

“Not Enough Raven”: Reading Lee Maracle’s *Ravensong* as Counter-Hegemonic Ethnography

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AS A DISCIPLINE, EUROPEAN ANTHROPOLOGY retains the historical baggage of its function as a primary validator of colonial violence. In many ways, ethnographic research persists to facilitate settler hegemony. Yet Stó:lō author and activist Lee Maracle provides scholars with a tool for decolonizing anthropological study in her 1993 novel *Ravensong*. Maracle describes her body of work as a synthesis of literary text and Salish oratory practice. In my view, this approach is more than literary innovation; it is a pedagogical method, exemplifying the non-hierarchical study of cultural difference. According to Maracle, “The study of Native literature is a written and oratorical collaborative process of seeing the self and society through story, in which the instructor is the facilitator” (“Oratory on Oratory” 70). Throughout *Ravensong*, Stacey, a young Indigenous woman, examines and questions the customs of “white town” (Maracle 11). Simultaneously, however, she examines and questions the customs of her own village and its relationship to Canadian settler society. Through this process, she attains self-knowledge and functions as a facilitator for the reader’s own process of oratorical transformation. In *Ravensong*, Salish peoples and their customs occupy a hegemonic narrative position, marking white culture as “other.” Nevertheless, this insider/outsider binary is complicated by a number of contradictions within the text. In this way, Maracle reproduces and oratorically inverts generic conventions of ethnography, decolonizing the practice of cultural study.

Using Maracle’s three essays “Oratory: coming to theory,” “Oratory on Oratory,” and “Raven Understood,” I contend that understanding Raven as a metaphor for “cataclysmic social change” (“Raven” 254) positions *Ravensong* as an articulation of counter-hegemonic ethnography. *Ravensong* subverts ethnographic methodologies through its oratorical focus on becoming rather than being. My assertion builds upon pre-existing scholarship delineating the politics of border crossing in Maracle’s work.

In particular, Helen Hoy reads *Ravensong* as theory and emphasizes the text's politics of discomfort and "radical inconclusiveness" (58). Similarly, Karen Macfarlane interprets Maracle's "storying" as a "simultaneous process of individuation, collectivity, and resistance," evoking the trickster as a linguistic and stylistic principle foregrounding border crossing, liminality, and transition (111). Most significantly, Judith Leggatt reads the novel in conjunction with medical anthropology, interpreting the text as an attempt to bridge cultural difference by inspiring an exchange of culturally specific medical knowledge (177). I build upon these arguments and interpret *Ravensong* as a form of decolonial anthropology. In other words, I depart from this accomplished scholarship by extending my interpretation of *Ravensong* beyond common boundaries of literary study: the text is a pedagogical form in its own right. *Ravensong* not only challenges settler conceptions of "the literary" but also dismantles and resituates the normative boundaries of Western ethnographic discourse. Whereas traditional ethnography attempts to define and delineate peoples and cultures, Maracle's counter-hegemonic ethnography posits individual and cultural transformation. Through these strategies, Maracle articulates her dedication to a politics of coalition across cultural difference. More importantly, *Ravensong* posits a radical argument for coalition building across chasms of violent displacement, dispossession, and colonization.

Maracle is a member of the Stó:lō Nation, the lower Fraser River Coast Salish people of what is now called British Columbia. As ethnohistorians Keith Thor Carlson, John Sutton Lutz, and David Schaepe note, the Stó:lō people have long been at the forefront of cutting-edge developments in historical and anthropological research:

Indigenous participation, creation, permission, and direction in research on Indigenous communities [comprise] one of the main manifestations of the new Ethnohistory, and the Stó:lō . . . have been international leaders in this area since the 1970s. The Stó:lō have also been highlighting and understanding the narrative and cognitive structures of stories from Indigenous perspectives . . . for decades. (20)

In *Ravensong*, Maracle follows the intellectual tradition of her people by rethinking and repurposing the cultural utility of ethnography. Carlson, Sutton Lutz, and Schaepe note that the new ethnohistory deconstructs internal and external discourses of exploitation, embraces both tradition and transformation, and recognizes multidirectional influence between

Indigenous peoples and settler-colonizers (24).

