

Writing with Blood: Dis-covering Essence

in Louise Bernice Halfe's *Blue Marrow*

by

David Gaertner

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of

The University of Manitoba

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of

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Abstract

In today's academy the idea of essence is often disregarded as a viable ground for critical discourse. Current theoretical work, for the most part, centers on postmodern ideas of displacement, social construction, mimesis and our apparent inability to maintain a stable metaphysic. In his 2001 book *Against Essentialism* Stephen Fuchs suggests that upon close examination of the elements we may have once accepted as the fundamentals of Being, "natural kinds disappear altogether, or turn out to be non-essential after all"(13). However, for the Cree writer Louise Bernice Halfe Cree fundamentals, or essences, play an indispensable role in creating a space for Cree identity that can be maintained alongside the debilitating space of colonial culture. Thus, my thesis will compare and contrast the differing perspectives on essence in *Blue Marrow* and the Western philosophical tradition, paying particular attention to how Halfe creates a badly needed theoretical space for essence from *within* a Cree paradigm. It is my hope to contribute to a discussion that re-enters essence into an academic discourse from the perspective found in Native literatures and epistemologies.

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Introduction

Starting at the Beginning: Cree Essence and Theory in *Blue Marrow*

In his CBC Massey Lecture, *The Truth About Stories*, Thomas King writes about the nature of change in stories and the ground that provides a structure for changes to occur on:

There is a story I know. It's about the earth and how it floats in space on the back of a turtle. I've heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes. Sometimes the change is simply in the voice of the storyteller. Sometimes the change is in the details. Sometimes in the order of events. Other times it's the dialogue or the response of the audience. But in all the tellings of all the tellers, the world never leaves the turtle's back. And the turtle never swims away. (1)

All stories, and that includes orature, novels, poetry and philosophy, need a turtle to rest on, a structure to take shape in. Despite postmodern arguments against it, I would argue that essence provides this structure for many Aboriginal authors. In the tautological manner of the word essence itself, Aboriginal theory must give itself to itself in order to look towards new forms of colonial existence.

In Louise Bernice Halfe's *Blue Marrow* essence plays an indispensable role in creating a space for Cree identity that can maintain itself alongside the dissimulating space of colonial culture. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines essence as "the basic or most important feature of something, which determines its character". Inasmuch as they make up the basic structure of *Blue Marrow* and help to determine its character, blood, bones and marrow can be said to make up an essence of this text. They connect the

narrator to her people and her stories; they provide a ground for history; they offer a Native centre and a beginning that is Cree. Towards the end of the book the narrator has a vision of her ancestors in a garden: "Raw-boned, / they left their blood. / In these moccasin gardens / I pick my medicines"(2nd edition 97). The garden in this passage is a place of growth and a beginning, a beginning which is defined specifically as Native in the adjectival use of "moccasin". As a point of beginning, a basic "ground" from which Native culture grows, the garden is connected with blood, bone and medicine. It is from this interpretation of essence in *Blue Marrow* that I will ground a beginning for my project here.

Traditionally, essences, which are also known as natural kinds in philosophy, are things in and of themselves, things that resist postmodern notions of deconstruction, antifoundationalism, the critique of representation and so on. Essence is the single, invariable feature of a thing. Stephen Fuchs writes that "natural kinds are things-in-themselves, after they have reached their true state and unfolded their inherent potential"(12). In *Tarrying with the Negative* Slavoz Zizek suggests that "'essence' designates here the immediate inwardness, the 'essence of things,' which persists irrespective of the external form"(134). To put it colloquially, if a thing is an essence, "it is what it is" and as such it often provides, for better or for worse, a ground from which to build a discourse. As tautology, essence also serves as a means of protection. Inasmuch as it is irreducible it is difficult to directly attack without getting caught up in a circular argument. Essence demarcates an ontological space and repels assertions that might dilute it. However, what essence means for Halfe in *Blue Marrow* both exceeds and expands a word that has become worn and tired in contemporary Western discourse, a

word that has become the whipping boy of modern critical thought and postmodern theory.

Marrow, one might venture to say, is what makes up the essence of essence for philosophy. Throughout the philosophical and literary traditions, bone and blood have provided an ontological ground for philosophers and authors alike. It is blood that binds families and nations, a notion we do not need Hegel to understand; and as poor Yorick would have told us had he still the means to do so, it is bone that provides a key to memory. Zizek suggests that “phrenology ends with the infinite judgment ‘Spirit is a bone’”(34). In other words, the idea that the “essence” of an individual can be captured in bone has roots that stretch far back into Western thought. Indeed, getting “close to the bone” of existence, the core of being, has been the project of many philosophical endeavours. Descartes’ “I think therefore I am” is just one classic example of an attempt to locate this inner core of being. Insisting that her reader “see the blood”(3) and “listen to the bones”(19), Halfe is aware of the importance these essences have for culture in general, yet she is also cognizant of how they are most readily associated with Western thought and bodies.

In *Blue Marrow* essence, as blood and bone, is evoked to initiate a Cree discourse outside of Western conceptions of truth and history. Essence can ground a representation of Cree identity, history and stories many of which have been repressed, obscured and denied by colonial culture. Marrow as the origin of blood and as the center of bones is, so to speak, an origin of origins. Bones and stories are synonymous in *Blue Marrow*. In her essay “Bone Memory,” Méira Cook connects the narrator’s ancestral narratives to bone:

“the bone, more particularly the ‘jaw bone of elk / lined with pearly teeth’(14)¹ that the narrator chooses as *aide-memoire*... is both totem and *memento mori*” (Cook 89). In other words, as is particularly cited in the image of the jaw --the bone which facilitates language and thus stories-- bones carry narrative in *Blue Marrow*. Like ink in a pen², the (blue) marrow found in bone renders into stories a Cree history.

Indeed, in the dedication to her first book of poems, *Bear Bones & Feathers*, Halfe writes that, “we own these stories / The Marrow”(dedication). In other words, these stories are at the centre of Cree representation. By acknowledging a centre, a “Creeness”, history can be interpreted from that position, creating a sense of ownership and responsibility that is often obscured when unfolded against colonial culture. Indeed, the Métis writer Lee Maracle refers to a particularly lucid interpretation of history as seeing through “the eyes of my essence” (300). Yet, essence, like the Cree bones buried in “mass graves” (Halfe 20) across the prairies, has become what the narrator of *Blue Marrow* must dis-cover beneath the layers of Western history and literature that serve to obscure and discredit it.

In the academy, essence and its adjectival counterpart, essentialism, has become a critical flogging stick that professors and students use to undercut the validity of a text or an argument. Within postmodern and anti-humanist contexts essence is something that either cannot or should not be located. In his 2001 book *Against Essentialism* Stephen Fuchs suggests that upon close examination of the elements we may have once accepted

¹ Cook’s page references are from the 1998 printing of *Blue Marrow* from McClelland & Stewart.

² Of course stories are not limited to ink. Cook’s essay opens up an “an opposition between the written text and what has been called oratory”(85). The transference of stories through different types of media, oral and written, is an exceptionally important part of *Blue Marrow* and an on-going debate in Native literature and theory. However, I do not have the space to explore this aspect of the text here. I will refer my reader to Cook’s excellent essay to explore this opposition in *Blue Marrow* in a more detailed manner.

as the essence of Being, “natural kinds disappear altogether, or turn out to be non-essential after all”(13). The Abenaki poet Cheryl Savageau writes that in graduate school “essentialist” was “thrown at [her] like a dirty word” (Womack 3) when she spoke about the “truth” of a Native experience. Even in Cook’s essay “Bone Memory”, the author worries about having such a devastating term as “essentialist” pointed at the text she is examining and takes the time to negate its possibility. Cook draws on James Ruppert’s notion of “multiple narratives of identity” as a means to “combat[...] charges of essentialism that may conceivably be leveled”(98) at the text she is examining.

The authority that grants “truth” its station and the ground that anti-essentialism takes in order to construct its argument play a large role in the need for a return to essence in Native literature. I will be looking at both in depth in the following chapters. However, it is not my intent to suggest that contemporary theory, in which anti-essentialism plays a large role, should be entirely abandoned in an exegesis of *Blue Marrow*. I would argue that essence itself is not detrimental to culture and society, however its application often is. It should be obvious that while essence may have its theoretical advantages, it also provides the grounds for stereotyping, hate and discrimination. As a result of the problems it elicits, we have perhaps directed our focus away from essence itself towards what divides us from it, that which has been paradoxically, to use a phrase popular in academia right now, “constructed” as essence.

Essence, like the Real, origin, or even the turtle story, is not a viable ground to build a critical discourse on *within* the postmodernist structure of today’s academy. Yet, stepping outside of this structure is often regarded as regressive, or uncritical. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn addresses the hegemony of non-Native academic paradigms in her important

essay, "Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner." According to Cook-Lynn the American Indian has been excluded from the academy for two key reasons. First, he or she has been isolated from American history and thus the discourse that constitutes the paradigmatic ideas of "logic" and "truth". Second, a dialectic that exists outside and independent from the popular definition of this logic is often disregarded as being "unscholarly"(33). In other words, Native and non-Native critics often feel powerless when using Native theory to justify their work. There is no way to logically ground Native ideas without opening them up (creating critical connections outside of the economy of meaning provided by a single text) against a Western theoretical background. Of course, this compromises the integrity of a comprehensive Native theory.

According to Craig Womack, Native critics turning to non-Native theorists to ground their arguments results in the lack of strong Native theory and the mainstream assertion that Native theory is uncritical: "If we Native critics share the fault of being 'theoryless,' my contention would be that this comes from not looking enough at our *home cultures*, not from looking too much at them" (emphasis mine, 13). In other words, Native theory is caught in a double bind, what Arnold Krupat aptly defines with the cliché "damned if you do and damned if you don't"(11). If a Native theory is not grounded in Western epistemologies it is often considered uncritical. As such, the theory is denied access to popular academic discourses and the authority these discourses bestow. However, if Native theory is grounded in Western epistemologies, the "Nativity" of the idea is obfuscated by the context it is presented in. By unfolding Native epistemologies against a Western background these epistemologies are limited to

the rules and regulations set by the Western thought. In both cases, with or against the mainstream, the development of Native theory *as such* is limited.

Unfortunately, Native concepts of essence in the academy are often considered against a postmodernist background. In the introduction to his book *Red on Red*, the Creek author Craig S. Womack states that “it is way too premature for Native scholars to deconstruct history when we haven’t yet constructed it”(3). Without disregarding the importance of postmodernism, and its place in the academy, he goes on to say that “postmodernism may have some limitations in regards to its application to Native scholarship”(4). In *Decolonizing Methodologies* Linda Tuhiwai Smith, a Maori academic, argues that

there can be no ‘postmodern’ for us until we have settled some business of the modern. This does not mean that we do not understand or employ multiple discourses, or act in incredibly contradictory ways, or exercise power ourselves in multiple ways. It means that there is unfinished business, that we are still being colonized (and know it), and that we are still searching for justice (34).

As this quote suggests, postmodernism, as a critical movement, has swept away the foundations of a body of literature that still has need of them³. In order for resistance to occur Native literature needs something to brace itself against. The scepticism implicit to postmodern theory has disallowed this possibility. Indeed, as I will be examining in my first chapter, *Blue Marrow* attempts to show how Cree essence has come to be (mis)defined in the terms of a theoretical context that need not apply to it.

³ In *How Should I Read These?* Helen Hoy also comments on the problems Native writers encounter with postmodernism. Hoy writes that “the postmodern crisis of meaning, destabilizing of the subject, and hermeneutics of suspicion (with their own local history and function) risk becoming universalized”(9). In other words, scepticism and instability, in their nearly universal application in the academy, have paradoxically become a ground for academic writing making it a difficult epistemology to challenge.

Theory itself is movement and the anticipation of possibility, that which should, as Judith Butler puts it, allow us “to rethink the possible as such” (*Gender Trouble*, xx). In order for Aboriginal literature to be possible *as such* this literature must be examined, not within a Western philosophical structure, but alongside it. A new structure requires a new ground, which *Nehiyawiwini* or “Creeness” can provide. Those looking to build on a Cree theory can turn to this ground as a place to begin and move forward. This is not to say that non-Native theory or theorists cannot or should not be included in this structure, but rather that it/they should attempt to place themselves within it, rather than the other way around. Of course as an outsider studying the essence of a culture it is challenging to acknowledge all of the elements that could contribute to a “Creeness”. Because I am an outsider to Cree culture and because I do not speak the language, my reading of *Blue Marrow* might not appear to deliver the Cree essence I am attempting to ground my thesis in. In fact, in the process of writing and researching this thesis I have discovered many Native ideas and stories that may have significantly altered my reading of Halfe’s text. Whereas I may have once approached a passage from a Western point of view I have come to recognize Native concepts that perhaps more fully open up the ideas Halfe is working with. However, in any area of scholarship there is always more to read and learn. And in regards to Native Canadian literature, to be paralyzed by a deluge of information is only to contribute to the silence that suppresses an important part of Canadian history. At some point I had to make the choice to begin with what knowledge I had. In this sense, turning inward to blood, bone and marrow, to an essence of Cree being, allows a Cree theory to grow *as such* and allows me, as an outsider and an academic, to continue to learn.

Furthermore, it does not call for an abandonment of mainstream theory. Essence serves as an anchor, a point from which to explore new ideas. I am taking my cue here from the Cree author and theorist Neal McLeod, who describes the anchor metaphor beautifully:

If a ship is tied to the anchor it will not rest in one spot forever. The ship will shift around, alternating locations. However, it will stay in the same general area, the same general location over a period of time. However, if the ship is cut from the anchor, then it will drift beyond the known (33).

While change is implicit to McLeod's metaphor, so is constancy. Essence gives an Aboriginal theory the anchor point and the strength to explore new possibilities, while also protecting it from being assimilated, or condemned to obscurity in the structure of an "unknown" non-Native culture. Thus, my first point of order in *Blue Marrow* will be to establish a viable anchor point, or ground, within that text.

Indeed, my first chapter will deal with the theoretical incongruence of anti-essentialist attacks pointed at Native literature from a Western structure. Essence in Native literature is often attacked from the ground of a truth/fiction dichotomy. Truth is considered to be consecrated and constant, whereas fiction is mutable and transient. The two hold each other apart by a firmly demarcated difference. Womack establishes the truth/fiction dichotomy as a seminal argument against Native literature in his book *Red on Red*. In his introduction to the book Womack quotes a personal letter from an Abenaki poet and friend Cheryl Savageau. The letter, which apparently relates a true story, tells of a professor who labels Savageau as an "essentialist" suggesting that "there [is] no truth, no history, just lots of people's viewpoints"(4). Since Savageau is called an essentialist

for conforming to a particular definition of truth, we are able to conflate truth and essence in this passage. Most importantly, however, is the fact that truth and viewpoint are assumed to be mutually exclusive terms⁴. As we can see, the claim sets up a direct opposition between the two. On the one hand, we have truth. On the other hand we have viewpoint. If the division between the two were not so definite this type of argument would make no sense.

What we need to consider is whether truth is necessarily diametrically opposed to viewpoint in Native literature. If it is not, the basic claim anti-essentialists use against essence in Native writing might not provide the best ground for critical understanding of this literature. Perhaps essence, as it is used in Native literature, needs to be re-examined. The practical application of a truth/fiction binary in Louise Bernice Halfe's *Blue Marrow* is the focus here. However, we will first need to establish a definition for viewpoint and a link between it and fiction and its place in anti-essentialist thought.

Viewpoint arguments dominate modern theory insofar as they facilitate postmodern incredulity. A viewpoint is a specific way of observing things, an opinion or point of view. Obviously, viewpoints change from person to person, place to place and time to time. Viewpoints also change within individuals. The key point to remember about viewpoints is that they are not fixed, whereas truth or essence is often assumed to be. Because of this they can always be called into question. As with essence, viewpoint also provides an argumentative impasse. Because of the ground utilized by a viewpoint

⁴ In her essay "The White Inuit Speaks" Diana Brydon posits that post-modernism is also predominantly concerned with the truth and its accessibility. Brydon writes that "without denying that things happened, post-modernism focuses on the problems raised by history's textualized accessibility: on the problems of representation, and on the *impossibility of retrieving truth*" (emphasis mine, 188).

argument there is no discriminating way to move beyond its logic, besides pointing to its inherent emptiness.

Indeed, at the root of these claims is a basic truth/fiction dichotomy. As the professor in Savageau's story seems to be suggesting, viewpoints are manufactured. Every viewpoint, whether of an individual or group, has been built out of an intricate web of biology, culture, chance, geography, ideology and any of the other many variables that might contribute to existence. A viewpoint can be a lot of things but it has always been "made up" by experience. Therefore, the logic behind anti-essentialist claims can be broken down into a simple syllogism: everything is viewpoint; viewpoint is manufactured; therefore truth is manufactured (or, and this is almost to say the same thing, there is no truth).

The stability provided by this logic makes it difficult to refute. How can Savageau, for example, assert that truth exists when she necessarily uses her viewpoint to do so? We need to break the claim down even further. As we can infer from the syllogism above, the viewpoint tautology, as applied in an attack against essence, is dependent on one simple premise: *viewpoint is manufactured and truth is not*. In other words truth and fiction are mutually exclusive terms. For the anti-essentialist, and we will continue to use Savageau's professor as an example of such, a definite line between truth and fiction must remain firm in order for his argument against truth and essence to be viable. By putting this claim into question we can disrupt the stability of an established attack against essence in Native literature.

With such a large and abstract concept as "truth", which we are dealing with here, the need for a stable context in which to unfold it becomes even more necessary. As Ian

Hacking points out, “truth” itself has no solid ground⁵: try looking the word up in the dictionary. *The Oxford English Dictionary* tells me that “truth” is “the state of being true”. The emptiness of that definition is almost comical. One might just as well insist that truth is truth. However, following from this explanation I found that the definition of “true” is “in accordance with fact and reality”. Finally, as you are probably already guessing, “fact” is defined as “a thing that is known to be true”. As any dictionary will illustrate, defining truth in any sort stable way, besides by balancing it on itself, is a difficult endeavour. The word “truth” itself is hollow; it must be anchored within some outside context or authority⁶.

For the most part I will be attempting to ground my definition of Native truth and essence in *Blue Marrow* itself, or the “home culture”(13) as Womack puts it. Of course doing so also presents a particular set of difficulties. In my experience, staying as close as possible to the text one is working on offers the most fruitful exegesis. Stepping too far outside of the primary source dilutes the effectiveness of an analysis. “Close to the bone” is the cliché often used to describe an observation that is exceptionally personal or that locates the root of a problem. In its preoccupation with bones and marrow, “close to the bone” is a cliché that applies nicely to *Blue Marrow*. The narrator writes that

this long bone I hold

leaves me calloused and cold.

