repeats itself within intergenerational female relationships and manifests itself as a wound on both the female body and collective psyche.

The mother's legacy as a physical, psychological, and metaphorical condition is the central narratological concern in Maracle's text. *Daughters Are Forever* moves beyond traditional counter-narratives to colonialist ethnographic narratives in its focus on the maternal figure as the embodiment of Native women's lived experiences. Maracle's critical initiative is to explore and expose the psychological, physical, and spiritual impact of colonization's

physical assault on the lives of Native women. Maracle's depictions and allusions to rape as the primary form of colonial exploitation is significant, each helping to explain the domestic abuse that marks the mother's present story in the text. The mother's story is framed by Native oral stories, offering a nuanced narratological perspective that moves beyond traditional figurations of the mother to reflect a conflicted protagonist, who is at once, the transmitter of Native cultures and of the physical and psychological trauma that results from colonial and patriarchal processes. As both the victim and perpetrator of domestic abuse, Marilyn, the primary mother figure in the text, reenacts the physical violence that occurred in her colonial past. As such, the mother figure, trapped between the constraints of History and her story, must reconcile her identity with socio-cultural and political realities of her past and present. Neil J. Smelser (2004) explains that a common result of psychological trauma is a double compulsion—to both avoid and repeat or relive the trauma (53). Marilyn's internal conflict, or what Smelser refers to as "antagonistic tendencies" (53) is reflected through the opposition between the mother-daughter kinship bond and the heterosexual relationships in the text. Maracle's narrative suggests that discourses of heteronormativity, upon which patriarchy and colonialism are predicated, is a principle social force that intervenes between mother and daughter. In her discussion of mother-daughter relationships in minority cultures, Natalie Rosinsky (1980) maintains that, "intergenerational bonds between mother and daughter are estranged by patriarchal and imperialist norms for female behaviour and Native women's identity" (280).

Specifically, the men in the novel sever cultural ties by imparting physical and psychological trauma on to the women. The collective trauma that is the legacy of cultural imperialism is represented by Native women's individual experiences of domestic abuse with in heterosexual relationships. Thus, the physical violence experienced by Native women works as an allegory of the collective violence of native history and experience. As such, Native women are doubly colonized by both patriarchal and imperialist regimes. However, the consequence of multiple oppressions on Native women's identity is paradoxical in that history both severs and unites, and constrains and liberates the Native women in the text. The point of resistance, which Maracle identifies as the point at which the victims "devictimize their consciousness" (1992: 91) is represented through the reunification of Marilyn and her daughters, which renews contact with the lost matrilineal tradition. Marilyn's renewed connection between her self and her daughters is established through their shared laughter at the end of the novel, a laughter that negotiates Native women's position as both insiders and outsiders of the continuum of history. Marilyn's laughter represents the reconstitution of her identity through her reconnection with her scarred body, and facilitates the reintegration of her fragmented psyche. Metaphorically, laughter sustains the mother's web of kinship and keeps cultural continuity intact (Bannan, 1980: 271), making possible a transformative feminist politics. Maracle examines the extent to which these transformative politics

are bound up with the politics of women's laughter. The text posits laughter as an ironic, humorous, and visceral response to trauma, as a feminist gesture that breaks through social and cultural barriers and foregrounds an indictment of the exclusivist postcolonial paradigms of past/present, us/them, east/west, native/other, and tradition/modernity by positioning it against patriarchal and colonial ideas of normal behaviour. Thus, in Maracle's text, the Native woman's body is not only the site of struggle and resistance, at which patriarchal and colonial discourses are negotiated, but also the touchstone of Native women's history, memory, conflict, and legacies.

### Intersecting feminist and postcolonial politics

It is the body which is the inescapable, visible sign of oppression and denigration. (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffen, 1995: 321)