The Ethnohistory Field School was established as a joint effort between the University of Victoria and the Stó:lō Nation in 1998; *Ravensong*, published in 1993, is interpretable as a cutting-edge text at the emergence of this new anthropological field. This new ethnohistory follows the dialogism outlined by literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, who invites us to “surmount the double challenge of how to become enough of an ‘insider’ to have a partial understanding of the other and enough of an ‘outsider’ to have a partial understanding of one’s own side of the dialogue. This . . . requires an acute awareness of one’s positioning in one culture (be it ethnic or academic) to engage in effective conversation with another” (Carlson et al. 23). In *Ravensong*, Maracle deploys this dialogism to the advantage of her counter-hegemonic project. According to Macfarlane, the novel strategically deploys physical boundaries and border spaces alongside images and figures that transcend them, signalling their artificiality (111). Stacey straddles an imaginary divide between her own village and white town, symbolized by the bridge that she must cross in order to attend school in settler society. She exists both “inside” and “outside” the cultural context of her village. Her dialogic position is emphasized not only by literal location but also by age, modernity, knowledge, tradition, familial relations, and patriarchal exploitation.

Mobilizing Stacey’s dialogic perspective, *Ravensong* shifts both the object and the methodology of traditional ethnographic study. Paraphrasing Homi Bhabha, Hoy observes that,

In the deployment of cultural difference as a disruptive strategy [in *Ravensong*], the effect is not merely to change the “object” of analysis — to focus . . . for instance on race rather than gender or native knowledges rather than metropolitan myths; nor to invert the axis of political discrimination by installing the excluded term at the centre. . . . It changes the position of enunciation and the relations of address within it; not only what is said but from where it is said; not simply the logic of articulation but the topos of enunciation. (55)

As a written expression of Salish oratory, *Ravensong* does not merely invert hegemony but also articulates a counter-hegemonic topos of enunciation. Stacey’s analysis of white town renders the behaviour of its inhabitants incomprehensible and absurd. Through Stacey’s observations, Maracle inverts the Western literary theme of “mysterious” Natives. And, as Hoy claims, *Ravensong*’s “radical inconclusiveness” repurposes Western literary

forms in the service of anti-colonial theory (58). In this sense, counter-hegemonic refers not to the transposition of cultural hegemony but to the resistance to hegemony's epistemological hierarchy and patterns of cultural domination in general.

In "The Disempowerment of First North American Native Peoples and Empowerment through Their Writing," Okanagan scholar and author Jeannette Armstrong argues "that it is systems and processors which we must attack" and not "a people we abhor" (241). As a primary system of colonial power and classification, traditional ethnography inscribes and naturalizes a genocidal relationship between settler-invaders and First Nations. Ethnographers speak from a position of culturally constructed authority, espousing Western anthropology as a regime of scientific truth. James Clifford notes that ethnographic authority in the twentieth century was partly cultivated through "a vision of ethnography as both scientifically demanding and heroic" and that "the professional ethnographer was trained in the latest analytic techniques and modes of scientific explanation. . . . [T]he professional could claim to get to the heart of a culture more quickly, grasping its essential institutions and structures" (30). Moreover, in traditional ethnography, participant-observers established a "prescribed attitude of cultural relativism" that distinguished them from other, presumably less dispassionate, professionals (30). This rhetoric of detached sophistication lent epistemic authority to their pseudo-scientific observations.

These observations, catalogued by European settler-invaders and legitimated by so-called Western science, laid the groundwork for acts of physical and epistemic violence. In *"Real Indians" and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood*, Mi'kmaw scholar Bonita Lawrence describes the cruel, pseudo-scientific methods by which the Canadian government determined Indigenous identity following implementation of the Indian Act in 1876:

New rationalist sciences of classification were utilized to categorize reservation residents. In order to determine who was "full-blooded" or not, in a context where European-style record-keeping did not exist, bizarre series of tests were devised by physical anthropologists, who determined that the size of feet, [the] degree of curl in hair, and the extent to which a scratch "reddened," as well as a host of other physical parameters, could determine how much Indian blood an individual possessed. (40)

These methods epitomize the colonizing force of presumed anthropological expertise. European settlers believed that the rationalist sciences of classification determined their own racial superiority and therefore the right to determine Indigenous identity.