⁵ In *The Social Construction of What?* Hacking refers to a game the philosopher J.L. Austin once played called *Vish!* (vicious cycle): “You look up a word, and then look up words in its dictionary definition; when you get back to the original word, you cry *Vish!*”(23). Hacking then suggests that his reader try the game on abstract concepts like knowledge, real, fact and truth, which I have above.

⁶ In the seminar *Aporias* Jacques Derrida suggests the contingency of truth on context. Starting the seminar he writes: “‘Limits of truth,’ with the prudence of quotation marks, is of course a citation. A concession to the times: today one would scarcely risk putting forth such a disquieting phrase without sheltering it behind some kind of paternity”(1). For Derrida, the “paternity”, or context, in which he will begin to unfold “the limits of truth” is “Diderot’s authority”(1).

A few months ago I chewed all the meat
and now I've become clever."(13)

In her imprecation to "listen to the bones"(19) of her ancestors, "this long bone" can be interpreted as a representation of a Cree narrative. It is by getting "close to the bone", that the narrator "become[s] clever". In other words, it is by staying adjacent to Cree stories that the narrator will find the strength and intuition to write a cohesive Cree history.

In a similar manner, I would like to stay "close to the bone" of *Blue Marrow* to shape my thesis. For the most part the sheer depth of the text will allow me to do this. However, reading a text through the ideologies it seems to put forth creates similar effects to a dictionary explanation of "truth". In the end the reading is balanced precariously on itself. Without some external ground or anchor point a close reading of any text seems somewhat incestuous and curiously empty. Staying at "home", as Womack would have it, is not always feasible, let alone desirable. In the remainder of this thesis, when I do step outside of *Blue Marrow* it will be to ground the ideas I find there in work that I believe is relevant and sympathetic to Native literature. However, I cannot deny that my understanding of "logic" and "truth" are rooted in Western epistemologies and texts. It is my hope that my interpretation, agreed with or refuted, can contribute to the proliferation of Native theory as a viable logic to begin to unfold ideas against.

It will not be the point of my first chapter to further disrupt the stability of the viewpoint argument. In many ways it follows the same type of logic I am evoking with essence. Like viewpoint, essence appeals to itself to create its own ground, in what I will be calling throughout this thesis, following from Slavoj Zizek, a tautological gesture. A

tautological gesture is the unspoken movement in an argument that evokes an implicit point of stability or ground that is often difficult, if not impossible to refute. For example take the statement, “all hermeneutics are a product of viewpoint”. In order to disagree with this statement I would have to first free myself from viewpoint, which is, to the best of my westernized knowledge, impossible. In fact, by challenging the statement, I tacitly reinforce its validity. The illusion of stability offered by tautology often provides the ground from which to build an entire discourse. However, rather than unseating viewpoint from its current position as a ground for much of contemporary theory, I would like to suggest that essence in Native literature often parallels contemporary notions of logic in the academy, as identified in *Red on Red*, while still operating out of an alternate centre.

Indeed, *Blue Marrow* offers a very “different set of terms” to the epistemologies utilized in anti-essentialist attacks, such as the one used by Savageau’s professor. In *The Turn to the Native* Arnold Krupat writes that while Native scholars may use abstract ideas such as knowledge and truth in ways that are similar to western models, “the Native American scholars whose work I know... may operate according to very different cognitive paradigms”(12). This is not to say that the radical alterity of Native people disallows non-Native scholars from accessing these paradigms. Rather, it is to say that inasmuch as there are similarities between Western and Native ideas of “knowledge” and “truth,” which could provoke founded arguments *against* essence, there are also differences that could disrupt the stability of these arguments.

Because “truth” is the operative word relating to essence in Savageau’s story, it is also an abstract concept we will be dealing with in *Blue Marrow*. As we will see, “truth”

in Native texts does not strictly operate within the limits set out by Western thought. In other words, it is not the opposite of fiction. In *The Truth About Stories* Thomas King writes that “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are”(2). On the one hand, “truth” in this passage subscribes to Western definitions inasmuch as it is a “the basic or most important feature of something, which determines its character.” It is “all we are,” an essence of being. On the other hand, “all we are,” is precisely fiction, for King. Like “medicine” in *Blue Marrow*, a concept which we will also be looking at in detail, this definition of “truth” has no stable meaning. It is subject to the change that accompanies the re-telling of any story.

In my second chapter, I will be looking more closely at essence as the anchor or grounding point identified by McLeod in “Coming Home Through Stories.” Halfe identifies essence as a “stepping stone” (97). Essence, as a theoretical stepping stone, has deep roots in postcolonial history. Negritude, a term coined by Aime Cesaire in 1939 and developed by a number of other black thinkers and writers like Leopold Sedar Senghor was based in an essence of blackness. The *Dictionary of Critical Theory* (DCT) writes that Senghor in particular equated “negritude with an essentialist celebration of an inherently African affectivity and personality”(266). Despite what Pal Ahluwalia calls an “all-too-easy dismissal...on the basis of essentialism” (232), negritude would provide a stepping stone for other black authors looking to expand on the idea or begin new paths of theoretical resistance. Although he is quite critical of the movement at times, Frantz Fanon would develop many of his ideas from the ground laid out by Cesaire and negritude. Indeed Fanon’s seminal text *Black Skin, White Masks*, particularly the chapter “The Fact of Blackness”, takes negritude and essence as a point of critical inception.

However, despite its historical use, contemporary theory often regards the “logic” of essence to be empty. According to Slavoj Žižek, “‘essence...remains an empty determination whose adequacy can be tested only by verifying the extent to which it is expressed, rendered manifest, in the external form”(134). In other words what essence “is” is dependent on the knowledge or context that grounds it at any particular space or time. With no other recourse, one who is working with essence is often forced to ground it in itself. The result is a tautology, which can be most succinctly expressed in the cliché “it is what it is.” Inasmuch as a tautology neither takes away nor adds content to the object it is addressing, it provides a point of implicit stability for the individual evoking it to forward his or her argument.

However, Krupat would argue that the “logic” of essence is not logic at all, but rhetoric. In the section he entitles “Problems with Essentialization,” Krupat suggests that for Native people, essentialist assertions are “rhetorical acts...performed for their practical effectiveness rather than for their logical coherence or factual accuracy”(6). Through King’s turtle story we can see how conceding to the ground offered by tautology might indeed be interpreted as being more practically effective than logically coherent. Obviously, despite the alternative of perpetually “counting turtles”, tautology does not provide the “good reason” we like to base scholarly claims on.

Nonetheless, as Krupat goes on to point out, in the face of statistics, which make it “abundantly clear”(8) that Native people are being denied the benefits afforded to non-Natives in North America, “the line between dialectic and rhetoric tends to shift and blur”(8). As we will find by comparing *Blue Marrow* to Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, two texts written almost fifty years apart, the colonized person occupies “a zone

of nonbeing”(Fanon 8). In other words, for the Cree there is no place to exist *as such* in colonial culture. In order for the colonized to identify themselves they must do so within a colonial structure, which relegates them to a position of absence, or what Jacques Derrida refers to as the aporia. Thus, any option that can provide the colonized with some degree of stability can be seen as operating within the limits of logic. Using the space set out for the colonized by Halfe and Fanon I will be attempting to show how witnessing the bloodshed of the Cree can operate as a ground or stepping stone for Native theory in *Blue Marrow*.

My final chapter will more carefully address the limitations of a Native project that necessitates essence as a means for healing. I will be addressing these limitations through Halfe’s early imprecation to “see the blood”(3). Womack writes that “healthy people survive through storytelling, but sometimes the pain is so great that people bury themselves in silence and internalize anger, then pass it on to their children”(237). In other words, stories heal communities and nourish national identity. However, when so many stories of a people have been repressed, because of the violence and suffering they contain, healing cannot occur. Furthermore, inasmuch as history is dominated by the perspective of its victors, Native stories of colonization do not have the prevalence of those of white settlers. So, in order to reinstate Native stories as a means of healing Native people, the wounds of indigenous history must first be re-opened.

Blue Marrow explicitly re-opens the Cree wound by channeling and imagining the violent stories of Native people at the time of colonization. Indeed, the text itself provides a number of important stories in which blood literally “stains” the narratives of white settlers, forcing the reader to address it. After viciously slaughtering his Native

wife with an axe, old white flesh tells the reader that “I’m bloodstained”(Halfe 49). As a red stain against “white flesh” one is forced to “see the blood”(Halfe 3) of colonial history. Furthermore, as a stain Native bloodshed also dishonours or blemishes modern society. It is difficult to see a political or cultural structure as ethical when its foundations are made of egregious violence and suffering.

Inside the cabin where the narrator writes, insulated with papers and books, the bloody histories of her relatives reverberate against the walls, “stain[ing] the leaves”(Halfe 71) of her own text: “when the Voices roar, / I write”(53). However, outside of this insulated space, subject to the suffocating force of colonial culture, Native bloodshed is effectively covered up. Following the family reunion of her white husband, in which white settler history is re-membered and re-told, the narrator of *Blue Marrow* attempts to share a Cree colonial experience with her children. In the space of a car ride home this woman attempts to “weave a story”(69) out of fragments of Cree history “alongside”(69) the larger colonial narrative. The story includes starvation, alcoholism, infant mortality and the reality of smallpox blankets. The result of the compressed telling is suffocating. The reunion scene ends with the Indian narrator as a passive viewer without a voice: “My breath won’t come anymore. / I stare / at the wheatfields”(70).

Inasmuch as Cree bloodshed is relegated to a position outside of colonial culture the Native voice that carries it, and the potential ground it represents, is covered up. This second chapter will address Native stories and history and in doing so it will also look at an important postcolonial question: Is there such a thing as a Native voice? Or, as Spivak puts it in her influential essay with the same title as the question, can the subaltern speak?

According to Halfe, as the stifled speech of the narrator in the reunion scene illustrates, the “subaltern” can indeed speak, but only with great difficulty.

Suggesting that colonial culture covers up the violence inflicted on Native people during colonization begs the question of how this cover-up could occur. After all, in many Canadian communities, and in almost all Canadian universities, multiculturalism is a dominant force. At this time we, as Canadians, are more inclined to uncover minority history and culture than obscure or bury it. Using *Blue Marrow* along with Rene Girard’s literary analysis of the scapegoat and Elizabeth Cook-Lynn’s evaluation of the treatment of the Wounded Knee Massacre by colonial culture, I hope to illustrate exactly how bloodshed can remain covered up in this particular cultural climate. As we can find in Girard, the bloodshed of the other is most often covered up by justifying the necessity of violence. In other words, colonial culture attempts to establish that innocent Native people were slaughtered not for purely selfish and imperialistic means, but because they threatened the very existence of European settlers. Indeed, in *Blue Marrow*, the Cree are represented as the “coil in jesuits’ dream[s]”(78), the serpent white settlers believed would tempt them outside of the firmly demarcated borders of civilization.

Because the violent act is deemed necessary, the signifier “violence” is attributed with multiple degrees of meaning. Of course degrees of violence play a paradigmatic role in interpreting the Western law: murder is defined by three degrees, first, second and manslaughter. While an individual may be accused of violently murdering his wife, the circumstances surrounding the murder will determine the “degree” of the murder and the severity of the consequences. In other words, violence is set on a continuum. Cook-Lynn opens up this idea further by exploring the language used by colonial culture to describe

the Wounded Knee Massacre. As an “event” or “incident” the violence against Native people that occurred at Wounded Knee is conveyed at a different degree than it is as a massacre. As we will see, the degrees of violence play an important role in covering up the bloodshed of Cree people in *Blue Marrow*.

Modern philosophy and critical theory are rightly skeptical about the nature of essence. This is because insisting that “it is what it is” is a means of legitimizing action. One almost expects that the rather benign phrase “it is what it is” to be followed by the more menacing statement, “there’s nothing we can do about it”. Furthermore, Western philosophy insists “Being” itself is a social construct that houses and orders all observations of the world. Each new observation is causally and indeterminately linked with its predecessors and successors in this structure, thus creating a web that no one can ever hope to untangle. In other words, it’s essence all the way down. Within this system, Aboriginal essence is thought to bury itself. According to Stephen Fuchs, “an observation does not ‘disclose’ the world, but *adds* itself to the world. The world is now more, not less, complex than before”(emphasis mine, 23).

The problem with Fuchs’s analysis, and that of many others, is that the particular “world” that is built from a non-Native ground that assimilates any “outside” thinking to fit in an orderly fashion within its borders. As Womack points out, even within more liberal discourses, white is always tacitly assumed to consume red; the mainstream always speaks for the subaltern; the colonized is a victim to the colonialist. This is not to suggest that modern theory is not critically reflective but rather that it tacitly accepts that the colonized is the victim as opposed to the agent. Why else would so many postcolonial writers so carefully, and often repeatedly, feel the need to position themselves in their

work? It often appears as if “whiteness” is so incredibly virulent that if one were to let down one’s guard, it would immediately infect any alternate discourse. Part of Halfe’s project is to escape the victim mentality assigned to her culture. In *Blue Marrow* essence provides the stability necessary to position the Cree as agent.

As essence marrow can be read as a “basic fact” of the human structure. Besides being at the centre of the skeleton, marrow also produces the stem cells that are currently thought to be the future of medical therapy⁷. In part, *Blue Marrow* attempts to identify a similar centre for Cree people. Indeed, it is from the bloody histories of her relatives that the narrator begins to ground an Aboriginal history outside of an obfuscating colonial culture and heal her people. The narrator calls her deceased Grandmother’s voice down into her text as a medicine:

Pe-nihtaciwek, nohkomak.
Climb down, my grandmothers.

Pe-nanapacihinan.
Come heal us.

e-sohkepayik. Kimaskihkim.
Your medicine so powerful (17).

However, as this quote illustrates, in order to communicate herself from a Cree centre, she must negotiate the dissimulating effects involved with using the colonizer’s language and writing itself, both of which are not Cree. In other words, Halfe, like her Grandmothers before her, must “learn to ride English”(8). She must use it as a vehicle to communicate her Cree self, while still traversing the transient border separating Cree and

⁷According to Sally Tisdale, an oncology nurse in an Oregon cancer ward, “stem cells are both parent and child, able to become many kinds of cells, depending on the body’s needs. Healthy marrow is always making stem cells” (70). While Halfe may not have been aware of the important role stem cells would play and their intimate relationship with marrow while writing *Blue Marrow*, their critical importance could bear some new reflection on this text.

colonial cultures. In many ways this, this is a matter of untangling the web created for Native people by colonial culture. Perhaps this is why both *Blue Marrow* and *Bear Bones & Feathers* begin with an image of *sihkos*⁸ untangling the narrator's braids. In order for Cree culture to survive as such, some separation must be made; a Cree thread must be followed.

How essence operates in Aboriginal literature needs to be readdressed. Inasmuch as *Blue Marrow* has been published in two very different editions, McClelland and Stewart, 1998 and Coteau Books, 2005, "it" provides an interesting way to think about essence before moving into a more theoretical analysis. I have sheltered the pronoun "it" within quotation marks here because these two editions could be interpreted as two different texts. I might have just as easily suggested that "*they* provide an interesting way to think about essence". Indeed, *Blue Marrow* covers itself very differently in its two editions, with different dust jackets and publisher blurbs. Inside, the text has also changed: word order, character headings and text layout are all obvious differences. Of course, in a book of poetry formatting is no small issue. Furthermore, the very *meaning* of *Blue Marrow* can be said to have altered between the two editions. In "Bone Memory," published before the release of the second *Blue Marrow* edition, Méira Cook writes that the lack of a glossary in this text "is an editorial choice that signals her [Halfe's] acknowledgment that she is not writing predominantly for a white English-speaking audience"(93). With the addition of a seven page glossary in the Coteau publication, Cook's very important point is no longer the final word.

Yet, at the same time, we are hard pressed not to agree that this is the *same* text. Indeed, when comparing the publisher's notes on both editions, the "bare bones" of *Blue*

⁸ Weasel. *Blue Marrow* page 2. *Bear Bones & Feathers* page 3.

Marrow would seem to remain the same in its shift from one edition to the next. Both texts employ a multiplicity of voices in order to weave a complex, beautiful and frightening history of Cree people in Canada; both texts “recover[...] the songs of those - especially women-- whose bones lie in the prairie”(publisher’s description, 2nd edition); and, according to Jane Urquhart, in her blurb on both the first and second editions, both texts are “a gift...a privilege to read”. It would seem that inasmuch as *Blue Marrow* changes, it remains the same. In other words, perhaps essence and change are not opposites. Indeed, for King, inasmuch as the turtle story changes each time it is told, it still remains the same. Perhaps, essence, in *Blue Marrow* is actually dependent on change. In oral culture a story propagates itself by being shared. It lives and thrives in being passed from one voice to another, all the time shifting and mutating through new perspectives. I would like to evoke Thomas King once more before moving into the first chapter of this thesis. King writes that “I’ve heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes”(1). For King, as with Halfe, change is an *essential* part of the story and while change occurs the story remains the same, it is still “this” story.

King’s definition of essence can be derived from the title of his book, *The Truth About Stories*, and the rationale that seems to underscore this work. According to King “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are”(2). Like the turtle story this line is also repeated at the beginning of every chapter. Here, King uses the word truth in an (un)conventional sense. According to the *OED* definition we have been working with what is true is “real or actual”. So, on the one hand, “truth” in King’s definition conforms to a standard definition of essence since as it is “all we are”, or Žižek’s “hard kernel of

being”(152). On the other hand, “all we are” is precisely fiction. According to King truth and stories are synonymous; truth *is* fiction. Therefore truth and essence necessarily shift and mutate as they move from one person to the next, or, in the meta-narrative of *The Truth About Stories*, from one chapter to the next. As King establishes, for many Native writers, essence is not a theoretical regression. Essence in Halfe’s work signposts the entrance to a Cree path of exploration. In *Blue Marrow* essence means looking forward, “Cree-ing loud into [the] night”(16) --a night created by colonial culture.

Chapter One

The View from Here: Defining Truth and Essence in *Blue Marrow*.

Nothing complicated enough to be really interesting could have an essence.

Daniel C. Dennett, Quoted from *Against Essentialism*.

As we examined in the introduction, anti-essentialist attacks against Native literature firmly demarcate truth from fiction. As a consequence, those who insist on a truth of history or being are often negatively labelled essentialist. A professor's argument against a Native graduate student in *Red on Red* serves as our exemplar for this demarcation: "there [is] no truth, no history, just lots of people's viewpoints"(4). Here viewpoint, which is understood to be manufactured, is clearly presented as being opposite to truth. In her adherence to the latter, the professor establishes that his student is an essentialist. In other words, truth and essence in this definition stand as opposites to viewpoint and what it connotes. In order to more clearly understand the boundaries of truth in this definition, and the implications that these boundaries have on essence, we need to look more closely at the connotations of viewpoint.