From a feminist perspective, the imperialist colonizer/"colonial other" divide is further complicated by the need to make space for a female consciousness. In *Thresholds of Difference: Feminist Critique, Native Women's Writings, Postcolonial Theory*, Julia V. Emberley positions Native women's writing as "an important site of cultural intervention for examining both the ideological contradictions and dominant social formations as well as the various subjugated modes of resistance and alterity that emerge to combat patriarchal, capitalist, and colonial oppression" (1993: 4). However, historical context and cultural specificity are contentious issues within current feminist dialogues. In *How Should I Read These? Native Women Writers in Canada*, Helen Hoy raises important concerns about the potential risk of the dismissal or blurring of fundamental distinctions amongst various Native tribes. The prioritization by Native women "of tribal differences and national sovereignty" (2001: 21) undermines imperialist and feminist universalist representations of culture and sisterhood, and challenges the view that all women's oppression is rooted in gender discrimination. Accordingly, the problem with the universalizing of women's oppression is that the category of gender is privileged over the categories of race and class. In her polemical work *I am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism*, Maracle troubles the premise that patriarchy is at the core of all oppression. While Maracle acknowledges that patriarchy is older than racism (1996: 20), she considers patriarchy and racism as two overlapping systems of oppression. The text troubles the view that women have always and everywhere been oppressed by men, and illustrates that "the influence of Western patriarchy is one of the most significant consequences of colonization; that prior to first contact, women have held a great deal of power in Native cultures" (Allen, 1986: 253). This post-contact shift in power is symptomatic of the historical effects of patriarchy's ideological forces on colonial discursive formations (Emberley 48). In *Daughters Are Forever*, Maracle strategically attributes the devaluation of Native women by Native men to the impact of colonization.

## The legacy of trauma and tradition

The words passed down from mouth to ear, womb to womb, body to body are the remembered ones.... Every woman partakes in the chain of guardianship and of transmission. (Minh-ha, 1989: 136, 121)

The process of cultural transmission is made possible when a thought is made familiar to another person's sense of touch, feeling, taste or sight, when something that is not physical is turned into a physical experience for another person. (Armstrong, 1990: 26)

Maracle's novel, *Daughters are Forever*, evokes the female body as the medium through which the transmission of culture occurs and female social systems of power are reconstituted, however, it explores the extent to which the transmission process is positive and transformative as well as threatening and destructive to the relations between Native women. Postcolonial feminist theorist Trin T. Minh-ha (1989) stresses that "what is transmitted from generation to generation is not only the stories, but the very power of transmission" (134), signifying the potential power of the female body to strengthen ties between women through the transmission process. The connection between women's physical and psychic trauma as it is carried across the spatial and temporal continuum is established at the beginning of the novel through Maracle's feminist revision of the Christian creation myth which remythologizes, through the use of Native oral tradition, a lost matriarchal paradise "rooted in the goodwill of safe womanhood" (Maracle, 2002: 13). Maracle's revisionist myth portrays Turtle Island, the setting of an idyllic pre-colonial contact space, in which female bonds and cultural traditions are forged and maintained through the transmission of oral stories. The break in the maternal legacy which causes a separation from the ancestral past is depicted as a physical rupture, reinforcing the body as the primary vehicle of oral transmission: "in their bodies lived the memories; in their blood coursed traces of old agreements" (14). Drawing from Cathy Caruth's (1996) notion that history implicates us in each other's trauma and that "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own" (24), the novel demonstrates how the body testifies to the experience of individual trauma and functions as the channel through which the characters witness each other's trauma. Accordingly, memory is deeply embedded in both the individual and the collective's sense of identity.

In keeping with Caruth, the female body offers a voice to history in that "the trauma emerges from the wound itself and repeats itself exactly and unremittingly, unknowingly and against the will of the victim. (Caruth, 1996: 2-3)

The blood imagery marks the moment at which colonial conquest forces

the separation between Native culture and tradition and mothers and daughters, as well as between Native women and men. Blood further provides the link between Native women's bodies and cultural heritage, blurring spatial and temporal distinctions. Temporal displacement is reinforced by Marilyn's dream-memory, which is the framework through which the creation myth and colonial conquest narrative is revealed. Marilyn's sense of Native history, as revealed by her dream-memories, is empowering in that "it overflows the boundaries of patriarchal time and truth" (Minh-ha, 1989: 149). We are told by Maracle's narrator that "men don't see life; they barely feel their existence"; that men "mark time and that time is the enemy of the dispirited" (2002: 25). The destructive impact of colonization is that Native women internalize patriarchal notions of time, resulting in the loss of their future and spirit.