Lawrence argues that “few individuals appear to have recognized the depth of the problem that the Indian Act represents — its overarching nature as a discourse of classification and regulation, which has produced the subjects it purports to control, and which has therefore indelibly ordered how Native people think of things ‘Indian’” (25). Lawrence posits that the Indian Act and its anthropological justifications shaped modes of both colonial oppression and Indigenous resistance. Specifically, “identity legislation has established the field in which Native peoples must situate themselves and the terms under which they must struggle to resist that legislation” (42). These systems of legislation and ethnographic classification disarticulated Indigenous peoples from their identities within specific nations and recast them within the overarching framework of “Indian.” Moreover, the reserve system created a literalized barrier between the inside and the outside of forcibly stratified Indigenous identity.

In this essay, I engage with Maracle’s texts as a set of theoretical tools for transformative coalition building and for reconceiving forms of relationship between disparate cultures and individuals. Salish oratory in *Ravensong* articulates a process of studying culture differently, against settler anthropology’s epistemic regime. *Ravensong*’s liminal position as literature and oratory itself resists ethnography’s epistemological hierarchy by defying what Fatimah Tobing Rony calls “Romantic taxidermy” (101). Rony understands hegemonic anthropological knowledge as a form of taxidermic preservation “which situates Indigenous peoples outside modern history” (104). Rony argues that ethnographers banish history in order to conceal their own roles as agents of change in the lives of Indigenous peoples and to maintain settler mythologies of First Nations as archetypes of “the primitive.”

In “Orality about Literacy: The Black and White of Salish History,” Carlson explains that a number of Stó:lō sources refute the traditional anthropological idea that settlers brought literacy to the First Nations of North America. This teleological narrative of literacy as progress contributes to ethnocentric perceptions of Indigenous peoples as a “dying race,” insofar as traditional anthropologists posit Indigenous cultures as based entirely on the significance of oral knowledge creation (54). For traditional

anthropology, Indigenous stories of pre-contact literacy are dismissed as “inauthentic.” In other words, “we have grown so accustomed to associating authentic Aboriginal culture with pre-contact temporal dimensions that we have dismissed or ignored Native stories that do not meet our criteria for historical purity” (56). *Ravensong* blends literature and oratory, thwarting ethnocentric, teleological narratives of literacy as progress.

In light of these epistemically and physically imposed barriers, Maracle’s “Oratory on Oratory” and “Oratory: coming to theory” clarify the interpretive methods through which settler readers can more appropriately enter her texts. For Maracle, oratory is not only a rich and rhetorically elevated form of Indigenous storytelling but also a form of knowledge creation and theory presented through story. In the first piece, she explains that academics waste a great deal of time deleting story from theory. In her view, this practice functions as a performance of objectivity and as a tool for the maintenance of authoritarian hierarchy. “Theory,” Maracle explains, “is useless outside of human application” (“Oratory: coming” 10).

By presenting theory through story in *Ravensong*, Maracle repositions herself vis-à-vis a hierarchy of scholarship imposed and maintained by Euro-Canadian settler-invaders:

By using story and poetry, I move from the empowerment of myself to the empowerment of every person who reads the book. It is personally dangerous for me to live among disempowered, oppressed individuals. “When they come to get me, I want to know: who is going to be there with me? Because I am not going willingly.” So said a young white woman speaking on the possibility of organized state violence against the women’s movement in this country. I want to know who is going to be there with me, resisting victimization — peacefully or otherwise — and always stubbornly and doggedly struggling to reclaim and hang on to my sacred self. (“Oratory: coming” 11)

In this instance, Maracle expresses her commitment to a pedagogical process that centralizes social transformation and human rights activism. Theory is useless without this process, benefiting a single individual and neglecting collective empowerment. Story and literature, in Maracle’s sense, are profoundly transformative.