Not only is viewpoint here "made up" --whereas truth is not-- the point we have thus far been focusing on, it is also conditioned by difference. A *point* of view is particularized and localized in time and space. If one were to regard the same object or idea from an alternate point it could appear quite differently. Indeed, the point of view one occupies in the "here and now" changes with the speed of an instant. According to Sartre there are an "infinity of possible points of view which one can take on [a] work"(6). Using a camera to make his point, David Farrell Krell refers to the swiftness of the passing moment as "shudder speed"(23). With the experience garnered with each passing moment (we shudder to think of how fast these moments move by) viewpoint

changes. Furthermore, difference and viewpoint are conflated insofar as viewpoint shift across gazes. "They don't see eye to eye" is another way of saying that while two individuals may be regarding the same object, they still see it differently.

However, truth and essence, in the definition gestured towards in *Red on Red*, are considered to be entirely stable. Here, truth and essence do not shift or change. They are not mutable or subject to opinion. According to Wendy Wickwire, editor of Harry Robinson's *Write it on your Heart*, Native literature is often approached by Western thought with this inherent stability in mind. Wickwire believes that purists might try to edit out the post-contact influences one can find in the traditional stories Robinson relates. However, she contends that

this is typical of the scientific tendency to crystallize living, evolving oral culture --to transform myth into a static artefact, an "urtext" which contains the purest essence of what, to the Western mind, a North American culture *is* (was) (emphasis original, 23).

Relegated to this wrongly intuited position of constancy, truth and essence are often considered inadmissible to many contemporary discourses, which work to disrupt stability. Our exemplar from *Red on Red* helps us to establish this point as the professor is condemning his essentialist student.

Yet, as we have already identified with Thomas King, essence and difference are not always considered opposites in Aboriginal literature. For King it is *because* of viewpoint that each time a story is told something changes, be it voice, tone, or order of events. While the "external form" (Žižek 134) of the story might be different, the story itself remains the same. The Okanagan author and activist Jeannette Armstrong also

suggests that difference is intrinsic to truth and essence. She writes that “I am a listener to the [Okanagan] language’s stories, and when my words form I am merely retelling the *same* stories in *different* patterns” (emphasis mine, 181). In a sense, Armstrong is birthing stories out of her Okanagan heritage into the English language. These are the “same” stories but, concurrently, they are entirely new, formed by a new language and the written word, as well as Armstrong’s viewpoint as an author, educator and activist. Both King and Armstrong set the stage for us to read difference as being intrinsic to essence in *Blue Marrow*.

In order to establish this logic of essence in Halfe’s work we need to locate a viable point of inception, a trope that can be seen to run through the text and perhaps beyond it, into the larger field of Native literature. Communication between texts allows us to stabilize a ground outside of the vertiginous economy of meaning found in a single piece of writing. The word “medicine” provides the necessary paradigm to work out of. In fact, essence and medicine are directly conflated in *Blue Marrow*. In one of the final poems of this book the word “medicine” has been filled with the essence of the narrator’s ancestors: “All women. Grandmothers and Eternal / Grandmothers, tender hands, soft breathing, moisture fills these words... *these medicines thaw / our murdered wounds*”(italics original 83). Filled with the essence of Cree history, represented in the breath and stories of “all women,” “these words”, which make up the entirety of *Blue Marrow*, can be applied to the Cree wound.

Furthermore, since Cree suffering makes up the majority of this text, healing can be identified as a major theme in *Blue Marrow*. Early in the text when confronted with stories of distress and bloodshed the narrator calls for her Grandmothers’ aid: “come heal

us/...Your medicine so powerful. /...That which will heal us”(17). Throughout this text, therapy will remain an important trope as the narrator continually draws on the curative nature of the Grandmother’s voices. Halfe is not alone in her emphasis on healing in Native literature. According to the Delaware academic Daniel David Moses in his introduction to *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English*, healing has become an important part of what Native writing, on a whole, is trying to do. For Moses, Native Canadian literature is beyond its “idealistic and angry stage”(vi) and it

is now...taking time to consider just what it can do to heal its community. (Do other literatures have to be so conscious of their audience?) Native literature is doing this quietly and more artfully than ever before, and perhaps a bit too introvertedly. (vi)

He makes the statement in the form of a question here, but Moses seems to be alluding to the idea that references to healing are perhaps more common to Native writing than other literatures. Whether this is true or not would require a study beyond the scope of this thesis, but his comments do allow us to establish that healing in Native literature and thought has become a major trope in the emerging canon. So, insofar as healing can be said to be a ground from which *Blue Marrow* and contemporary Native literature is built, it can also be read as an essential aspect of this text. However, in order to make this study more manageable, I will be looking specifically at Halfe’s use of the word often considered to be synonymous with healing: “medicine.”

At first glance, “medicine” appears to be a stable term in *Blue Marrow*. The Eternal Grandmothers, who serve as voices of authority in the text, insist that “*The Medicine lives. / Lives. / Lives*”(22). The repetition of “lives” and the use of the uppercase

for “medicine” in this early passage are meant to suggest the inherent stability of this concept. The capitalization of “medicine” needs to be addressed further in order to establish this. As we have already suggested, formatting is no small matter for any poet and certainly not for Halfe. As Cook points out in “Bone Memory,” the italicization of specific words in *Blue Marrow* is of critical importance: “italicizing words and phrases from a language other than the one used in the body of a text typically exotizes the ‘other’ language as foreign, alien, and in need of explanation”(94). Insofar as she italicizes English words in *Blue Marrow*, Halfe calls the dynamic between Cree and English into question. English is marked with the same “difference” as Cree insofar as they are both italicized/exoticized. The use of the uppercase in *Blue Marrow* also calls for the reader’s critical attention. In the Western tradition, Capital “G” god, capital “T” truth, and even the capital “I” are meant to represent an essential and autonomous entity.

In Western philosophy capitalized words, like “God” or “Truth” are meant to be read with a certain reverence and a sense of ontological stability. “God” is not contingent on anything. “God” simply is. Halfe blatantly disregards the capitalization usually afforded to religious icons in Western writing in her work. Both *jesus* and the *virgin mary* (14) are relegated to the lower case early in *Blue Marrow*, suggesting they are not meant to be perceived as essential or as a point of stability in this text. Yet, *medicine* is afforded the “honour” of the uppercase, and the connotations it carries, in the passage we are currently addressing.

However, while the word “medicine” makes a number of appearances throughout *Blue Marrow*, its definition is never as stable as the one the Grandmothers are trying to convey above. In fact, the meaning of the word changes each time it is used. The word

“medicine” is used at least eight times, ten if we count the “med-sin” homonym Halfe constructs in this text, but I will be focusing on two usages here in order to illustrate the difference intrinsic to this essential word here. In the first, medicine is connected to harm as a source of healing, an idea I will be exploring in depth in the next chapter. After calling for the Grandmother’s medicine, “that which will heal us”, the narrator is answered by the spectral voices of the Grandmothers, and the Eternal Grandmothers.

They inform her that

Your children’s tears

roused our sleep.

You have filled our scalped breast

with tobacco

Our wombs the medicine bags. (22)

Here, healing is necessitated by a new generation, evoked by the suffering of the narrator’s children. However the “medicine” that is offered to them is explicitly connected with female suffering. Both the breast and the womb are emblematic representations of motherhood and femininity. The severed body parts of these murdered women hold the implements of restitution. Tobacco⁹, which is often used to cleanse an individual or area in smudging ceremonies, is held in a “scalped breast”. Since the breast has been “scalped” or violently removed from the body, we might infer the same for the

⁹ Tobacco is associated with healing and aid in Eden Robinson’s *Monkey Beach*. When trying to find her brother, who is lost at sea, the main character ponders the power of her cigarette: “Ah, tobacco, whose sacred smoke carries wishes to the spirit world. Please let me find Jimmy. After the way I was sucking back the smokes yesterday, you’d think the spirits would throw him in my lap just to shut me up”(217). The flippancy in this passage, taken from the fact that the tobacco being referenced here is in the form of a cigarette, highlights this character’s difficulties in believing in its healing powers.

womb, represented here as a “medicine bag”. The image of the womb in this brutal context allows us to infer that it is out of the pain of these women that healing is born.

Conversely, healing can be read as a source of harm only pages later. *nohkom atayohkan*¹⁰, a character to whom we will be returning throughout this thesis, shares a violent history in which she is murdered by a white fur trader. Of her murderer she laments that “*Now he swims / in stars, / me dangling in his fist*”(23). Caught in colonial culture, which has been afforded some sort of undeserved reverence, “medicine” has been stripped of a stable meaning for this woman. Rather than simply being an agent of healing it is now concurrently an agent of harm. After relating her history, *nohkom atayohkan* tells the narrator that “*the medicines they’ve thrown / to thorn my path / I’ve gathered*”(24). Because “they” does not have a clear referent in this passage, we can interpret it from an us/them dichotomy. In other words, colonial culture has thrown a medicine at the Cree that is intended to harm. Since medicine is traditionally defined and interpreted as something meant to heal, here, as a “thorn,” the meaning of the concept is destabilized. For “them,” harm is caused by healing. “Medicines” are being utilized to “thorn” the Aboriginal path, or impede their progress. I will be looking at this second passage in more detail shortly. For now it is only necessary to see that in *Blue Marrow* the word “medicine” --a term connected to essence and healing-- contains difference within itself. It is both a remedy and a poison. Because “medicine” contains this difference it is difficult to ground a stable meaning of the word to work with. Without a solid foundation, an anti-essentialist claim against *Blue Marrow* can be challenged.

¹⁰ The Keeper of Sacred Legends. It is interesting that while Halfe uses capital letters to identify her characters in English, she only uses the lowercase when naming them in Cree. I would suggest that because Cree is not traditionally a written language that punctuation is not a way to establish the importance of a character or concept. This importance must be communicated in other ways. However, when using English as a vehicle to communicate herself, the author must use all the tools she can in order to convey meaning.

I would like to briefly turn to Thomas King and *The Truth About Stories* to elaborate on the inherent instability of foundational terms. As King helps to show, the most important concepts we have are also often the most unstable. The author starts each of the sections of this Massey Lecture with the meta-narrative that opened this thesis: “There is a story I know. It’s about the earth and how it floats in space on the back of a turtle. I’ve heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story it changes”(1). King goes on to provide a demonstration of the ubiquity of this story by subsequently repeating it throughout his book. Indeed, it changes a little bit each time it is offered. However, the essence of the story remains the same throughout. In other words, despite, or perhaps because of the nearly infinite number of influences that can alter the narrative --voice, change in details, order of events or response of the audience¹¹ -- it remains “this” story. At some point the reader arrives at some version of this pivotal moment:

One time, it was in Prince Rupert I think, a young girl in the audience asked about the turtle and the earth. If the earth was on the back of a turtle, what was below the turtle? Another turtle, the storyteller told her. And below that turtle? Another turtle. And below that? Another turtle. The girl began to laugh, enjoying the game, I imagine. So how many turtles are there? she wanted to know. The storyteller shrugged. No one knows for sure, he told her, but it’s turtles all the way down.”(2)

As the turtle story suggests, arguing for or against the groundedness of fundamental concepts might be a rather entertaining endeavour, but no matter how far “down” into the

¹¹ These are all changes that King himself points out can change the Turtle Story. The full quotation, at least in its initial offering, is the opening quotation in this thesis.

argument we get we are still talking about the same two things, in this case the turtle and the earth. In other words, as soon as one of these fundamentals is called into question we are unable to stabilize our definitions, except circularly. If a turtle holds up the world, what holds up the turtle? Well, another turtle. And what hold up that turtle? etcetera. As we have already seen, circular definitions also buoy some of the English language's most important words: reality, knowledge, fact and, of course, truth. Such words have been the friends and foes of philosophy through the ages. Ian Hacking refers to them as "elevator words" because "they are at a higher level"(23). Like the turtle story, any attempt to meaningfully engage with elevator words can only result in dissatisfaction. There is no way to ground these concepts that is not fraught with the emptiness of tautology. At some point, as I believe King is suggesting, one has to take *something* as ground or be forever lost in a frustrating and futile discussion.

While therapy may be a goal for the narrator of *Blue Marrow*, healing and harm are represented as being indistinguishable in her use of the word medicine. In other words, difference is present in this single, essential signifier. This text is not the only work of Aboriginal literature to make use of the idea of medicine as both harmful and healing¹². In Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, the protagonist's grandmother, Ma-ma-oo, refers to *oxasuli*, a root that can help with arthritis, as "a dangerous gift"(371). According to Ma-ma-oo *oxasuli* is a "powerful medicine. Very dangerous. It can kill you... You have to respect it"(151). In *Monkey Beach*, as in *Blue Marrow*, medicine is not simply an

¹² Nor is the instability of "medicine", of course, limited to Aboriginal literature. Derrida most famously explores the instability of a medicine in "Plato's Pharmacy" with the *pharmakon*. I will be addressing the *pharmakon* and Derrida later on in this chapter.

agent of healing. In fact medicine can accomplish exactly the opposite effect. Rendering it down to a remedy, or, for that matter, a poison, is not to respect what *oxasuli* “is”¹³.

The difference intrinsic to the word medicine also makes appearances throughout *Blue Marrow*, two of which I have explored above. However, Halfe most succinctly emphasizes this ambivalence by utilizing a makeshift homonym, naming medicines as med-sins: “*I spooned wihkes -- med-sins into my sister. / She lay on the ground / filled with homebrew*” (30). According to the glossary at the end of *Blue Marrow*, “*wihkes*” is “a bitter medicinal root”(109). Yet, in the passage just quoted, it is glossed directly as “med-sins”. For the narrator in this passage, what she understands as medicine, *wihkes*, is no longer simply such. It is now a split-signifier that contains a remedy, represented in the “med” portion of the word, and poison represented in the “sin” portion. It is also important to note that “sin” here is something that has been introduced to the Cree by colonial culture. Not only is sin more readily connected with the Jesuits in this text, but the med-sin here can be read as the homebrew, which was used for trade by the white settlers. In any case, medicine “is” both an agent of healing and of harm.

We can apply the ambivalence ascribed to the word medicine in *Blue Marrow* to its function as a “thorn,” offered to us by *nohkom atayohkan*. Here, the reader is asked to question the stability of the concept when balanced against words that have been more securely grounded. Below is the entirety of the passage I quoted from above:

These medicines they've thrown

To thorn my path

¹³ Louise Erdrich also explores the need to respect medicine in her first novel *Love Medicine*. Lipsha Morrissey, a Chippewa boy who has the healing touch, worries about what can go wrong with love medicines: “When [Grandma] mentions them love medicines, I feel my back prickle at the danger”(241). As in *Monkey Beach* and *Blue Marrow* what medicine “is” is not simply a remedy in this book.

I've gathered, the Bundles

Given to amisk – beaver, iskotew – fire

And the swan.

They run from their mother's

Nursing tongue (24).

As *nohkom atayohkan* gathers these “medicines” into bundles the reader has no way of interpreting whether she is assembling them as a medicine or as a thorn, as a remedy or as a poison. The ambivalence of the word medicine in this passage is made to be explicit. In order to contextualize it, *nohkom atayohkan* offers two different contexts for meaning and stability to be considered. On the one hand, she presents us with a movement of meaning from Cree to English: “amisk -- beaver; iskotew -- fire”. Even without the use of the glossary, which is only included in the second edition, the reader is able to securely ground definitions of these words¹⁴. There is a meaning that appears to “belong” to each word. Indeed, the “mother’s tongue”, which can be read as the Cree author or narrator, supplies meaning right there in the text. *Amisk means beaver. Iskotew means fire.*

On the other hand, the reader is confronted with locating a meaning that “belongs” to the word “medicine”. There is no gloss, no “mother’s tongue” to ground it. As such its meaning, or essence, is not confined to a rigid demarcation. However, the assumption for the reader is that “medicine” does not need to be defined. To put it in a rather facile way, medicine is assumed to be medicine. However, if we look closely, this

¹⁴ I am not unaware of “the task of the translator” and the *unheimlich* nature of all language, which, as Walter Benjamin identified, makes its presence known in translation. Despite the glossary added to the 2005 publication, I do not believe that *Blue Marrow* is a book meant to illustrate the ease with which one can move between Cree and English. Cree, like any other language is inherently slippery. What Halfe is illustrating here is a relative difference between words like beaver and fire and words like medicine, which hold a more ambivalent and essential application in a colonial discourse. The strategic gesture towards this type of “ground” illustrates the need to move away from rooted and static conceptions of Native culture.

important word has none of the stability the reader might wish to afford to it. In order for medicine to be a grounding concept in *Blue Marrow*, the reader needs to prop it up against some stable definition. However, it appears that one does not have the means to do so without stepping outside of the text. There is no one meaning that “belongs” to medicine in this passage. The “mother tongue” of the text itself does not, and indeed cannot, provide it for us. Rather, meaning is transient within this single signifier, it can be both simultaneously or independently a remedy or a poison.

Inasmuch as “medicine” can operate as a model for the logic of *Blue Marrow* we can identify how foundational terms do not necessarily operate according to the same rules that Savageau’s professor tacitly ascribes to truth and essence. The ground Halfe lays out to build her story from is mutable and transitory and does not necessarily fit into Western paradigms of ontological stability, which are often applied to Native work. Of course, in most, if not all, of his work Derrida illustrates that stability in Western philosophy is illusory. “Plato’s Pharmacy” begins by stating that

A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible. Its laws and its rules are not, however, harboured in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they can never be booked, in the *present*, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception (emphasis original 63).

In my reading of this passage, Derrida is pointing to the fact that there is no perceptible meaning that could ever be said to “belong” to a text. One can neither write, nor read, a text in full knowledge of the rules and regulations that make it what it “is.” “In the

present,” which is when any text must be addressed, a moment that necessarily occurs after it is written, any stability that the text may imply is a product of the reader’s interaction with it. In Derrida’s words, “a hermeneutics *assigns* intuition”(emphasis original, 69) toward some point of stability within a work. As a product of two separate entities, “meaning” is transient and mutable, shifting from writer to reader in a nearly infinite number of permutations. As such, it offers none of the stability one might intuit from “the first glance.” Of course, the case in point in “Plato’s Pharmacy” is the writing of Plato. Derrida’s reading of the *Phaedrus* and the *Statesman*, along with other seminal Plato texts, illustrates the inherent instability of the work so often used as a ground in philosophy.