The continuity of physical trauma is further emphasized by juxtaposing the images of blood resulting from the first colonial encounter to the post-contact condition of Native women. For instance, the voices that sang the first ships into the village became "blood-filled throats" (Maracle, 2002: 19) and upon the first destructive encounter, the unbroken and untainted bodies, which were free of physical and social contagion (Hoy, 2001: 135), were left in pieces with blood leaking out chronically (Maracle, 2002: 28). Images of Native women's "bloody corpses" (18) are juxtaposed to the blood that later surrounds Marilyn's mother's abused body (33). The blood motif is further associated to the songs that were sung by the colonized Native women, whose voices, through mass rape and assault were "shocked into silence" (17). The dream-songs, which continue to haunt Marilyn in the present, evoke painful memories of the body and represent the trauma that is transmitted across generations, constituting her conflicted identity. This sense of contradiction is exasperated by Marilyn's simultaneous embodiment and disembodiment of the complex historical processes at the core of the colonial and patriarchal project. The haunting dream-songs suggest that Marilyn's body is symptomatic of the multi-layered experiences, both physical and psychological that mark her body, which, at once, carries her own oppression as well as the oppression of her mother and culture:

Marilyn tossed and turned. The dream-song tried to reach her. It hummed about in the thin layer between her muscles and her skin but could not reach her unwilling mind. The stilled woman who left her body spiritless so she could survive carnage and procreate, haunts, but she cannot communicate with Marilyn or Anne. Dream-song memories can be cruel. This one assumed governance of Marilyn and Anne's bodies before it registered in their minds. (Maracle, 2002: 36)

Dream memories demonstrate the extent to which "trauma has a way of intruding itself into the mind, in the form of unwanted thoughts, nightmares, or flashbacks" (Smelser, 2004: 53). Marilyn's dream memories of physical

violation, which invade the body, establish the connection between Native women's victimization, reinforcing the ongoing legacy of trauma.

### **Surviving the stillness: Reclaiming the body's history**

Marilyn did not feel safe inside her emotional being. She might betray herself. In fact, she had a history of letting herself down. (Maracle, 2002: 165)

As the female cycle revolves in the novel, the continuity of collective trauma is represented not only by the sexual exploitation Native women were subjected to in the past, but the transmission of trauma is a process that culminates in the physical assault they exercise on their own daughters in the present. As both the victim and perpetrator of abuse, Marilyn participates in the traumatic reenactment of self-negation by losing sense of her own physicality, and in doing so, exemplifying the extent to which history leaves its mark on the body. Native women's experience of a history of physical victimization and cultural domination results in the inculcation of colonial and patriarchal values of racism and sexism. As such, these values establish physical patterns of suppression and redirection of pain. Marilyn's suppression of feeling is a result of colonial and patriarchal discourses that render the body as shameful. The colonial encounter blankets the bodies of the Native women of Turtle Island with "a layer of shame" (Maracle, 2002: 24) that render their bodies with a "pain-filled stillness that replaced the body's natural desire to move" (19). The shame that rose from "between the legs of skirtless bronze bodies" (19) triggers the stillness that marks the female legacy of trauma. The internalization of this racist-sexist logic in the text is intensified through women's disembodiment, and, in turn, is projected on to the daughters through physical abuse. Thus Marilyn unwittingly perpetuates the cycle of physical and psychic pain by beating "stillness" into her daughters.

Colonization for Native women signifies the enforced docility of the female body. Stillness, a recurring motif in the novel, signals this docility; to the suppression of excitement and to what Maracle refers to as the "absence of and negation of Native women's desire" (Maracle, 1996: 20). As such, stillness represents the internalized fear and self-erasure passed on through generations. Minh-ha (1989) argues that this process of internalization is perpetuated because mothers "carry their own guilt and self-hatred over into their daughters' experiences" (244). It is the stillness of the body that severs the emotional ties between mother and daughter and causes Native women's disassociation from their bodies. After her father's death, we are told that "Marilyn mimicked her mother's silence" (34), which "robbed Marilyn of the nurturing she needed to become herself" (34). Maracle not only emphasizes the extent to which stillness pervades the female body, but makes the point that stillness is an effect of heterosexual relations that



...filled both mother and daughter. It became their governess. Their bodies adjusted almost automatically to it. It felt old, familiar...too strange to truly contemplate. Its heavy presence weighed down upon them. The thickness of it stopped their skin from acknowledging their own presence. The skin lost its ability to feel its way through life.... "Don't move" became the command of Anne and Marilyn. (Maracle, 2002: 35)