Stacey’s journey reflects Maracle’s understanding of collective oratory as fundamental to the production and dissemination of counter-hegemonic knowledge. Although Stacey attends university near the end of the text,

her achievement of advanced literacy does not produce tangible results for her community; a chasm remains between the two cultures. *Ravensong's* epilogue prefigures the suicide epidemic of *Celia's Song*, a companion piece featuring the same characters and published over two decades later. Hoy interprets *Ravensong's* epilogue as follows:

With each of Maracle's novels, *Sundogs* and *Ravensong*, I was non-plussed to find myself unsure after reading the book of whether or not I had finished it. The epilogue of *Ravensong*, set twenty-five years later, seems to derail the narrative, with the thwarting of Stacey's dream to teach the village children abruptly announced and then left unexamined, and with silence maintained on the status of Raven's scheme to enlist Native people in the transformation of the white world. In part, though, that inconclusive quality results from a genre error in my reading. I was familiar with but mainly puzzled by Maracle's goal, spelled out in the preface to *Sojourner's Truth*, to combine Native oratory with European story. . . . It was when I was re-reading *Ravensong* for theory . . . that I began to appreciate the textual integrity and fullness of the work (I now hesitate to use the misleading word "novel") — and to get a sense for what Maracle means by oratory. Reading *Ravensong* as story in the service of theory removes certain narrative burdens from characters and plot, enlisting them in a more reflective enterprise. (58)

Hoy's analysis suggests that *Ravensong* is not simply inconclusive but also a story expressed through the written word that does not conform to settler perceptions of the "literary" or the "oral." Maracle challenges both Indigenous and settler readers to engage in the cultural transformation that *Ravensong* facilitates through the process of oratory.

Blending oratory and literature, Maracle proposes cultural syndication as opposed to cultural assimilation or ethnographic gatekeeping. In *Ravensong*, readers follow Stacey through her own oratorical learning process. Raven narrates the young woman's near-obsessive examination of white town, explaining that "Stacey alone moved about in the others' world. She moved about in it somewhat catatonically, as though she could not see through its facade of polite hierarchy. She seemed unable to get under it to expose it enough to find the key to its transformation" (24). Although Stacey reveals and ponders the cultural conventions of white town, she does not yet possess the relevant knowledge or context required to interpret her observations. Nevertheless, her repeated examination of the Snowdens' behaviour places Salish culture in a hegemonic narra-

tive position, highlighting a chasm of disparity between two culturally distinct groups of people: “Stacey had never seen the children get down from the table to wander off without first asking for permission to do so. The children rarely spoke unless spoken to. The house did not belong to them. Today it all looked so weird. It was almost like they could just barely tolerate each other” (17). Her subjective position establishes Salish culture as the norm against which settler customs are measured. The text, however, does not position Stacey as an authoritative observer of the white “other.” In light of traditional anthropology’s rhetoric of detached sophistication, her emotional investment in her own cultural education is distinctly counter-hegemonic, refusing to separate story from theory and inserting herself into the process of study despite its painful discomfort.

As Hoy argues, *Ravensong*’s anti-hierarchical politics of transformative coalition is attentive to context and does not minimize Canada’s history of intentional colonial genocide: “Far from glib declarations of global oneness, these interconnections point to the painfulness of being unable to maintain separate destinies while still not sharing the lived context necessary for co-existence” (57).¹ For instance, Rena chastises Stacey in *Ravensong* for taking inventory of the differences between white town houses and their own. Confronted with the indignity of her own comparison, “[Stacey] felt uncomfortable; heat travelled up her leg to the pit of her stomach. Although she had never experienced shame before, she knew that the hot discomfort she felt arose from the realization that she was being unfair to herself and her family” (79). Her discomfort during the ethnographic process of observation registers the painfulness of interconnection and challenges anthropology’s prescribed attitude of detached sophistication. For Maracle, studying culture intelligently and counter-hegemonically necessarily involves a confrontation with collective pain.

Significantly, in “Oratory on Oratory,” Maracle explains that oratory is a fundamentally collective process and that “There is no arguing or challenging someone’s viewpoint. We are certain that there is a place for oppositional points of view, as all views are seen as an aspect of the whole” (57). In *Ravensong*, differences between Stacey’s village and white town become integral to her understanding of the fraught relationship between both cultures: “oppositional points of view” are integral to her understanding of “the whole.” In “Storying the Borderlands: Liminal Spaces and Narrative Strategies,” Macfarlane observes that physical boundaries in *Ravensong* are routinely transgressed (111). Although a bridge definitively

separates the people of Stacey's community from settlers in white town, a number of characters complicate the bridge metaphor's logic of purity.