The most useful, and expedient, way to establish this instability is in Derrida’s analysis of the translations he is working with. I suggest that translation is the “most useful” trope for our purposes because of the discussion of the “mother’s tongue” and the translations provided for the Cree in the *Blue Marrow* passage above. In that passage Halfe does not attempt to render a stable definition for “medicine”, choosing to leave it unaccompanied by the “mother tongue” that grounds a meaning for beaver and fire. This allows the essence of the word a freedom denied to it within the rigid limitations of specific meaning. However, translators of the *Phaedrus* have been forced to provide a stable definition of the enigmatic *pharmakon*, which is in fact established in “Plato’s Pharmacy” as a medicine. According to Derrida

this *pharmakon*, this ‘*medicine*,’ this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with all its

ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be --alternately or simultaneously-- beneficent or maleficent.”(emphasis mine, 70)

Derrida emphasizes the traditional connotations and the limitations of the word “medicine by placing it within quotation marks here. Like Ma-ma-oo’s *oxasuli*, the *pharmakon* is a “medicine” that operates outside of a standardized definition. It is concurrently and separately a “remedy and poison”. Reducing it down to either/or is not to respect the difference (or Différance in Derridean terms) that makes the concept what it “is”. Yet, as Derrida points out, various translators of the *Phaedrus* have done exactly this to *pharmakon*, “rendering the...word by ‘remedy’, ‘recipe’, ‘poison’, ‘drug’, ‘philter’, etc.”(71). Such translations attempt to stabilize an inherently unstable term with which to work with. Before Derrida, the authority, and thus stability, of these translations was presupposed.

As opposed to the translators working with the *pharmakon* in Plato’s work, Halfe does not attempt to unify and stabilize the difference implicit to the medicine of her text. In fact, the author makes it clear that meaning does not belong to the author and the attempt to stabilize language is, ultimately, futile. Méira Cook writes that the “translation of speech into writing is perhaps inevitable in the context of Western modes of production and reception, where poetry is typically communicated through the silent communion between the (absent) writer on one side of the page and the reader on the other”(86). In other words, meaning is manufactured between writer and reader in *Blue Marrow*. Halfe’s own awareness of the volatility created by bifurcated meaning is evident in how *acimowinis*¹⁵ construes her own writing. She tells us that “my words get in your way. / I feel your sting” (33). The “sting” that the narrator feels here is an interpretive

¹⁵ The Keeper of the Stories.

backlash. For, inasmuch as the spectral voices of the past influence *Blue Marrow*, the imagined voices of the future do as well. The narrator states that she feels “*your* sting”. The second person pronoun implies a sting that is incurred in the “here and now” of the text’s reception and interpretation: the “you” that is reading the text at a specific moment in the “present”. In other words, what the author writes is not necessarily what the reader will comprehend. “Meaning” runs from the mother’s tongue towards the reader. Therefore, meaning is transitory, dependent on the subject and hermeneutics. It is in this *movement*, which necessarily changes between readers and points of view, that a ground is created in the text. In other words, difference is implicit to the essence of the story and even, as we have seen with medicine, to the essence of the word.

Thus, if we are working with an essence in *Blue Marrow* it does not necessarily conform to the exclusivity of the truth/fiction binary set up by anti-essentialists in which essence and difference must be read as opposites. While a hermeneutics of viewpoint might assign an intuition about the nature of essence in this text as singular and stable, it is just one way of grounding a difficult concept. If we are to ground the essence Halfe gestures towards in *Blue Marrow* in the notion of difference offered by King and Armstrong we must turn to the “bones that stand and sing”(Halfe 2) a Cree history into the text. *nohkom atayohkan* provides a place to begin. She tells the narrator that

I do not exist

have not

since my bones

dissolved. (50)

There are a number of things in this passage that we will need to look at closely, such as bones, stories and existence before we eventually arrive at essence. However, we will need to make our way there slowly. Halfe's concept of "Sacred Legend", the translation of *atayohkan* offered in the Cree-to-English glossary, is something we need to address first. Obviously, the word "sacred" itself is a good place to begin. In the Western tradition, when one refers to something as sacred it is often to secure it against violation or infringement. The sacred is consecrated; it sets boundaries around a person, object or concept that are not meant to be transgressed. A sacred oath or sacred rights are good examples. In this sense of the word, "truth" and "history" are being perceived as sacred by Savageau's professor in *Red on Red*. While he refutes their existence, as concepts "truth" and "history", and with them essence, are supposed as that which cannot be polluted or altered by viewpoint. In *Blue Marrow* Sacred Legends are meant to be perceived as an operative representation of this type of concept. There are two other key gestures towards the existence of essence offered by Halfe that deserve our attention.

We have already touched on the first gesture with the Western models of capitalization. Like the capital "M" medicine used by the Eternal Grandmothers, "Sacred Legends"(23) is afforded the reverence associated with the upper case. We cannot go so far as to say that the uppercase is meant to be a direct representation of essence in the Western tradition. However, in *Blue Marrow* Halfe composes it as such by removing capitalization from beings essential to the Christian tradition, Jesus and the Virgin Mary, and applying it to the concepts essential to her text. The second gesture towards essence comes from the oppositional relationship set up between The Keeper of the Sacred

Legends and the more ubiquitous, yet less revered Keeper of the Stories, *nohkom atayohkan* and *acimowinis* respectively.

As opposed to *nohkom atayohkan*, *acimowinis* is an interpreter, given to misrepresentation and in need of guidance. She writes that “My Grandfather laughs, / takes my fingers / through the thick black book” (72). As this passage identifies, the stories do not “belong” to *acimowinis*, she is merely an interpreter; she translates history as a medium would translate spectral voices at a séance. Furthermore, given that Cree is an oral culture this is not simply a translation between voices, but between media. As Armstrong indicates, translating stories in any manner automatically changes them. The change that occurs is a concern for some oral cultures that believe the power of the stories will be lost if they are written down¹⁶. However, in the passage from *Blue Marrow* above the grandfather gently mocks any trepidation *acimowinis* would seem to feel while beginning her translations and directs her hand on the page.

In contrast, we have *nohkom atayohkan*, who is represented in the definition of essence we identified in the introduction to this thesis: “the basic or most important feature of something, which determines its character.” *nohkom atayohkan* defines herself:

*I'm earth
born each moon,
waxing and waning,
bleeding eggs. (23)*

In the very first line of this passage this character is conflated with the earth. In other words, she is “real or actual,” the world as it is. She “is” a ground, history, a big bang

¹⁶ Arnold Krupat discusses the tenuous ground between the written word and oral culture in relation to Gerald Vizenor’s *Dead Voices*. In that book the main character decides to publish Chippewa stories despite the warning that “publication would kill the stories”(76).

theory or a turtle story from which narrative itself is born. As an essential mother figure *nohkom atayohkan* also gives birth to the *acimowinisa*¹⁷ that the Cree will share. Indeed, the bloody stories that *acimowinis* remembers, channels and imagines in *Blue Marrow* have been born in part out of the violent Cree history related to her by *nohkom atayohkan*.

However, following the single line "I am earth," *nohkom atayohkan* goes on to qualify her essential being telling us that she is "born each moon". In other words, this essential being is subject to constant change, "waxing and waning" with every passing moment. In order for this constant change to occur the line between parent and child has been blurred. *nohkom atayohkan* is "born each moon" but she is also giving birth. On the one hand, *Blue Marrow* and the *acimowinisa* that make it up are born out of the bloody history that constitutes the Cree past. On the other hand, the existence of this history is dependent on the *acimowinisa* of *Blue Marrow* and of other Cree stories. Indeed, the existence of history is dependent on the stories that re-enter into contemporary discourses. If the past is neglected or disregarded as a simple fiction it can cease to exist at all. Thus, inasmuch as stories are created out of a specific point in history, history is (re)created by these stories.

For many Native storytellers, who recognize the dissolution of oral culture and indigenous languages, maintaining their history means embracing change. If a story is to survive it must be told in new languages and new medias. Wickwire writes that "as more and more of his listeners, natives included, understood only English, Harry began telling his old stories in English to keep them alive"(15). By telling these stories in English, and with the written word, Robinson has no doubt altered them, but he has also contributed to

¹⁷ Small stories.

their survival. These same “old stories” keep a portion of Okanogan history alive because “influences on [a] body of knowledge work forward and backward in time”(Wickwire 23).

Of course, one could argue, as Savageau’s professor does, that history as an essential, or sacred, construction is only obfuscated by the stories that relate it. Remember the professor’s contention was that “there [is] no truth, no history, just lots of people’s viewpoints”(emphasis mine, 4). While the professor may disagree with the existence of a consecrated history one would assume that he would not deny the existence of a past. After all, most anti-essentialist arguments claim that viewpoints are manufactured out of an individual’s forgoing experiences. In turn, the “truth” of these experiences is subject to constant re-visions from a point in the transient “now”. This creates a looping effect in which what could be said is the essence of the event is irretrievably lost. However, this argument has some very dangerous consequences for the people suffering under colonial culture.

In his essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History” Walter Benjamin illustrates how the existence of the past is contingent on its existence in the present. Benjamin writes that “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably”(255). In other words, if an image of the past is not entered into the discourse of the present, it simply ceases to exist. History is only what is remembered and shared, what is passed from generation to generation. When this history contains the violent treatment of indigenous people by colonial culture, an issue we will be exploring in depth in the following two chapters, we cannot afford to relinquish it to obscurity. Therefore, if this history is to survive, its essence should be

seen as being contingent on difference. Cree history lives through the re-visiting, re-membering and re-visioning implicit to storytelling.

That *nohkom atayohkan*, as a representation of essence or truth, is aware of the contingency of her existence on stories is evident in her statement “*I do not exist / have not / since my bones / dissolved*”. As this passage illustrates, inasmuch as stories are contained in bone in *Blue Marrow*, history or truth does not exist without them¹⁸. The line separating fact and fiction becomes irreparably blurred. *nohkom atayohkan* is a product of *acimowinis* inasmuch as *acimowinis* are a product of *nohkom atayohkan*.

Because essence in *Blue Marrow* cannot be confidently said to conform to the rigid definitions set out by anti-essentialist thought it would seem that this nearly universalized ground may not be the best place from which to begin a critical analysis. Essence should not be assumed to be mutually exclusive to difference in Native literature. Both Thomas King and Jeanette Armstrong establish this in their work. As I hope I have shown, *Blue Marrow* disrupts the stability of an anti-essentialist argument in its representation of foundational concepts. The logic that *Blue Marrow* constructs for itself does not allow for the ground necessary to firmly demarcate mutually exclusive terms. Difference is intrinsic to an essential concept. In other words, its opposite already belongs to it. “Medicine”, as a representation of essence in this text, is both remedy and poison concurrently, the negative and the positive within one signifier.

¹⁸In essence, Žižek’s reading of the Lacanian Real operates in much the same manner. According to Žižek, “*the status of the Real is thoroughly non-substantial*: it is a product of failed attempts to integrate it into the Symbolic”(Emphasis original, 129). In other words the Real is nothing unto itself. It exists, or is created as such, only insofar as one attempts, and fails, to integrate it into the Symbolic order. It is not opposed to the Symbolic it is contingent on it. In *Blue Marrow*, *nohkom atayohkan* does not exist, or is “thoroughly non-substantial”, insofar as her existence is contingent on the *acimowinis* that attempt to account for her presence, yet are unable.

Indeed, within *Blue Marrow* itself, there is no way to establish where essence begins and viewpoint stops. Sacred legends and stories interact in a way that blurs the critical distinction between parent and child, or past and present. Each contribute to the other's existence. In other words, what essence "is" in Native literature does not necessarily conform to the rigid definitions being applied against it, nor should it if a Cree history is to survive.

Chapter Two

Stepping Towards Native Theory.

When there is no longer a 'human minimum', there is no culture.

Frantz Fanon *Black Skin, White Masks*

As a transitory, mutable concept the ground provided by Cree essence in *Blue Marrow* is not to be read as being a goal, what Cree culture should be moving towards. However, essence can be a "stepping stone"(Halfe 97), a ground that provides the means for moving forward towards new forms of resistance. As opposed to Spivak's "strategic essentialism," meant to be evoked only at very necessary and calculated moments¹⁹, Halfe's essence remains in place as a ground. It is from this "human minimum" as Fanon puts it, that movement towards a Cree theory can begin.

While it can be argued that using essence as any type of ground is ultimately an empty gesture, such "logic" is called into question when one addresses the ontological position of the colonized. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Frantz Fanon identifies this position as a state of non-being. One of the early ways for the colonized to locate themselves and choose a path of resistance in the vertiginous reality created for them by colonial culture was through essence. The negritude movement focused on giving a "blackness" back to black men and women and led to the development of other, perhaps more critical, theories. Despite being written over fifty years after the negritude movement and its positive influence on the role of the colonized, *Blue Marrow* still

¹⁹Spivak confirms this use of strategic essentialism in *The Spivak Reader*. According to the theorist strategic essentialism is "a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest"(*The Spivak Reader*, 214).

locates the Cree in a non-space similar to Fanon's²⁰. Of course this raises an important question about the problems of conflating the essence of two distinct groups, such as that of the black Martiniques and the Cree, or even that of the Creek and the Cree. It would seem obvious that essence would change between dramatically between cultures and communities. However, simply abandoning similarities because there are also differences is to eclipse the potential for cooperation between groups and time periods. Thus the challenge becomes recognizing difference while concurrently talking about more general complementarities. Because the Cree can be seen to occupy a type of aporia identified by Fanon, essence for these people should be reconsidered as a viable theoretical ground. For both Halfe and Fanon, this aporia is not a necessary place for the colonized, but a colonial construction which indigenous people must fight against. Found in the pages of history, and within this text itself, witnessing the brutal fact of Cree bloodshed will provide salient place to begin. For the sake of clarity, I would like to reiterate the definition of essence I suggested as a starting point in my introduction. Following that, I will connect it to the notions of ground and of blood I will be working with in this chapter before moving into an examination of *Blue Marrow*.

As we have seen, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines essence as "the basic or most important feature of something, which determines its character." In other words, essence can provide a ground. The word "basic" finds its roots in "base," which the *OED* defines as "a foundation, support or starting place." In *Blue Marrow* essence provides the foundation necessary to build culture, ideologies and resistance. Arnold Krupat will go as far as to admit, along with Sartre, that "there is some correlation between a relatively

²⁰ Of course, the fact that Halfe locates the Cree in a similar state of non-being to Fanon's is most likely due to the fact that the indigenous people of North America do not occupy post-colonial territory. The Cree, like other Aboriginal groups in Canada, the United States and Australia still live in a colonial reality.

secure social position and the possibility of philosophy”(Krupat 7). Indeed, if we turn to philosophy, essence is related to what Hegel called formal ground. According to Slavoj Zizek in *Tarrying with the Negative*, formal ground is created by a tautological gesture similar to that utilized by the viewpoint argument, which we explored above. Zizek writes that

formal ground repeats the tautological gesture of the immediate reference to ‘true essence’: it does not add any new content to the phenomenon to be explained, it just translates, transposes, the found empirical content into the form of ground.

(136)

In other words, essence provides a ground insofar as it generates its own stability. As an ontological concept essence represents an impasse or stalemate. One does not “add any new content to it” except through a tautological gesture: it is what it is. I would suggest that Zizek uses the word “gesture” here in a similar manner to how we used it in the first chapter: the tautology implicit to an argument utilizing essence rarely explicitly identifies itself as tautological. Rather, it gestures towards a ground, or a point of implicit stability. As a result, essence resists deconstruction in its appeal to itself. As Zizek points out earlier, “as we start losing ground in an argument, our last recourse is usually to insist that ‘despite what has been said, things are essentially what we think them to be’”(134). In other words, essence is what we come up against when there is no longer an alternative. It would appear that despite the emptiness that accompanies it as ground, essence can provide enough stability from which to begin some form of argument. However, the logic of this argument is something we will have to consider in detail.

An appeal to ground through the tautological gesture of essence makes up a large part of *Blue Marrow*. Marrow itself is a “basic feature” of both bone and blood, a “ground” from which their existence is constructed and maintained. Using the image of the stepping stone, Halfe illustrate how the temporary stability provided by essence can allow one to move forward. With a hoofprint on her breast, *acimowinis* is identified as being marked for movement in *Blue Marrow*. However, she soon discovers that this movement is caught up in colonial culture. She writes that “on my left breast was a hoofprint. It disappeared when I began to walk for them”(3). The second personal pronoun in this passage does not reference a specific group, so we might interpret it from the same us/them dichotomy we have thus far been applying to this text. Inasmuch as the Cree language names the members of her family in these opening pages “them” is a reference to non-Cree. The disappearance of the hoofprint, which Cook identifies as being “as much a scar as a brand”(88), seems to suggest a loss of self. Walking for “them” *acimowinis* can no longer walk for her people. Born in a Dent Grandmother reinforces this interpretation when she later tells the narrator that “*Our feet were free / before da walk of da white skin*”(61) implying that colonial culture now sets the path which Native people must now follow. With no place left to plant her feet as a Cree woman the hoofprint that once marked the narrator disappears.

As Cook goes on to point out, it is not until the end of the *Blue Marrow* that the hoofprint reappears in a vision of Ram Woman, a figure the critic identifies with movement and progress (106). Inasmuch as the return of the hoofprint precedes the narrator’s final assertion that she is “A pagan. Again”(99) we might assume that she has regained the path of the Cree lost to her at the beginning of her journey:

Ram woman, I stood naked
 beneath the falls.
 Your hoofs pounded
 in that April rain. I remember
 your fist in your mother's womb,
 heels kicking her door. (96)

We can identify essence in this passage in the images of origin, spring rain and the mother's womb. Both are points of inception, the ground for new beginnings. It is by exposing herself to essence in this passage that *acimowinis* is granted the opportunity to ground herself and move forward, as Ram Woman hands down her "large eye" to be used as a "stepping stone"(97). As such, essence operates in this passage to provide the narrator with a ground stripped from her in the opening pages. Furthermore as Ram Woman's "large eye", this stepping stone offers the narrator a way of re-visioning a colonial history from a Cree perspective, looking forward to new ideas and theories.

Delving into post-colonial history, we can see how an appeal to essence has previously functioned as the "stepping stone" identified in *Blue Marrow*. The negritude movement provides relevant insight into how essence can contribute to the growth of new ideologies by providing a temporary ground. The negritude movement began in Paris in the 1930s, initiated by Leopold Sedar Senghor, the Guyanese Leon Damas and Aime Cesaire of Martinique. Although Fanon was highly critical of the negritude movement itself, the ideas and friendship of Cesaire would be instrumental in helping this other important Martiniquan, develop his own ideas out of "blackness" years later. The *Dictionary of Critical Theory* states that "Fanon remarks that it was only with the

appearance of Césaire that negritude or blackness became a condition that would be assumed with pride by a French West Indian”(265). As Pal Ahluwalia tells us in his essay “Negritude and Nativism”, negritude was about returning the essence of black people to black people. Quoting Césaire, Ahluwalia writes that “negritude is the simple recognition of the fact of being black and the acceptance of this fact, of our destiny as black people, of our history and our culture” (231). In other words, “blackness” or, “the fact of blackness”, the title of one of Fanon’s key chapters in *Black Skin*, was a ground for a movement.