Unable to come to terms with her past, Anne's stillness enforces a break in the mother-daughter relationship and poses a continuous threat to the female body. Adrienne Rich (1976) argues that "the loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy" (237) and according to Natalie Rosinsky (1980), "this loss is one of psychological nurturance" (280). The loss of the daughter to the mother is illustrated by Marilyn's relationship with her daughters. While stillness ostensibly performs the positive function of ensuring women's protection and survival, the novel makes clear how the transmission of stillness came to define Marilyn's relationship with her daughters and how the trauma process plays itself out in the present. We are told that "women, the keepers of cultural survival, passed on stillness as the ultimate way to protect their daughters" (Maracle, 2002: 22). However Anne's "Don't move" command that silences her daughter, which echoes Native women's historical calls to "Be still" as a response to colonial invasion, are less protective than destructive in the way that they "change the voice of motherhood" (27) so that possibilities of laughter and connection are superseded by silence and stillness. Marilyn's memories of "don't move" thwart her ability to confront her past and recover her Native female identity. Nevertheless, it is Marilyn's vocation as a social worker that first forces her to confront her history. Despite her position as neglectful, alcoholic mother, Marilyn finds meaning in her work, which ironically entails her governing the relationship between Elsie, another Native woman and alcoholic mother, and her children. Paradoxically, in confronting Elsie's case file, Marilyn's "stillness" leaves her body for a brief moment when her own fear of losing her daughters is momentarily realized (48). The parallels drawn between Marilyn and Elsie function to create a bond between Native mothers' complex struggles, which the text indicates "had taken over one hundred years to create" (55).

The temporary physical separation between Marilyn and her daughters evolves into "an invisible bridge that continued to divide them" (Maracle, 2002: 49). Having led a "life of pain and hate" which is "all she had to share" (109), Marilyn projects her pain onto her children. Despite this transmission of trauma, Marilyn recognizes that she still carries feelings of love "banged around the walls of her belly" (109), which move her toward transformative action. This movement counters the stillness and accuses her stillness of being "guilty of conjuring her hate" (109). Thus Marilyn's conflicted bodily processes of physical restriction and no restraint, reflect her psychic processes.



Marilyn's relationship with T. J. (the text's male protagonist) counters her other heterosexual relationships and ostensibly triggers a balance between these two modes of corporeal responses. While it momentarily offers her the possibility to reclaim her desire and reawaken her body's "deadened ecstasy" (19), the physical relationship is not actualized in the novel. In fact, Marilyn's movement towards governing her own body and reclaiming what Maracle terms as "her sacred and significant self" (Maracle, 1992: 91) is stunted by her heterosexual relationships. Based on her heteronormative fantasies, Marilyn constructs T. J. as an ideal in her mind, moved by his image rather than his actual physical presence. Marilyn's construction of T. J.'s image is one of several recurring experiences of "drifting images" which she admits is an "unnamable and unreal aspect of herself that she had kept secret from everyone" (Maracle, 2002: 128). Marilyn continues to romanticize her relationship with T. J. even though she admits to not wanting to meet him (130). After she establishes a connection with her daughters, Marilyn recognizes that T. J. only offers her a momentary respite (207), and realizes that it is not through his presence that her body is renewed, but through her idealization of him. Rather, the complex process of renewing contact with the body culminates in Marilyn's reconciliation with her daughters. This process traces the transformation of Marilyn's anger and hostility into a complex recognition of maternal responsibility (Irvine, 1980: 244). Although she attributes her awakened desire to a brief heterosexual encounter, which is not consummated on a physical level, Marilyn minimizes this awakening by reminding herself that she is "in the middle of a Harlequin romance; a goofy love story" (Maracle, 2002: 153), realizing "that she was not hungry for a man at all, but hungry for her daughters" (246).

### **Laughter catharsis: Reclaiming memory and identity**

Laughter is closely bound up with power. So it may come as no surprise to discover that women have not always lacked a sense of humour. (Gray, 1994: 6)

Laughter is the bodily function, directly connected to psychic processes that ultimately reunite the mother-daughter relationship. Laughter, according to Frances Gray (1994), is closely bound up with power (6). In the novel, the integration of psyche and body, the recuperation of history and cultural tradition is represented by the laughter that Marilyn shares with her mother, her girlfriend Gerri, and most potently, with her daughters. While the laughter with men that Marilyn claims she is lonely for (Maracle, 2002: 174) represents the expression of her heteronormative desire, the laughter she shares with her daughters secures the bond between Native women through their shared oppression and transmits the powers of their cultural traditions through their foremothers (Minh-ha, 1989: 135). The recollection of the power of

her mother's laughter, which continued to "gain volume and clarity," enables Marilyn to confront her childhood experiences as a witness to domestic abuse. Thus, for Marilyn, female laughter is a transformative bodily response that offers release from physical containment and makes the survival of individual and collective trauma possible. This distinct female laughter also has a similar affect on Marilyn's girlfriend Gerri, whose sense of humour "saves her from embracing pure hatred" (Maracle, 2002: 174-75). No longer victim to her concealed feelings, Marilyn's laughter challenges the silence that separates her from others and renews her connection with mother-history, experiencing her personal rebirth as a result.

The laughter shared between Marilyn and her daughters in the final scene performs a recuperative act of renewing the body's spirit and releasing the women from stillness. This function is emphasized at the end of the novel during a cathartic scene where Marilyn feigns a reenactment of her past assault by suggestively exposing the wooden spoon, her primary instrument of assault, to her daughters. Marilyn's uncovering of the wooden spoon reactivates their memories of the trauma, and as psychoanalyst Judith Herman (1992) explains, is an example of the way in which "traumatized people relive the moment of trauma not only in their thoughts and dreams but also in their actions...they often feel impelled to re-create the moment of terror, either in literal or disguised form without realizing what they are doing (39-41). Marilyn's and daughter's response to this shocking moment was laughter: "Their laughter came out squeezed between tense, still-nervous vocal chords. It gained volume as the fear floated up and out. Somewhere in the laughter, Marilyn realized she wasn't hungry for them at all, but for herself" (Maracle, 2002: 234). Marilyn's disguised repetition of the colonial act of violence is a radically transformative moment that performs a healing function that culminates in the reinstatement of the mother's power, and reinforces the maternal roles as healer and protector of cultural tradition. The very act of their laughter as a group suggests cultural cohesion and communal identity. Furthermore, Marilyn's revelatory action elicits a laughter of recognition such that it enables the daughters to recognize their mother as a fellow victim, making reconciliation possible. Women's laughter, according to Luce Irigaray (1985), is "the first form of liberation from a secular oppression" (163). The laughter shared by Marilyn and her daughters represents a reunification with the maternal body that signifies Native culture, community, and collectivity; it is a laughter that playfully yet powerfully overturns patriarchal and colonial culture in a deconstructive manner. Maracle's text demonstrates that Native women's laughter releases their trauma from the body and perpetuates cultural continuity. By paralleling the silence of the scarred collective psyche to the stillness of the body in pain, the former disciplined by psychological violence and the latter by physical violence, Maracle offers a narrative that explores the possibility for a renewed Native female heritage that stands outside of colonial and patriarchal processes.

## Conclusion: Representation, resistance, and transformative female politics

We are interested in clearly stating what we see and looking for the key to the unknown in the voices and words of others. We are listening—our imaginations fully engaged—to what is said, what is not said, and what is connected to what is not said. (Maracle, 2007: 58)

Lee Maracle, of Salish and Cree ancestry and a member of the Sto:loh Nation, stands amongst several contemporary Native women writers in Canada, including Jeannette Armstrong, Maria Campbell, Beatrice Culleton, and Eden Robinson, to name only a few, who move beyond the ethnographic approach to explore the connections between Native women, history, gendered politics, and narrative identity. In doing so, these women have helped provide a space in the Canadian literary tradition for Aboriginal women's voices. Through narrative, Maracle participates in the ongoing attempt by Native women writers in Canada to tell a story that needs to be told about multiple marginalization, but more so about transformative relationships and the reconstruction of individual and collective identity. The novel situates the female body as the symbolic site at which the psychosocial, physical, and political conflicts are played out. The inclusion by Maracle of the Native female ethnic body into the history of colonialism serves as a textual intervention against the silenced history of Native women and often overlooked Native-Canadian culture. Maracle embarks on what she calls the "journey of the story" to discover and unfold unknown voices, words, and histories, and it is only "in seeing ourselves through [her] story that we become part of that journey" (2007: 59).

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