Despite Sartre’s contention that negritude was “anti-racist racism” (*DCT*, 266), as a theoretical ground, negritude came under attack for inverting racial binaries and reinstating the essentialist notions of either/or that contemporary theory rigorously repudiates. However, as Ahluwalia notes, despite being critically ignored as an important cultural movement (and this is due chiefly to its essentialist grounding), negritude played an important role as what I am referring to as a “stepping stone” for other black movements. As I mentioned above, Fanon would later develop many of his ideas in *Black Skin, White Masks* out of the work done by Aimé Césaire. Indeed, according to Ahluwalia negritude provided the ground for looking forward to many different black movements: “the concept of negritude has developed since its inauguration to include a multiplicity of meanings as diverse as African personality, black renewal and Pan-Africanism”(231). Furthermore, despite its “all-too-easy dismissal”(Ahluwalia 232) on the basis of essentialism, negritude played a key role in providing new possibilities for anti-colonial resistance. Ahluwalia writes that negritude “had much in common with other movements of the struggle for liberation when it was crucial to break down the

representations of the colonizers, when it was essential to reconstitute subjectivity" (232). In other words, "blackness", or African essence, provided the ground from which to build a cohesive black discourse in the face of a colonial suppression of self. As the negritude movement illustrates, giving essence back to a people who have all but lost themselves in a colonial structure allows them a place to begin from and to move forward.

The solidity of the ground utilized by negritude is provided by the tautological gesture of essence. "Blackness" appeals to itself for its validity as a ground. It is what it is. The "logic" of essence, or the emptiness of its tautological movement, is often what anti-essentialists call into question. As we touched on briefly in the opening chapter, in the section of *The Turn to the Native* called "Problems with Essentialization", Arnold Krupat identifies arguments that use essence as rhetoric as opposed to logic. For example, according to Krupat, "to assert the existence of 'an Indian voice' discernable in critical writing is to argue rhetorically, not logically"(8). For Krupat the existence of a Native voice, which would necessarily need to be discernable from an American voice or a Jewish voice (both of which Krupat sees himself as having) or more generally, a non-Native voice, is not logical because there is no one "thing" that all Native voices rest on. According to Krupat, and I am inclined to agree with him, if one were presented with unmarked native writing to judge against non-native writing it is "doubt[ful] whether...anyone... would be able to guess which authors were Native and which were non-Native"(8)²¹.

²¹ Krupat's claim was recently affirmed in Native literature and criticism. Tim Barrus, a "middle-aged white guy of Scandinavian decent" (*The Virginia Quarterly Review*), published several well received, non-fiction books as a Navajo writer named Nasdijj. Until some investigative journalism was done by *LA Weekly* Nasdijj was commonly accepted to be a Native writer.

However, in the face of quantitative and qualitative analyses that illustrate the fact that Native people are denied the benefits other groups in North America have access to, Krupat admits that it is difficult to readily distinguish between logic and its antonyms. Following an analysis of a statistical report from the *Digest of Education Statistics*, which shows that in 1980 Native people made up only .3% of full-time faculty in American Universities, Krupat writes that “it is no wonder that the line between dialectic and rhetoric tends to shift and blur as Native scholars ‘fight back’”(8). In other words, logic and rhetoric cannot be defined as mutually exclusive terms in the face of the very real problems confronting Native people²². It is “logical” to argue for the need to turn to essence in Aboriginal literature insofar as it produces some “small gain in power”(Krupat 7). In other words, as the word “gain” implies, logic can dictate whatever allows Native people to move forward. Not only does this “logic” blur the lines between dialectic and rhetoric, but it also, dangerously, blurs the line between harm and healing as more drastic measures are looked to for restitution.

²² In his essay “After Whiteness” Mike Hill suggests that the idea that race is socially constructed has become so ubiquitous that it is now tacitly accepted as a logical paradigm to work out of:

“everyone everywhere now seems to agree [that] race is a historically changeable social construction. Republican congressmen and post-Enlightenment race theorists join each other in touting this boilerplate theme. But the fact anti-essentialism is approaching postmodern common sense should not make it a trivial matter. To the contrary, that a constructionist theory of race has become ordinary news ought to provoke a look at how post-formalist assumptions about identity alter the jurisprudence of rights”(The *Post-Colonial Studies Reader* 205).

Hill’s essay takes issue with how social construction has become common sense for academics and politicians alike. However, social construction cannot always be said to follow the rules of “good reason.” Using statistical analysis from the 2000 U.S census to make his point, Hill illustrates how the blanket application of social construction theory can actually obscure the rights of minority groups. As the ability to self-identify in surveys becomes greater so does the number of registered groups that have different political needs. Not only is it nearly impossible for a government to respond individually to the needs of thoroughly diversified state, it no longer has the need to. The political significance of a group of three or four individuals is negligible. Notwithstanding social construction’s widespread popularity, the work of both Hill and Ian Hacking in *The Social Construction of What?* necessitates a very critical look at any use of social construction as a universal logic.

If we look closely at the position historically occupied by colonized people, we can see how the tautological gesture of essence indeed functions on the basis of some logic. In other words, identifying the “sickness” experienced by colonized people will help to better contextualize the validity of essence as a “medicine”. There are striking similarities between the colonized position identified by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, first published in 1952, and the position occupied by the Cree in *Blue Marrow*, published almost fifty years later. As Fanon demonstrates in *Black Skin*, the position experienced by colonized people should not, and indeed cannot, be identified as anything past an “experience” of lack in colonial culture:

Yesterday, awakening to the world, I saw the sky turn upon itself utterly and wholly. I wanted to rise, but the disembowelled silence fell back upon me, its wings paralyzed. Without responsibility, straddling Nothingness and Infinity, I began to weep. (140)

The implications of Fanon’s lament in this wonderfully written passage need to be carefully addressed. Here, “straddling Nothingness and Infinity” Fanon seems to be identifying his complete lack of position as a colonized person. It is not that he is struggling against some particular force, but that he is paralyzed within a void. He can neither move forwards nor backwards as there is nothing to mark a beginning or an end. Neither space nor time has any meaning for him. Furthermore, in such a state he has been stripped of a basic human condition, responsibility. Fanon’s self-identified (non)position is similar to what Jacques Derrida identifies as the aporia in his book *Aporias*. According to Derrida,

there, in sum, in this place of aporia, *there is no longer any problem*. Not that, alas or fortunately, the solutions have been given, but because one could no longer even find a problem that would constitute itself and that would keep in front of oneself, as a presentable object or project (emphasis original, 12).

At the end of *Aporias* Derrida will conclude that “*the aporia can never simply be endured as such*” (emphasis original, 78). However, in *Black Skin* it appears that Fanon has been condemned to the very type of space that Derrida is identifying. Indeed, he “belongs” to no space or time in particular. As Derrida suggests it is the very lack of a problem, which Fanon might use as a ground to begin a resistance against colonial culture, that confounds him and confines him to this (non)space. With no problem, and certainly no answer, Fanon is “without responsibility” insofar as responsibility requires a moral ground, a place to brace one’s *response* against. In other words, the experience of colonized people, inasmuch as one can name it an experience, is, that of a void, aporia or the negative.

However, this is not to suggest --when taken in relation to *Blue Marrow*-- that the Cree are suspended in a position of absolute non-agency. Indeed, I would argue that Halfe’s work comes from a position of strength and *Blue Marrow* itself actively struggles against this void or aporia. In order to illustrate this strength it is perhaps necessary to contextualize the void I am referring to in more detail, particularly in relation to essence. Most importantly, this void must be understood as a colonial construction. Any assertion of non-agency for the Cree must be seen as one that has been imposed by the colonizer. Just because the Cree may have been relegated to this space does not mean that they cannot struggle against it. I am emphasizing it here as a void because, as Cook-Lynn points out, colonization is often understood to be a “benign movement” (“Why I Can’t

Read Wallace Stenberg, 29). In order to understand the strength implicit to Halfe's work it is necessary to understand the power of what she struggles against. Colonization and colonial culture is not benign, but a force that carries with it a strength to incapacitate the colonized, as suggested by Fanon's (non)space.

Quoting Sartre, Fanon goes on to show how Western philosophy has left the black man in this (non)position, struggling against oblivion with no ground to look forward from (or to): "negritude is the root of its own destruction, it is a transition and not a conclusion, a means and not an ultimate end"(133)²³. Sartre, who would later write the preface to Fanon's second book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, is here writing about Hegelian dialectics in which the colonized person becomes the antithesis in a binary system that consumes the negative pole in order for synthesis to occur. According to Sartre, inasmuch as negritude posits a resistance against the white man as the positive value in a dialectical progression, it necessarily relegates the black man to the antithetical value. In other words, negritude destroys the ground it creates in a single gesture.

In Western culture Sartre illustrates only one of the many ways that the colonized are represented as occupying the antithetical position in a negative/positive dichotomy. From a Marxist perspective, Gayatri Spivak argues that the subaltern, an individual left without agency because of his or her social position, can "speak" but cannot be "heard", due to the fact that her voice must first pass through a political representative. She writes that "it is in the shadow of this unfortunate marionette that the history of the unheeded subaltern must unfold"(29). In other words, the subaltern can only be known when regarded against a specific, colonialist, critical background. As with the film of a camera,

²³ Fanon seems to see Sartre's logic as the point of departure from his own ties to negritude. After citing a lengthy passage from *Orphee Noir* of which I have taken a small excerpt, Fanon writes that "when I read that page, I felt that I had been robbed of my last chance"(133).

the negative must be held against the light in order to be registered by the subject. Both the Sartre and Spivak quotes help us to identify the negative position that the colonized occupies in Western discourse. The hegemony of this position is also what Native critics like Craig Womack are working to refute. Womack firmly states that "I reject... the supremacist notion that assimilation can only go in one direction, that white culture always overpowers Indian culture, that white is inherently more powerful than red" (*Red on Red*, 12). Inasmuch as it seems encapsulate the experience of the colonized, the negative bears a closer look.

Indeed, the word "negative" itself provides an interesting way to think about the colonized position. According to the *OED* the definition of negative is "showing the absence rather than the presence of particular features". That absence can be "shown" is perhaps a bit misleading. For Fanon the "white song" (113) of Western philosophy and colonial culture is indicative of a social structure that leaves the person of colour with no place to exist *as such*: "a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinary sterile, arid region, an utterly naked declivity" (8). Rather than attribute this quote to the intricacies of Hegelian dialectics we can see it simply as a problem of language, indicated in the *OED* definition of negative above. Zeros and ellipses aside, what absence "is", so to speak, cannot be *shown*. Inasmuch as he sees himself as signifying absence, Fanon does not feel that he can enter himself *as such* into a discourse of presence, controlled and maintained by colonial culture. However, in his ties to psychoanalysis, being for the author is dependent on signification. To mark the negative is to give it positive features and thus to alter its very "thingness". One cannot mark absence; one can only gesture towards it within the limitations of language. In other words, in attempting to signify himself in the presence of

colonial culture Fanon is unable to cogently mark the “as such” of his self. “Blackness”, as absence, cannot be significantly indicated in the dominant signifying chain. The limitations of the system he is forced to signify in relegate him to this “naked declivity” in which signification, and thus being are impossible.

Conversely, in *Blue Marrow* non-being is *generated* through signification. A number of narrative voices make up this text. Besides *acimowinis*, who orchestrates the voices on the page, the reader is confronted with the spectral accounts of “all my relations”(6). The ancestors represent the variety of perspectives, both cultural and temporal, that make up colonial history. Inasmuch as English is the dominant signifying system in this book, the Cree speakers are confined to its limits. They fumble with the unfamiliar language in order to bring themselves into being in Halfe’s text. Grandmothers “stutter” (61) their stories across the page. Halfe marks the “naked declivity” her Cree ancestors are forced to occupy in an almost playful manner. In her difficulty with the language “Born in a Dent Grandmother” locates herself in Fanon’s “zone of non-being”: “*Our feet were free / before da walk of da white skin. / I can’t dell you where I waz born. / In a dent somewhere*”(61). Like *acimowinis*, who loses the hoofprint that brands her as Cree, Born in a Dent Grandmother also loses herself in the walk for “them”. That “our” feet were free before “da walk of da white skin” suggests that the Cree are now confined to the movement of colonial culture. As if in a river, the Cree have been caught in a current that only allows for movement in one particular direction. In order to bring herself into being she must do so within the limitations of that system.

Now, not only must Born in a Dent Grandmother walk the walk, she must also talk the talk, insofar as English has become the prevailing signifying system. By bringing

herself into being in the English language, this woman identifies herself in what one might interpret as Fanon's space of nonbeing or Derrida's aporia. Straddling English, the language she must use to state her existence, and Cree, the language that interferes with her pronunciation, this Grandmother locates herself in a dent. According to the *OED* a dent is "a slight hollow in a surface made by a blow or pressure". However, the word "dent" is also used more colloquially to signify reduction. For instance, I might attest that an injurious comment put a dent in my pride, or that a large expenditure put a dent in my savings. In other words, "dent" can signify an absence. Still, the reader might infer that what Born in a Dent Grandmother *means* is that she was born in a *tent*. As opposed to "dent", the word "tent" signifies some sort of shelter and protection.

However, meaning within *Blue Marrow* is fully contingent on language. The narrator herself laments this fact when she writes that "my words get in your way. / I feel your sting"(33), a passage which we examined in relation to the fallible "mother's tongue" and hermeneutics in the first chapter. In other words, as the narrator herself admits, it is what the reader sees, not what the writer intends, that assigns meaning to this text. While there may be some meaning that exists behind language, just as black skin exists behind a white mask for Fanon, once entered into the centripetal structure of the signifying chain it is impossible to locate. Therefore, inasmuch as Born in a Dent Grandmother *says* she was born in a dent, she was. The gesture made by language overrides the meaning which may be behind it. Furthermore, her name, which is presented by the narrator, the interpreter of the story, suggests as much. She *is* Born in a Dent Grandmother. Halfe is not saying that this character belongs to absence, but within

the limitations of language she can only locate herself in this position. Shelter and protection is beyond the means offered to her.

According to both Halfe and Fanon it appears that within a hegemonic colonial system the colonized are denied an *existence* as Cree or Black, respectively. Asserting one's being within the limitations of this system is only to confirm one's absence. Denied existence, there is no "human minimum"(Fanon 184) for indigenous people in a colonial structure. In other words, there is no place to begin, no ground from which to build culture, no stable point against which one might push off from and out of the system that denies them being. As Krupat suggests, the lines between rhetoric and logic in such a system are indeed blurred. It would seem that any implement that allowed for a modicum of stability or "small gain in power" for an individual or group struggling against it could not strictly contradict the principles of good reasoning. Thus, despite the "emptiness" of its logic, the ground created by essence in its tautology should perhaps be reconsidered as a viable theoretical ground for colonized people. Essence can act as a tool in opposition to this space, providing the ground and stability necessary to mount an attack. I will now turn to blood, which serves as that essential ground in *Blue Marrow*.

The specific appeal to blood, as a representation of indigenous essence and a means of lending strength to a colonized people, takes its form in early post-colonial theory. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon turns to blood as a means to nourish his being within the "Nothingness" he sees offered to a black man within colonial culture:

Blood! Blood!... Birth! Ecstasy of becoming! Three quarters engulfed in the confusions of the day, I feel myself reddened with blood. The arteries of all the world convulsed, turn away uprooted, have turned towards me and fed me. (125)

Clearly, Fanon's frenetic appeal to blood in this passage is not simply to platelets and plasma but to a basic fact of existence. Blood, in its connection to birth and becoming, is represented as an essence of the author's being. Indeed, insofar as it feeds or nourishes him, a point that is important to *Blue Marrow* as well, it is blood that allows Fanon to become. Weighed against the earlier quotation in *Black Skin* which famously cites Fanon as being mired within a zone of non-being or absence, blood can be read as giving the author some positive form here.

Blue Marrow also makes a very specific appeal to blood. In a line dedicated to itself, Halfe writes "see the blood"(3). This early imprecation will serve as a point of reflection for the remainder of this thesis. As opposed to Fanon, who, in the passage quoted above, is looking towards bloodlines as the means to become, Halfe is looking towards bloodshed. Indeed, the author goes on to illustrate how bloodlines are difficult to perceive. The narrator writes that one of her Grandmothers "must have been married to a white man, 'cause my cousins all have that white skin. Guess you could say that about my father too, white skinned Indian, though *nimosom* and Adeline were Indian, as Indian as me anyway"(8). As this passage illustrates, what it means to be Indian, or Cree, is not uniformly marked in genealogy. Difference is a part of what it is to be Indian. Thus, as a salient ground for "Greenness," bloodlines are not always appreciable.

The blood that Halfe asks her reader to see is that which was shed of Cree people during colonization. She wants her reader to witness the violence. Unlike genealogy, this blood is easily located in *Blue Marrow*. The different voices that make up this text share stories of the emotional and physical pain endured during colonization. In many ways, *Blue Marrow* is a study in pain. In fact, I first encountered it in a seminar on trauma

literature. Halfe is asking her reader to see the basic fact of violence²⁴. Through the dance²⁵ of her Grandmother, *acimowinis* is reminded of the suffering endured during colonization:

The remains of chapels burning,
chalices gleaming,
scalps, smallpox, famine
and winter sleeping. (73)

When unearthed from the ash with Grandmother's "sweeping feet"(73) oppression, violence and suffering become the basic facts of a Cree position in colonial culture. It is the urgency connected to this bloody history that will "gather [the] pencil scratch"(73) of novelists, poets and historians. And it is witnessing the bloodshed unearthed by the Grandmother as storyteller that will fill "empty bellies"(73), nourishing Cree culture in much the same way as blood "fed" Fanon.

It would seem that the appeal to blood in *Blue Marrow* works from similar feelings of urgency identified in *Black Skin*. Indeed, before she loses the hoofprint on her breast walking for "them," it is witnessing the blood that provides a foundation for the

²⁴ In *Antigone's Claim* Judith Butler establishes the similarities between bloodlines and bloodshed as a political ground. According to Butler "by signifying 'blood,' Antigone does not precisely signify a blood line but something more like 'bloodshed' --that which must be remaindered for authoritarian states to be maintained. The feminine, as it were, becomes this remainder, and 'blood' becomes the graphic figure for this echoing trace of kinship, a refiguring of the figure of the bloodline that brings into relief the violent forgetting of primary kin relations"(4). In other words, blood, remaindered or remembered, can act as a ground for the state or the family, respectively. Repressed, blood allows the state to maintain control, remembered it provides the grounds for revolution.

²⁵ According to Helen Gilbert in her essay "Dance, Movement and Resistance Politics" dance can restore Aboriginal identity outside of colonial culture. Gilbert writes that during dance "individual identity is both created by, and subsumed in, group identity as culturally coded movement that gives valence to each performer's dance, allowing participants to shed their everyday roles determined within white hierarchies of power"(304). As a means of speaking to colonial culture outside of the limitations of language the role of dance in Native cultures needs to be further examined.

narrator. Below is the “see the blood” quotation we addressed earlier, accompanied by the lines preceding it:

The prairie is full of bones. The bones stand up and sing and I feel the weight of them as they guide my fingers on this page.

See the blood. (2-3)

Since the important passage comes to the reader within the first few pages of the book, the appeal to “see the blood” can be read as an imperative that underscores the entirety of *Blue Marrow*. I will be addressing the limitations of this imperative in the following chapter. Right now it is only necessary to establish how witnessing bloodshed can act as essence or a ground in this important passage. I would argue that just as it does for Fanon, blood nourishes the Cree community, allowing the Cree people to “become” in the dissimulation offered by colonial culture, which we addressed above. However, for Halfe, it is *seeing* the blood of slaughtered relatives that can provide a ground for Cree culture.

Of course, turning towards bloodshed as a ground is fraught with paradox. Suffering and death are generally considered to be the tools of the colonizer and the trauma connected to violence cannot be said to be nourishing. Evoking bloodshed as ground for resistance risks validating the very system we are attempting to disrupt. However, Halfe is asking her reader to see the blood that *stains* colonial history. This bloodshed is a fact of colonization and it needs to be addressed as such. As we established in the previous chapter, history must be remembered and shared or it ceases to exist. Furthermore, death can act as a galvanizing force for Native people. The Ojibway author Louise Erdrich establishes the death of family as an important ground in

her first novel *Love Medicine*. When attending the funeral of his Grandfather Lipsha Morrissey, a boy gifted with a healing touch, reflects on the nourishing power of death:

It was someplace in that long sad service that my vision shifted. I began to see things different, more clear. The family kneeling down turned to rocks in a field. It struck me how strong and reliable grief was, and death. Until the end of time, *death would be our rock*. (emphasis mine, 253)

As a rock, death in this passage death is clearly identified with ground. Not only does death provide Lipsha a way to anchor himself, but it also allows him to see things “more clear.” In other words, death should not be considered as being strictly traumatic. Like the medicine that pervades *Blue Marrow* it can be both an agent of harm and of healing.

We can read bloodshed in the “see the blood” passage quoted above in the way the author conflates bones and blood. It is the bones of her ancestors, buried across the prairies in “mass graves”(Halfe 20) that provide the cultural “weight” for her story, guiding her pen on the page. These Cree relatives did not die peaceful deaths of old age, but were murdered in violent acts of colonialism. The first story of colonialism in *Blue Marrow* told from a Cree perspective calls for the reader to witness the horror of what many indigenous people were subjected to. The Eternal Grandmother tells her story: “*They tore flesh, breasts became pouches, hung / from their belts. Our bellies spilled*”(20). It is by “seeing the blood” of this death and others that both the narrator and the reader enter into this text.

So, the imprecation to “see the blood” is derived from the “weight” or urgency of the violent acts incurred against the Cree during colonization. Indeed, in *Culture and*

Imperialism, Edward Said suggests that the scars that mark victims of colonization can provide a ground for moving towards a new, "post-colonial future." Said writes that

the post-imperial writers of the Third World therefore bear their past within them --as scars of humiliating wounds, an instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions of past tending towards a post-colonial future, as urgently reinterpretable and redeployable experiences, in which the *formerly silent native* speaks and acts on territory reclaimed as part of a general movement of resistance, from the colonist (emphasis mine, 31).

In other words, according to Said, addressing the "wounds" of colonization can provide a ground from which to look forward to new, post-colonial, conception of the world around us. Inasmuch as these wounds can be read as facts, a reality of the violence implicit to colonization, they can provide the stability from which to embark on a re-thinking of resistance against the colonist and a reinterpretation of the past. The urgency suggested by witnessing bloodshed provides "an instigation for different practices," a place to begin outside of the current model. Indeed, *Blue Marrow* has its characters "re-vision"(79) colonial history through the suffering of Cree people. Furthermore, Said also seems to be taking into account the idea that a different logic is perhaps applicable to the colonized. According to the author in this passage, bloodshed seems to provide a place to begin where there was once nothing for the indigenous people. As he suggests, addressing these wounds will give voice to the "formerly silent native."

If we look further into Said's work we can clarify the social mechanisms in place that creates the witnessed wound, or bloodshed, as such a ground for "different practices." Inasmuch as blood "fed" Fanon in the passage above, the bearing witness to

the wounds incurred against indigenous people during colonization can nourish Native identity. I am using “nourish” here in the sense Said does in his essay “The Mind of Winter”. In this essay Said writes that,

the Palestinians...know that their sense of national identity has been *nourished* in the exile milieu, where everyone not a blood brother or sister is an enemy, where every sympathizer is really an agent of some unfriendly power, and where the slightest deviation from the accepted line is an act of rankest treachery”(emphasis mine, 441).

In the passage we looked at from *Black Skin*, blood nourished the author’s being in a colonial structure that continually stripped him of existence. In my reading of Said, exile nourishes the community in much the same way. What I understand Said to be saying in this passage is that exile forces a community to bind together. The definition of the word is certainly open to differing interpretations now, but to be exiled traditionally meant to be cast outside of the city limits. Often, if an entire group was exiled it was for holding dissimilar politics, genes, or religious views to the majority or ruling class. Left to fend for themselves beyond the protective walls of the state, exiles were forced to turn to the only ones they knew they could trust, those who were persecuted for the same reasons. Exile “nourishes” national identity insofar as it forces the exiled to draw the walls of their community tightly around themselves in order to survive. Identity is “fed” by being surrounded by like minded, or bodied, individuals.

Like exile in Said’s work and blood in Fanon’s, seeing the bloodshed of the relatives slaughtered in the past “nourishes” Cree identity in *Blue Marrow*, galvanizing the Cree enough to provide a stepping stone from which to look forward to a new future.

By witnessing bloodshed of past violence in the present the Cree can step away from a victim mentality. Grief and sorrow can work for, rather than against, them. In the passages above, both Fanon and Said are writing about blood, a vital principle of life that unites families and communities. Blood, in this sense, works *for* the colonized since it helps to consolidate a group, giving them more strength when pushing against the colonized. Bloodshed, as the destruction of life, however, is meant to work *against* the colonized. The slaughter of indigenous people was part of the imperialistic process meant to firmly position the colonizer as the dominant force. Halfe's imprecation to "see the blood" is meant to direct attention towards the egregious violence committed against the Cree, since many of the stories of colonial violence have been repressed or covered up. Where strength is gained for the Cree, how their culture can be "nourished" by bloodshed, is found in the fact that this violence was horribly wrong. Notwithstanding recent acts of reconciliation by the Canadian government and the current multiculturalist attitude Canadians are said to hold, as a colonial culture, Canada was built from an entirely reprehensible ground. By shaking the foundations of the structure the Cree are forced to occupy they nourish their own position. They are stronger inasmuch as the opponent is weaker.

Furthermore, it must also be kept in mind that the bloodshed in *Blue Marrow* is explicitly connected with stories and history rather than the experienced acts of violence. Said seems to be alluding to in "The Mind of Winter." Directly after evoking the voices of "All Women. All Men. Grandmothers and Eternal Grandmothers. Eternal Grandfathers"(70) the narrator relates this memory:

Grandfather talked

With Grandmother. She said,

"River blood will always be our milk.

This talk will stain the leaves."(71)

In this passage, flowing blood is directly equated with nourishment: milk, in its connections with mothers and children, is an almost emblematic representation of growth and strength, as well as birth and beginnings. Like "April rain" or "mother's womb" we might go so far as to identify milk with an essence of being. As this quote explicitly shows, it is bloodshed that provides this essential means of nourishment for the Cree community. Following from Said's definition of nourishment for the exile, as "milk" bloodshed, as the terrible and gratuitous acts of violence colonial culture is founded on, can galvanize the Cree community, giving them a ground within a dissimulating colonial culture. Yet exactly how Said's idea of nourishment can be applicable to indigenous people, for whom the idea of "exile" has entirely different connotations, must be examined more closely.

In a Hegelian analysis, which Said's own seems to follow, it is by acknowledging the suffering and pain of "blood" relations lost in war that the state binds together in mourning, pride and defiance. National boundaries are built and reinforced on the galvanizing force of the bloodshed of compatriots. Indeed, this "logic" evokes the ambivalent "medicine" addressed in the first chapter since harm can be seen to inspire a type of healing. As I write this on the 90th anniversary of the battle of Vimy Ridge, I am reminded of how that battle, in which over 10,000 Canadians were killed or wounded, serves as a historical marker for the moment Canadian national identity was solidified. In fact, Brigadier-General A.E. Ross even went so far as to declare of Canada after the war,

"in those few minutes I witnessed the birth of a nation"(Ross ix). Obviously, we do not need to turn to a lengthy discussion of German Idealism to see how bloodshed can play a significant role in "nourishing" national identity. Canadians only have to turn to their own history to recognize this. As a means of consolidating national identity, stories of bloodshed like those from Vimy Ridge are evoked annually in documentaries and news stories. I was confronted with it during the semi-finals of an international hockey game. Canada was playing Sweden in a game that would determine the gold medal match. Looking at pictures of wounded Canadian soldiers on the scoreboard, it was hard to ignore the nationalism war was meant to evoke when presented before an international competition. Indeed, besides at hockey games, Canadian bloodshed is utilized to nourish Canadian identity across vast stretches of time and space. History books and historical fiction are filled with stories that consolidate Canadians with stories of violence and suffering forcing them to bear witness to a bloody history²⁶.

Obviously, as an important part of any culture, stories give shape to the communities that share them. Stories of war and violence against a community can lead to individuals binding together for safety and comfort. In Said's definition of the word, this nourishes the identity of the community. Halfe is aware of the nourishing potential of stories of violence against the Cree. The quotation marks the author applies in the river blood passage above are not simply fortuitous. The hermeneutic emphasis in the four lines, as the double use of the word as both a verb and a noun here suggest, is directed

²⁶ In his first novel *Three Day Road* the Métis author Joseph Boyden plays with the connotations of nationalism and history for Native Canadians. In this book two Ojibway men join the Canadian armed forces in World War One. In its vivid battle scenes and affecting portrayals of suffering and bloodshed in the trenches, Boyden evokes the nationalism associated with war. However, as the figures of the two Ojibway men illustrate nationalism confines one to the culturally accepted borders of a nation. In order to be accepted one of the men adopts the mannerisms and practices of the white soldiers. The other is relegated to the margins of the camp in his unwillingness to conform. *Three Day Road* illustrates the dissimulating effects nationalism can have on minority groups.

towards “talk”. By using quotation marks around the “river blood” section of the text Halfe calls the reader’s attention to the fact that the words are a repetition of or a reference to a previous occasion in which the words were used. “Talk” is shared across media and voices. For Halfe, propagating “talk” can act to “stain the leaves” of literature and history. How this occurs is really just a product of sharing stories. Quotations have a way of duplicating themselves, finding their way into new ideas and writing, often in ways that the author probably never intended. Walter Benjamin probably best exemplified the transient nature of quotations in his book *The Arcades Project* in which the author created a montage of quotations from hundreds of published works to present his own ideas. In other words, once they make their way into the world, quotations have a way of facilitating their own propagation, “stain[ing] the leaves” of new texts without the author’s aid.

However, it should be noted that this passage from *Blue Marrow* is not simply a suggestion about the power of sharing of stories in general. The talk in this passage is aimed at a specific topic. “This talk” refers back to the noun in the previous sentence, which is “river blood”. Of course, flowing blood can be read as that which flows through one’s veins and defines family. Yet, it can also be interpreted as that which was shed during colonization. In other words, it could be the talk of historical bloodshed that will more literally work to “stain the leaves” of *Blue Marrow* and nourish the Cree community. In other words, it is by bringing the events of the past into the light of the present that the Cree community is nourished. This is not to say that more bloodshed is necessary for the Cree, but that the fact of death and violence --that which cannot be altered, only remembered or forgotten-- must be re-examined in the here and now. After

all, a stain is a blemish and a cause of reproach, but it is also the mark of a past event. The blood of colonized people, which, when one addresses works like *Blue Marrow*, can be seen to stain colonial culture acts as a galvanizing force for indigenous people. Bloodshed, in the form of a stain, or past event can work to bring them together in admonishment against colonial history. To “see the blood” is to condemn its necessity.

The brutal fact of the pain and suffering of the Cree during colonization, emblemized in the bloodshed Halfe implores her reader to bear witness to in her text, is to be read as an essence, a “milk” to nourish the beginnings of a Cree history, and instigation for different practices. Importantly for the narrator of *Blue Marrow*, “this talk” has been taken from the oral history of “all my relations.” It is a quotation borrowed from a Cree context. In other words, “this talk” of bloodshed is distinctly Cree. Flowing through this text and, as this thesis itself illustrates, into the texts of others, the blood Cree people shed during colonization is being recuperated into a ground of identity. The word recuperation is useful here because it suggests that something which was lost or wasted can be recovered and allowed to regain its strength. Indeed, colonial violence wasted a lot of life. However, in illustrating how “seeing the blood[shed]” of history in the present can work *for* Cree people, rather than *against* them, Halfe uncovers a strength in death and provides a ground or stepping stone from which to begin. I would like to emphasize, once again, that neither I nor Halfe are supporting death and violence. The bloodshed that occurred during colonization was gratuitous and terrible. However, *Blue Marrow* makes it a ground in order to move away from a victim mentality.

Like Said’s scars, bloodshed and its capacity to provide a ground for the colonized can be witnessed in the pages of history. Indeed, the consolidating effects of

Cree bloodshed “stain the leaves”, or pages, of *Blue Marrow* itself. By appealing to her reader to “see the blood” Halfe is suggesting that the means to galvanizing the Cree community are within the colonial stories of her people. The bloodshed of the Cree, more specifically the violence incurred against them and the suffering they endured, must be seen in order for this history and its people to be sustained. Inasmuch as Vimy Ridge or Remembrance Day can work to consolidate Canadians, the memory of fallen Cree during colonization can serve to nourish the Cree community. In fact, the bloodshed of the Cree during colonization “stains” the pages of this very text. Women are raped, children are murdered and people are left to die after being uprooted from their homes. The brutal facts of these deaths are enough to provide a ground for further movement to what Said calls a “post-colonial future”. Furthermore, in seeing the explicitly represented Cree blood in *Blue Marrow*, Halfe is also imploring the reader to look for it in the historical texts that do not represent the bloodshed of indigenous peoples as explicitly. There is blood to be found in many of the texts that make up colonial history. Simply knowing what to look for can help to unveil it. I will be exploring this idea in depth in the following chapter.

Historically, blood, in the context of race, has provided an ontological ground for many colonized writers and theorists to begin a discourse. Blood in this context provides a stepping stone in the movement towards larger and more critical ideologies, as evidenced in negritude. As a native literature canon begins to emerge, many native writers have been forced to readdress their relationships with essence, suggesting that the anti-essentialist mandate of post-modernism leaves the Aboriginal intellectual foundering in a theoretical oblivion. Many ask, as Henry Louis Gates does for the black individual,

“how can the black subject posit a full and sufficient self in which blackness is a sign of absence?”(218). Insofar as the Cree position in a colonized world appears to hold the characteristics of a colonized position identified by Fanon over fifty years ago, some form of ground would seem to be necessary. As Arnold Krupat suggests, it is the very fact that Native people are being denied the benefits afforded to non-Native groups that blurs the line between logic and rhetoric. If a movement affords Native people some small gain in a system that works to discredit their existence, it is difficult to argue against the good reason of that movement. Thus, to a certain degree, essence is perhaps restored as a viable theoretical ground in a colonial context. As *Blue Marrow* illustrates, witnessing bloodshed may provide a stepping stone from which the colonized can instigate movement towards a new resistance in much the same way as movements such as negritude did.

However, witnessing bloodshed, although utilizing similar principals of ground as bloodlines, is not a simple essence. It is not an innate feature of an individual. Rather, it is a galvanizing politico-historical action/movement that occurs in the interaction between history and its audience. The direction of the movement is determined by the subject’s interaction with an essential feature of colonial history. In other words, essence, in this context, is subject to change and difference. Witnessing is, of course, subject to point of view. As I believe Halfe is suggesting, bloodshed should not be seen as a solid ground. Witnessing it provides a stepping stone, a way to move forward towards new ideas. A stepping stone is not a place to rest, it is a means of advancement or a way to facilitate crossing. However, as Helen Tiffin points out “decolonization is a process not an arrival”(99). In a colonial structure that leaves the colonized struggling within a vacuum

or aporia, bloodshed can and should be used as a way to begin that process. In other words, "see the blood" and move forward.

Chapter Three

Dis-covering Bloodshed in *Blue Marrow*

For so long I have not finished / something. / I've been buried.

Louise Bernice Halfe *Blue Marrow*.

As we saw in the previous chapter, only three pages into her long poem *Blue Marrow*, Louise Bernice Halfe insists that her reader “see the blood”(3). As essence, witnessed bloodshed can operate as a stepping stone for Cree theory in a dissimulating colonial culture. However, colonial culture also works to *cover up* this bloodshed. By obfuscating the severity of the violence committed against indigenous people during colonization, modern societies are able to negate the fact that they were born out of gratuitous violence. Yet in *Blue Marrow*, seeing the blood does not appear to be a difficult task to complete. Indeed, it “stain[s] the leaves”(71) of this affecting text. In order to tell her history at all the Cree narrator recognizes that she must become “a squaw with blood on [her] hands”(20). Using these hands to write, blood is meant to be visible in every word.

Because the stories of colonial violence against indigenous people have been forgotten or repressed it is important that they are dis-covered in books like *Blue Marrow*. Writing on Joy Harjo, a poet who also explores the pain of Native people in history, Womack suggests that “healthy people survive through storytelling, but sometimes the pain is so great that people bury themselves in silence and internalize anger, then pass it on to their children”(237). For Womack, the pain inherent to Native history is often so great that it is repressed by the people who carry it. As a result a history of silence is passed on, with each generation tacitly burying family bloodshed deeper. Time and sorrow work to divide a people from their history and the means to be

healthy. Thus, paradoxically, but conforming to the limits of logic set out in my opening chapter, exposing the wound in Native history is often the only way to re-open stories and bring about convalescence. Halfe would seem to agree with the logic Womack is employing. In a late passage she conflates bloodshed with nourishment: "*My wife claws open her forearm. / her warmth drips / into my mouth.*"(77). It is by re-opening her wound to her family, allowing them to witness her pain, that the men are given the strength to speak, "their water-voices...fire"(78).

There are a number of images in *Blue Marrow* that explicitly re-open the wound of a violent Cree past. Because they deal with a history that has predominantly been repressed and concealed from a critical gaze all of them deserve close attention. However, because of the constraints of time and space I can only deal with one here. I have chosen the following passage because it vividly depicts a level of violence that I will argue is still covered up by colonial culture. While many people are aware of the mistreatment of Natives during colonization, and even of the violent deaths of many of these people, history and literature still work to obfuscate the severity of indigenous peoples' suffering during the colonial process. In *Blue Marrow* old white flesh, a British fur trader, recounts the story of his Cree lover:

I loved her, this squaw, her little brown body

Warmed my bed for a thousand moons. Her

Fingers nimble, tanned hides, quick and sharp

In shooting.

I loved her.

When the Jesuits came and cursed her, I never looked at her again.

I drank spirits. Lifted my axe.

I'm bloodstained. And this

British lass is a useless bone (49).

The complete innocence of the victim in this passage is impossible to escape. Not only is she slaughtered for a seemingly random decree of the church, but she is clearly represented as the friend, equal and lover of this man. "I loved her" is repeated twice. Nonetheless, this "squaw" is murdered without reflection or emotion: in the space of one line old white flesh moves from loving her to "never look[ing] at her again". Two actions mark the onset of what we can only imagine would be a horrific death: "I drank spirits. Lifted my axe." The sociopathy of the white fur trader and the level of violence against the Native woman is the explicit focus of this passage. Furthermore, by leaving the reader to imagine the murder of this woman with an axe, he or she is forced to play an active role in recreating this bloody scene. Indeed, it is impossible not to "see the blood" in this passage; it stains this historical image.

However, when confronted directly with the oppressive authority of colonial culture at her white husband's family reunion, the same narrator who records the vivid story above finds herself struggling to see the Cree bloodshed she has, until this point, been steeped in. Amidst "the history of their migration"(69) she asks herself "how many of my relatives were cattled / onto the reservation during their settlement? How much of *my people's blood was spilled / for this migration*"(emphasis mine, 69). The heavy use of the third person plural balanced against the possessive determiner in the family reunion scene allows us once again to establish an us/them dichotomy with the Cree on one side of the division and the white relatives on the other. "Their" migration was not only

facilitated by the bloodshed of the narrator's relatives, but when surrounded by "their" history she is not even sure "how much" blood was spilled. In other words, the details of the violent acts committed against Native people have been covered up by the more pervasive colonial narrative. Later, when attempting to "weave a story for [her] children"(69) a history that recounts the reality of the suffering endured by Cree people, the narrator or *acimowinis*, is unable to find the words or the breath to pass "these small gifts"(7) on:

I tell them
how [my relatives'] little children died wrapped in
smallpox blankets.
My breath
won't come anymore
I stare
At the wheatfields. (70)

This passage represents the end of the family reunion scene. Surrounded by colonial culture the narrator is suffocated, despite the urgent need to share the Cree history she knows so well. As a consequence *acimowinis* is rendered a passive viewer left to "stare at the wheatfields," an explicit symbol of colonization, leaving the very violent and very real histories of their Cree ancestors to go unsaid. Weighed against the remainder of the text, the family reunion scene in *Blue Marrow* illustrates that when placed within colonial culture Native bloodshed is still covered up.

In making the claim that colonial culture has covered up Cree history I would like to make clear that I am not suggesting that we, as academics, as whites, as

deconstructionists or even as Natives are oblivious to the fact that many indigenous people died violently at the hands of white settlers. That Native people died, many violently and unarmed, at the hands of white settlers should be considered as close to a fact as post-modern scepticism will allow. So, again, we must ask why does Halfe insist that it must be seen? Why, only three pages into *Blue Marrow*, in an independent line at the top of a page, is there the simple command to “see the blood”? As academics and Canadians, what, in our multicultural perspectives and post-modern sensibilities, could still work to cover up this bloodshed?

If we return to the murder scene quoted above, the need for the imprecation to “see the blood” becomes even more perplexing. Not only is Cree blood explicitly exposed in this text, it also “stains” this particular speaker, old white flesh. As anyone who has gotten blood on a white shirt can attest, bloodstains do not come out. So, it would seem that “white flesh” would carry the violence of colonialism with him always, that concurrently this violence would “stain the leaves” of colonial culture. How, then, are these bloodstains covered up? Rene Girard provides an interesting and relevant way to address this very pressing problem.

In his expansive work on violence and the sacred, *The Scapegoat*, Girard writes that “human culture is predisposed to the permanent *concealment* of its origins in collective violence”(emphasis mine, 100). In other words, societies need to “cover up” the blood they have spilled in order to maintain order and political structure. In *The Scapegoat* the cover-up is most effectively established by justifying the necessity of violence. According to Girard, the scapegoat mechanism is put into effect during periods of institutional collapse in which the “difference” maintained between people and

cultures ceases to exist. Institutional collapse is often initiated by some sort of disaster, drought, plague or political revolution, in which the hierarchies and social contracts that hold people together and apart dissolve, giving society the appearance of the monstrous: “Intuitional collapse obliterates or telescopes hierarchical and functional differences, so that everything has the same monotonous and monstrous aspect”(13). In other words, culture, as we know it, is eradicated, or “eclipsed” as Girard puts it:

The effects of institutional collapse are illustrated in *Blue Marrow*. Colonization took men away from the protective folds of their families and governments and left them to survive in an environment radically different from their homeland. Even for the Jesuits, who order the death of the Cree woman in the passage above, this change dissolved many of the critical boundaries that allowed them to culturally differentiate themselves:

*Father, these robes I wear confuse me. I have forgotten
who I am. A Jesuit. A monk. A brother. A priest. A
nun, perhaps. It matters not. I have sinned. My last
confession was in 1492. Yesterday. Ah yes, late today. (Halfe 33)*

As Halfe is illustrating here, this priest suffers from a basic ontological confusion. The seemingly indelible borders that usually demarcate such important concepts as religion, gender and even time have been blurred. It is only by anchoring himself in the historic date 1492 that he seems to gain some clarity. As Girard points out, in times when the lines of culture are not firmly demarcated, the boundaries that separate “us” and “them” become permeable. Following from this, the more radical “difference” that the other offers makes the more subtle “difference” within the group appear insignificant or

nonexistent. Girard suggests that “difference that exists outside the system is terrifying because it reveals the truth of the system, its relativity, its fragility and its mortality”(21). As the most readily identifiable “cause” of institutional collapse, the stranger, or the other, is identified as being the origin of the problem. It is by spilling the blood of the other, who has now become the scapegoat, that “difference” is restored and culture is reconstituted as such. In other words, murder becomes a necessity.

This interpretation of a “need” for murder can be applied to the scene from *Blue Marrow* I opened this chapter with. As we have seen, old white flesh slaughters the Native woman after “the jesuits came and cursed her.” If we search the text for a plausible explanation to the Jesuits’ reaction we find that Native people are represented as the “coil in the jesuits’ dream”(78), the serpent that the Jesuits believe will lead the “civilized” colonialists to temptation and sin. In other words, Native people are believed to effect institutional collapse for the Jesuit order. In order for colonization to occur, for the Empire to extend itself and its history into the “new world”, the border between “us” and “them” must be rigorously maintained. Thus, by having the Cree woman murdered the Jesuits believe they are protecting the Empire and forwarding the imperialistic project.

However as Girard quite clearly points out, the scapegoat is identified as being as much the cause of the problem as she is identified as being the cure. Because her death is connected to healing, or the reinstitution of firm cultural borders, the scapegoat is now revered as a healer, rather than reviled as a witch. As such, she is actually perceived as contributing her bloodshed to the health of the community. According to Girard, the persecutors conform to “the illusory belief that the scapegoat is omnipotent and facilitates

the cure. The universal execration of the person who causes the sickness is replaced by universal veneration for the person who cures the same sickness”(44). In other words the scapegoat is seen as being complicit in her own bloodshed. This fallacious interpretation obfuscates the very meaning of the violence committed against her, or at least alters our understanding of what violence means²⁷. In this way bloodshed can be covered up by colonial culture, allowing one to ignore the “stain” of imperialistic violence.

The “cover up” that Girard identifies in *The Scapegoat* has very pertinent implications for witnessing bloodshed insofar as the imprecation to “see the blood” suggests that the full implications of violence against Native people are still being obscured by colonial culture. According to Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, “the invasion of North America by European peoples has been portrayed in history and literature as a benign movement directed by God, a movement of moral courage and physical endurance, a victory for all humanity”(29). In other words, like the violence towards the scapegoat identified by Girard, indigenous bloodshed is obfuscated by how it is represented in history and interpreted in colonial culture. On the one hand, *Blue Marrow* represents the bloodshed of white settlers, in the metonymical figure of Christopher Columbus, as an open wound: “Columbus wrote: / *my wound has opened again*”(Halfe 15). Here, blood, and the pain and suffering it represents is exposed to the text and the reader. We are called to witness it. On the other hand, Native bloodshed is represented as a “large scab”(20). Of course, a scab is caused by coagulation, a process meant to cover the wound and stop blood flow. In other words, if the Native wound is scabbed over, the reader is unable to clearly “see the blood” of that wound.

²⁷ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines violence as “behaviour involving physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill”. Insofar as the majority retroactively sees the focus of their actions not being to hurt but rather to heal, “violence” here must assume a new definition, or be discarded all together.

Obviously, while a scab is still representative of an inflicted violence it does not carry the same implications as an open wound. As an intermediary between the wound and the scar the scab is a mark of healing but also of harm. The wound itself is covered up, but this does not mean that it is not still painful. Indeed, if not properly cared for a scab can fester and lead to a harm greater than the original wound. In a society such as Canada, that finds a large part of its identity in multiculturalism, the wounds that were opened up between Aboriginal people and colonial governments are, from one viewpoint, assumed to be closed. One need only turn to the reconciliatory acts put forth by the Canadian government in the last thirty years to identify the application of a colonial salve. In lieu of this, the Aboriginal wound is often no longer identified as open. However, this does not mean that it has healed. Instead the Cree wound can be said to occupy this intermediary position as a scab. Rather than following the idea that further care will allow the scab to heal, Halfe is suggesting that it needs to be re-opened. In other words, *Blue Marrow* is a bloodletting procedure. As the river blood quotation examined in the previous chapter suggests, blood must flow in order for healing to begin: "*River blood will always be our milk*"(71). Once again, this is not to say that Halfe is endorsing violence, but that re-opening the incurred wound from a Cree point of view can provide the ground for new paths of resistance.

In its sheer pervasiveness, the Columbus story plays a major role in obfuscating the stories of indigenous peoples. Already, in the priest passage above, we have seen colonial culture using this history as a ground for interpretation. 1492, of course, is a date most readily associable with Columbus²⁸. Early on into *Blue Marrow* the story of the

²⁸John Noble Wilford points out in the opening paragraph to his lengthy book that 1492 is a monolith of historic consciousness: "Our minds may misplace this or that date of personal and national history, but

Eternal Grandmother, who is later conflated with *nohkom atayohkan*, is identified as being covered up by this authoritative history. In a passage rife with parody, The Eternal Grandmother tells us that:

*I am she who speaks, father, the Eternal
Grandmother.
Forgive me father, for I have sinned. It has been since
1492 since my last confession. I have committed the
following sins. (20)*

This passage establishes that 1492 marks the last time Eternal Grandmother's voice was heard. Beneath the cultural weight of a story perceived as a "reality" of colonization, the Cree story that she carries goes unheard. Indeed, even as she speaks here, the Eternal Grandmother's voice is "covered up" in the sense we have been looking at with Girard. In other words, the "meaning" of Cree bloodshed is obfuscated. Two very Western concepts mediate the Eternal Grandmother's voice in the passage we are currently addressing: Columbus's history and the Catholic confessional. The Eternal Grandmother must speak through them both in order to realize herself within the dominant culture. In doing so healing properties of her story come out as a "sin". The confessional is, of course, representative of repression and guilt. In a sense, it is also a place in which one shares stories. Yet, how these stories are shared conforms to an exceptionally regimented set of rules and regulations. The storyteller is the sinner and the listener is the absolver.

indelibly imprinted in our memory is the verse from childhood: 'In Fourteen Hundred and Ninety-Two / Columbus sailed the ocean blue'"(emphasis mine, X). Wilford fails to clarify his pronoun reference in this quote, so I believe we are meant to assume that by "our minds" he means "everyone's mind", including, of course, indigenous people. Furthermore, being that he is quoting a children's rhyme, Wilford is also showing how this date plays a foundational role in our understanding of history. "We", as inhabitants of a colony, take as one of our major points of historical inception the story of Columbus, thus automatically obscuring alter/native interpretations.

Within these narrow guidelines any “story” is, almost by definition, also a sin. The same sort of idea applies to the history constructed out of the Columbus story. Notwithstanding the scepticism surrounding the character of the explorer as the most recognized name in colonial history it is in his shadow, as Spivak would put it, that the history of the colonies must be unfolded.

While parody is an important part of what is going on in the above passage, these mediators still work to cover up the bloodshed of the story which follows this “confession”. We can come to this conclusion insofar as the Eternal Grandmother identifies them as “sins”. Directly following the above quote these sins are listed: *“Ripped my robes. Thrown into sea. / Spirit on their soil. / They tore flesh, breasts became pouches, hung / from their belts. Our bellies spilled”*(20). In portraying the violent acts committed against her people and herself as a “sin,” the Eternal Grandmother implies that she is in some way guilty of them, that she played an active role in their occurrence. By construing the story as such she is allowed to contribute her voice without directly threatening the predominantly benign representation of colonization. As an audience we “see the blood” but it has been covered up, obscured by its depiction through colonial culture. Indeed, the Eternal Grandmother goes on to suggest that her own bloodshed has been covered up, writing *“I am a large scab”*(20). As we have already touched on, in an informal continuum of flesh injuries the scab lies somewhere between open wound and scar: not quite healed, but not quite a cause for alarm either. An exception to this rule is smallpox, an infectious disease that ravaged Native Canadian and Native American people. Smallpox comes up a number of times in *Blue Marrow*, one instance being the passage from the family reunion scene quoted above: “I tell them /

how their little children died wrapped in / smallpox blankets”(70). With smallpox the scab in a sense is the disease. As such, the scab does not signify healing at all, but pain and suffering. Because smallpox is recognized in *Blue Marrow* in the larger context of a cultural cover-up we cannot assume that any form of covering, be it a scab or a political Band-Aid, is a sign of healing.

Cook-Lynn establishes the fact that the cover-up of Native bloodshed extends into more modern colonial culture in her 1996 essay “End of the Failed Metaphor.” The Sioux critic writes that

the largest daily newspaper [in South Dakota] refuses to call the killing of innocent women and children at Wounded Knee, all of them under a white flag of truce, a ‘massacre.’ In South Dakota it is publicly called, one hundred years after the fact, an ‘event,’ ‘an incident,’ or an ‘affair’(144).

Cook-Lynn’s assertion about the newspaper calls our attention to the difference between the words “massacre” and “event”, “incident” or “affair”. “Incident” in this context clinically suggests, at best, that some Dakota Sioux died on December 29, 1890.

However, “incident” does nothing to convey the degree of violence that occurred, which included the slaughter of over 250 women and children who had already given themselves up to the opposition. The urgency of the word “massacre” more readily draws attention to the fact that unarmed victims were violently slaughtered *en masse*²⁹. By using

²⁹ What language should be used to describe Wounded Knee is far from decided. In 2004 Hugh J. Reilly published an article entitled “Wounded Knee, 1890: Battle or Massacre: A Treaty Context.” In the article Reilly explores the still prevalent opinion that Wounded Knee was a battle because “approximately sixty cavalymen were killed or wounded”(266). According to the military writer General S.L.A Marshall “such a death toll would be impossible if it had not been a well-planned attack rather than a tragic accident”(266). However, Marshall does admit that “women and children were slaughtered for hours after the initial gunfire exchange and many miles away from the action”(266). As Reilly suggests “this denigrates, somewhat, [Marshall’s] position of calling Wounded Knee a battle rather than a massacre”(266). Furthermore, while Marshall appears to be covering up Native bloodshed at Wounded Knee years after it occurred (the article

the word "incident" instead of "massacre" the severity of the events that transpired at Wounded Knee is covered up by the language of the newspaper. While "blood" may be visible in this article Cook-Lynn argues that the violence and pain behind it is stifled.

By drawing attention to how these words operate to hide the Sioux reality implicit to this historic day, Cook-Lynn is not suggesting that the word "massacre" unveils the truth of the events that took place. Rather she is exposing the fact that the violence of the acts committed against the Sioux has been obscured behind language of this sort. Walter Benjamin draws attention to the necessity of addressing the violence hidden behind history in "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Benjamin writes that "to articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it 'the way it really was'. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger"(255). In other words, interpreting history need not be about "truth," but rather about exposing the important stories which risk being lost beneath the "triumphal procession [of the] present rulers"("Theses" 256).

In "Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner" Cook-Lynn attempts to strip the colonial narrative of some of its authority, perhaps allowing room for the flashes of memory connected to the suffering of indigenous people. In much the same way that Girard insists that societies are predisposed to the concealment of the violence underscoring culture, Cook-Lynn writes that "new societies and new nations are born from the spilling of the blood of other nations -- a fact that must be denied if a nation is to see itself as ethical"(39). In other words, modern societies cannot bear to think that their nation was

Reilly cites is from 1972) the cover up appears to have been initiated directly after the massacre. According to Reilly, the Army attempted to justify the events at Wounded Knee by "award[ing] almost twenty Medals of Honor to participants in the engagement. It remains the record for the highest number of Medals of Honor winners for any single engagement in United States history"(268).

built out of the bloodshed of innocent people. As a consequence literature and history use words like “incident” and “affair” when referring to historical moments that epitomize such bloodshed in order to cover up a violence that would disrupt the fundamental principles of the Free State.

Cook-Lynn’s analysis of the newspaper article may appear to be somewhat obvious, especially to those of us who make a living out of interpretation. However we should consider that our present interpretations of this same article may be somewhat anachronistic. The dissolution of the authority of the colonial narrative is a gradual and continuing process. Earlier works like Cook-Lynn’s have contributed to our current viewpoints. In other words, what may appear now to be a facile interpretation of a right-wing newspaper can only be so because of the critical stepping stones laid out in the past. Building on these earlier analyses hopefully clears a less obstructed view.

In its very short family reunion scene, which we touched on briefly above, *Blue Marrow* provides a stepping stone towards a more comprehensive Cree history. While attending the family reunion of her white husband, in which each relative brings a book that “lovingly” details their family’s migration from “England, Norway and into the Dakotas”(69), the narrator struggles to consider the degree of violence committed against her Cree relatives. I suggest that she “struggles” to do so because although Cree bloodshed is a part of the histories carried by her white relatives it is certainly not represented as being so. Rather, the “wonder” associated with colonialism seems to be the focus:

Laughter and *wonder*

As fingers move across the atlas. This is where

Great-granddad Arne crossed on the barge.

The is where great-great-granddad travelled

And preached the law of the land where his

Wife Isobel taught the little savages to read (emphasis mine, 69).

Authority is only gestured towards in this passage. “Wonder” is evoked by stories of ancestors traversing stretches of land that only fingers in a book would now dare to cross. In fact, the “wonder” that oversees this passage works to obscure the Cree voice in much the same way as the date attached to Christopher Columbus obfuscates the Eternal Grandmother’s story in the passage above.

If we turn to the explorer’s own journal entries we can see how this cover-up operated historically. Indeed, Columbus’s writing portrays the native voice as essentially useless and unimportant to history. In the journal he kept to document his inaugural journey he writes that “many other things were said [by the natives] that I did not understand, except I saw *everything was wonderful*” (emphasis mine 40). The “wonder” in this passage works to distract from the story being told by the Natives. Inasmuch as the scene is wonder-full there is no room for an interpretation of the native voice. As in this short passage from Columbus, everything in the Halfe’s reunion scene is also full of wonder, leaving no room for the narrator to enter the bloodshed of her Cree relatives into the conversation. Authority is therefore only gestured towards in this passage because there is nothing, and no one, to call it into question.

It is not that the reunion scene is an impenetrable depiction of colonial goodwill. Indeed, the reader is confronted with two obvious points of access that could re-open stories of Native suffering: great-great-granddad preaching “the law of the land” and

Isobel teaching the “little savages to read”. Any reader who had arrived at this point in *Blue Marrow* would be predisposed to note the cover-up taking place. A stranger preaching the law of the land to natives of that land has some dangerously ironic connotations, while teaching “savages to read” reeks of the horrors of the residential schools. Yet, the wonder instilled in this history, found in the descriptions of Europeans traversing great dangerous stretches of land and educating “savages”, seems to suffocate any alter/native interpretations. Indeed, as we have already seen, Halfe’s narrator is unable to tell her children the Cree stories that might “squeeze...through”(Halfe 59) the small gaps left in a pervasive colonial narrative. Her breath “won’t come anymore”(70) as she tries to inspire her own children to “see the blood.”

This suffocating effect of a wonder-full colonial narrative becomes more apparent when we address the wonder found in other passages in the same scene:

They marvel at the trek of their ancestors.

The click of wine glasses echoes through the harbour
of this large family gathering. And five Indians.

I the eldest, my children and two other Indian youth. (69)

“Marvel,” a synonym for “wonder” dictates the tone of this particular passage. Halfe draws her reader’s attention to how “marvel” contributes to the forthright exclusion of the Native family members here by relegating them to their own short sentence, “alongside”(69) the larger family. Grammatically, the Indians are both a part of the larger family and outside of it at the same time as if in the “dent” identified by Born in a Dent Grandmother in chapter two. This (non)position is further emphasized by the use of “they” for the white relatives, which sets up the familiar us/them dichotomy. The same,

of course, applies to the Indian stories. While Cree people may be acknowledged as being a part of the dominant narrative here, the essence of these stories is cast outside of it since this narrative ignores the “blood spilled for this migration.” In other words, a “basic fact” of colonization is disregarded.

Stories of undue suffering and violence against the Cree do not fit neatly within a narrative meant to convey admiration. For Halfe’s narrator, forced to participate in the sharing of white settler stories at a family reunion, it is the “wonder” associated with these stories that stifles the reality of Cree bloodshed. There are two intersecting senses to the word “wonder” that we need to address here before moving forward: admiration and speculation. Together they lend an unquestionable authority to narrative that works to obfuscate a dissenting voice. Indeed, the former is built out of the latter. We admire someone for something we cannot do or have not done ourselves. This fact places a certain distance between us and them and restricts direct questioning.

The family reunion scene we have chiefly been dealing with in *Blue Marrow* in this chapter represents only a small part of this text. It is significant only because it takes the Cree narrator, the *acimowinis*, and places her within the midst of the colonial narrative. Against “the history of *their* migration”(emphasis mine, 69) she is forced to push through a history of “*my* relatives”(70). It is not that a Cree history cannot be told, that the subaltern cannot speak (as Gayatri Spivak would have it), but that doing so is exceptionally difficult, even suffocating. Indeed, earlier in the book the Eternal Grandmothers compare the narrator’s task to threading a needle, insisting she must “squeeze [the stories] through”(59) the small space afforded her in a larger colonial discourse. Often, the task may seem futile, but as the Grandmothers go on to say, “some

songs / come tumbling out / weak and small”(59). In other words, a Cree history can be heard, the subaltern can speak, but only through the small openings the culturally marginalized afford themselves.

The “sins” of the Eternal Grandmother, which we addressed above, are one way Halfe opens up Cree history. Inasmuch as this Grandmother is forced to represent the bloodshed her family as a “sin,” the full impact of Cree bloodshed is stifled; in some way the Eternal Grandmother is seen as complicit to her own death. Yet as a blatant parody, no one, save the most careless reader, is meant to fall for the trap that Halfe cleverly lays out here. Notwithstanding that colonial culture may portray colonization as a benign adventure for white settlers, suggesting that the Cree actively contributed to their own decimation borders on the absurd. While “sin” is the word assigned to the events that the Eternal Grandmother represents, the reader is meant to recognize the cover-up that such language institutes. Indeed, this passage could be read as the “med-sin” we identified in the first chapter since it carries the means for healing in a sinful representation. Furthermore, because it is parody this passage does not simply suggest that Eternal Grandmother’s story is any truer. Rather, in the absurdity it evokes, it is meant to strip the colonial paradigm that she speaks through some of its authority. By calling attention to the absurdity in the way the colonial story obscures the Eternal Grandmother’s voice, Halfe shakes the implicit authority of colonial culture and implores her reader to “see the blood” that it covers up.

Similarly, the “wonder” associated with colonial history provides another opening in *Blue Marrow*. Because “wonder” in this text restricts one’s ability to directly question the colonial narrative, it also provides the means to open up alter/native histories. Wonder

calls the reality or truth of the colonial narrative into question. This is accomplished through the latter sense of the word addressed above, speculation. When asked to “wonder” about colonial history, as the narrator’s white relatives do in the reunion scene, one eventually discovers that these stories have no ground. Much like Thomas King would insist, the “truth” of these stories is that they are based in conjecture and myth. One need only turn to what is certainly one of the most popular colonization stories to discover this lack of ground, that of Christopher Columbus.

As we have already seen, the explorer himself writes in the journal entries documenting his inaugural voyage “everything was wonderful”. In other words, not only is wonder directly associated with this journey, but this quintessential colonial expedition is wonder-full. The statement allows us to establish a firm connection between wonder and the journey that stands as a paradigm for the colonial narrative. As we addressed above, as compared to the “scab” of Cree history, the colonial narrative is represented in *Blue Marrow* as an open wound. In the passage below, the wound acts as a metaphor for Columbus’s story insofar as this particular story continues to be re-opened almost 500 years after he passed:

Columbus wrote: “*My wound has opened again.*”

His bones at the cathedral of Santa Domingo

moved four times,

different burial grounds

In the last move his ashes

spill and are trampled (emphasis original 15).

As soon as the reader engages with this short passage he or she is prompted to question the significance of the quotation. Indeed, in the numerous histories of the man there has been very little written about any “wound” that he may have suffered from. Historical records show that he suffered from a number of ailments, malaria, periods of blindness, conjunctive arthritis and gout (Wilford) but there is no easily located documentation of a re-opening wound. What, then, is the wound we are meant to address here?

If we stay within the parameters of *Blue Marrow* it can be read as a metaphor for Columbus’s history. What flows from it, in the words directly following the quote, is an easily referenced summation of the man’s trials after death. I suggest it is easily referenced because any Columbus history, of which there are hundreds, or any *Google* search, will provide an account of Columbus’s “final” burial place. Indeed the location of Columbus’s grave is exceptionally well documented, if not agreed upon. John Noble Wilford draws our attention to this in his history of the man:

all or part of Columbus’s remains could be in Seville, Santo Domingo, Havana, or Genoa. Each city has laid a claim, and the boasts of Seville and Santo Domingo ring with authority... But the record, as in nearly everything concerning Columbus, is far from clear (241).

The title of Wilford’s book is *The Mysterious History of Columbus*. His final burial place, which Halfe alludes to in *Blue Marrow*, is just one of the mysteries. In other words, it is something historians have long expressed “wonder” about. Another, which Halfe does not reference as explicitly, is the cause of the man’s death. Wilford tells us that the explorer’s demise has “encourage[d] *any number of investigators* to engage in speculative forays”(emphasis mine, 240) into its cause. None of these speculative forays,

which included the attention of a number of military doctors during World War I, has determined the case closed. The mystery associated with his journey and life has prompted a slew of academic investigations that piece together contrapuntal narratives of the man's life. Columbus has been "proven" to be Jewish and Catholic, Portuguese and French as well as genius and a criminal (Wilford 58). While the majority of this work "rings with authority" (Wilford 241) none of it has been able to staunch the steady flow of dubious information people seem to find in his small piece of history.

According to Wilford, the Columbus story is and will always remain incomplete. In other words, it is subject to being re-opened at the historian's whim. The lack of certainty is precisely what attracts academics and authors to it: "the vacuum [history] left has been filled with a rush of conjecture and tall tales" (56). In other words, it is the uncertainty associated with this interminable gap that constructs this story and grants it its authority. Columbus's history has become so pervasive that it is perceived as a ground for colonial culture. Indeed, in *Blue Marrow* the Eternal Grandmother must speak from it in order to be heard. Yet, as with any fundamental concept, on close inspection the wonder-full story of Christopher Columbus story cannot be anchored in any sort of truth. It is not a matter of fact or history, it is not real. It is conjecture, hypothesis and uncertainty, just as much as it is awe, marvel and admiration. Like Columbus himself, left without a final burial site, and like the "unburied woman", which Halfe cites in an epigraph to the first edition of *Blue Marrow*³⁰ this history has no locatable ground.

Since a wound on Columbus's person is not an explicit part of his history "My wound" can also be interpreted as that which Columbus *caused* rather than suffered. "My

³⁰ Interestingly, this quote, which Halfe took from Pablo Neruda's "The Unburied Woman of Paita" only appears in the McClelland & Stewart edition of *Blue Marrow*. Indeed, in the second edition by Coteau this quotation has been covered up.

wound” is the mark of colonization inflicted on the Eternal Grandmother and the Cree narrator: the scab that never heals. It is the suffering that the Columbus story, as the archetype for the colonial narrative, continues to inflict on the Native people of the Americas. That such an antithetical interpretation can be wrested from a single possessive determiner only further illustrates the cover-up initiated by colonial culture. On the one hand, we have a wound that belongs solely to the speaker. It is “his” insofar as he suffers it; it marks his body. On the other hand, we have a wound that belongs to the speaker only insofar as he inflicted it³¹. This wound marks indigenous people like a brand.

However, inasmuch as in the first interpretation the wound “belongs” to Columbus, in the second interpretation the wound must also “belong” to Native people. The thin margin dividing the two interpretations identified in a passage like this can contribute to the obfuscation of Native suffering in the history and literature of colonization. Because the wound is predominantly interpreted as belonging to colonial culture, read from within a colonial context, the bloodshed of indigenous people that is implicit to the same signifier is covered up. *Blue Marrow* forces its reader to speculate on an alter/native interpretation. In this text Columbus’s wound is “opened again” within a Cree narrative. Just as the “five Indians” at the family reunion were relegated to a dent in the more pervasive colonial history, Columbus is afforded this single line. Indeed, it is the only time his name is mentioned in the entire book. Thus, the blood the reader is meant to see here is specifically that which Columbus has caused. The larger context of the book works to assign a particular interpretation of this single passage, compelling the reader to re-open it from a Cree perspective. In this interpretation, the wound both

³¹ I am indebted to Professor Warren Cariou for suggesting an alter/native of the Columbus quotation in *Blue Marrow*.

belongs to Columbus, because he has inflicted it, and to the Cree, because they suffer it. Therefore, this imprecation to “see the blood” is meant to re-open the wound of colonization for both Cree and colonial cultures. The gratuitous violence that accompanied this history has been repressed and suppressed in Cree and colonial cultures, respectively. However, violence lies buried beneath the ethical ground taken by colonial culture, which must negate and deny violence in order to maintain its self-perception. Therefore, unearthing this violence can only disrupt the foundations of colonial culture, putting cracks in the structures built out of them and, perhaps, if the damage is great enough, forcing us, as inhabitants of a colony, to begin again.

Conclusion

Because truth can be intimately connected with fiction in the history that acts as a ground for colonial culture, *Blue Marrow* attempts to create a Cree truth out of the channelled and imagined stories of indigenous people. Before closing this thesis, it is necessary to return to the fact that Halfe is not just opening the Cree wound in *Blue Marrow*; she is also asking the reader to “see the blood” that flows from it. Indeed, while the reunion scene illustrates how Cree bloodshed is covered up by the colonial culture, it takes up only two pages of this ninety-nine page book. The remainder is “stained” with images of Cree bloodshed and suffering, such as the brutal murder we addressed at the beginning of this chapter. It is by re-opening these bloody histories and re-entering them into a Cree discourse that the community can begin to heal. In other words, seeing bloodshed, as essence, can serve as a cogent ground from which to begin a “re-vision[ing]” (Halfe 79) of colonial history. These re-visions are not simply changes to the colonial text, a line added here, and paragraph deleted there, but a re-thinking of colonial history that begins outside of the history of the victor. However, rather than simply exposing the bloodshed of indigenous people to her readers, Halfe illustrates how Native history can and should be opened up on a larger scale. She accomplishes this by calling the authority of the colonial narrative into question, asking her reader to “see the blood” that exists behind other wonder-full narratives. In such a way postmodern scepticism is conflated with foundationalism. A hermeneutics of suspicion provides the means for locating a ground that is threatened by suffocation in the larger colonial discourse.

As tautology, essence can demarcate an ontological space for the colonized that can repel assertions against it. It is what it is. The claim creates an implicit point of

stability, grounding itself in itself. Despite the assumed emptiness that accompanies essence and this tautological gesture, it can provide the means for dis-covering a Native history that continues to be covered up by colonial culture. In "Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner", Elizabeth Cook-Lynn argues that contemporary thinking has all but forgotten the violence inflicted on Indigenous people during colonization. According to Cook-Lynn, "Expressed Regret"(31) and the dissolution of agency for Europeans as persecutors, which accompanies the passing of time, allows for the Native wound to be covered up or to be presumed healed.

Indeed, in 1998 Canada's Minister of Indian Affairs, Jane Stewart, read a "Statement of Reconciliation" that apologized for the pain and suffering cause to Native people during colonization. Reconciliation is an attempt at healing. It closes a rift between two opposing ideas or facts and stops the suffering that can potentially be born out of it. For Stewart, reconciliation also meant looking forward rather than back: "the time has come to state formally that the days of paternalism and disrespect are behind us and we are committed to changing the nature of the relationship between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people in Canada"(*Albion Monitor*). In other words, reconciliation was offered as a means of healing, closing the wounds of the past and looking towards a more inclusive and healthy future.

However, for Aboriginal authors such as Louise Bernice Halfe and Craig Womack, healing is dependent on the continued exposure of the Native blood shed during colonialism. Gestures of reconciliation do not heal the wound, but only scab it over, leaving it to fester and intensify. For these authors, looking back is the only means of looking forward. Putting "paternalism and disrespect behind us", only serves to further

obfuscate the path towards a healthy future. Inasmuch as it can be said that both Halfe and Stewart are attempting to locate a medicine for colonized people by respectively opening or closing the wound, we must also recognize the potential “sin” implicit to either option. Stewart’s position requires a mindful forgetting of important history while Halfe’s forces people to stare into the face of past violence and suffering. Because both options carry as much potential for pain as they do for healing, we are forced to acknowledge that a stable concept of medicine for Aboriginal culture is yet to be realized. The two oppositional “med-sins” I have identified here, closing and opening the wound, are both as much a poison as a remedy. Neither is a Medicine we should apply without due caution and respect.

According to Cook-Lynn, the cover-up of violence by colonial culture, what she calls “the Stegner phenomenon,” perpetuates itself: “it takes over, colonizes, invades the reality of human experience in North America”(38). As Native bloodshed is covered up by colonial authors who refuse to, or simply do not, acknowledge violence against Native people it becomes more and more difficult to insert this violence as a truth into the larger discourse of history. Indeed, the Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking argues that a popular world system, such as history, works to conceal its own fictional nature by virtue of its hegemony: “What was once visibly contingent feels like it has become part of the human mind”(21). In other words, inasmuch as Native bloodshed is excluded from history, it is excluded from truth, which, as Cook-Lynn puts it “condemn[s] to oblivion or absurdity Indian writers who want to continue the drama”(33). By opening a space for Cree history and entering this space herself Halfe positions Native bloodshed as a truth of colonization, a truth that is contingent on the viewpoints that “re-vision” it.

Indeed, in order for Native literature to look forward to a future outside of the dissimulating space of colonial culture essence itself needs to be re-examined. Despite the work done in post-colonial theory since *Black Skin, White Masks* was written, *Blue Marrow* re-establishes the position of the colonized as Fanon's space of non-being. Cree essence, in its self-generated validity, can provide the ground enough to locate oneself in this aporia. Rather than to simply dismiss it as theoretically regressive or logically incoherent, what essence is and how it operates needs to be closely addressed in any text, especially in those that attempt to struggle against the dominant discourse. As Mike Hill writes in "After Whiteness," "the fact anti-essentialism is approaching postmodern common sense should not make it a trivial matter"(205). Essence can have some very serious consequences, both positive and negative, and we need to look for them in texts like *Blue Marrow* beyond the lens of universal scepticism. As a "basic fact" of colonization, witnessing the bloodshed of indigenous people provides a cogent point of inception. "This talk" of flowing blood, of the brutal fact of indigenous peoples' suffering and death during colonization, not only stains the leaves of *Blue Marrow*, but it works to expose the bloodstains that have been covered up across colonial culture, forcing the reader to witness a bloodshed that was once obfuscated. The "truth" of this history is contingent on "this talk", or, in other words, the remembered and imagined stories born out of a Cree past. By addressing the reality of these violent stories in works like *Blue Marrow*, by dis-covering the suffering obfuscated by the wonder-full colonial narrative, it becomes difficult *not* to see the blood that colonial culture was built from. As an essence or a basic fact of a colonial past, Halfe asks us to "see the blood" of our own histories. Indeed, once we have it is hard to look away.

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