One example is German Judy, a white woman who lives with her partner Rena in Stacey's village. Judy's relationship with Rena and Stacey subverts the traditional ethnographic dichotomy of power and ignorance. In *Ravensong*, Judy feels disempowered by the two Indigenous women's powerlessness in the white world. Nevertheless, *Ravensong's* narrator makes the following observation:

Somehow the ignorance of Stacey had power in it. It was inexplicable but there were so many assumptions in the white world that had no meaning here. . . . The gulf between them ceased to be a threat. The absence of knowledge of the other world was so vast that Judy could not conceive of its size. All three women sat in a complete state of unknowing. In an odd sort of way they were all equal in their lack of knowledge. (76)

Although she is a settler and thus privileged in numerous ways, Judy is disempowered by the powerlessness of others.² In this passage, Maracle communicates the purpose of Salish oratory: to empower everyone who participates in it. The goal is not to achieve assimilation but to bridge the gulf of ignorance between two disparate peoples. Clifford notes that ethnography in the twentieth century "was marked by an increased emphasis on the power of observation. Culture was construed as an ensemble of characteristic behaviours, ceremonies, and gestures susceptible to record-keeping and explanation by a trained onlooker" (31). Yet *Ravensong* acknowledges the inconceivable gulf of cultural ignorance between white settlers and Salish peoples. A complete understanding is impossible, even for the most integrated observers. Presumptions of knowledge and ignorance are central to ethnographic hierarchy but lose their power when the women in *Ravensong* realize that "the gulf" is equally vast for both parties. Although Judy lives in the village and resembles a quintessential participant-observer, she does not claim ethnographic expertise on Salish cultural specificities.

Further disturbing the inside/outside binary of ethnographic hierarchy and expertise in *Ravensong*, Stacey encounters difficulty understanding and interpreting her own cultural traditions. For instance, though Rena and Judy are allowed to live in the village, homophobic and gender-prescriptive attitudes generate an artificial barrier between the couple and the cultural interior. Stacey emphasizes this barrier when she memorializes Old Nora:

Custom must be some sort of invisible policeman channelling everyone through a tube of unspoken discipline. Can there ever be a truly free world? The question dogged her while her imagination unravelled pictures of Old Nora, who chose to fish, hunt and space logs rather than remarry. No one treated it as odd, but there seemed to be an unsaid absence of total acceptance of eccentric Old Nora. Was that it? Does the fact that Old Nora broke rank limit the level of acceptance? (48)

Stacey questions the village's strict adherence to custom and delineation of who does and does not belong. In doing so, she rejects the notion that resistance to settler assimilation requires an uncritical loyalty to all forms of Indigenous tradition and their taxidermic preservation.

Stacey recalls that Nora was passed over for the position of village speaker because of her fellow villagers' view that her gender identity was not "natural." However, Stacey's Grandpa Thomas replies that "We don't live in natural times so we have no way of knowing what is natural and what is not" (64). In "Raven Understood," Maracle solidifies Grandpa Thomas's statement. She explains that the unnatural process of epidemic death robbed Indigenous peoples of their cultural contexts. Raven, she explains, is a metaphor for "cataclysmic social change":

Raven calls us to cherish words, to embrace the sacred and to strengthen our belief. She demands that we become conscious beings, that we police ourselves, become mature thinkers. Raven clutches at the skeleton of our cultures left behind, searches for the significant in our scant memories and inspires us to augment these memories, reconstruct and reclaim ourselves. Raven has become the harbinger of colonial resistance. Despite the newness of colonization, we see this as part of the renaissance of original culture. This may or may not be true, but it matters little. Raven has matured under the collision of systems. Raven has matured under the horror of epidemic death. Raven has matured under the terror of cultural prohibition. (254)

Although the horrors of colonialism, genocidal violence, and the Indian Act continue to structure the relationship between Indigenous peoples and white settlers, Maracle argues that Raven can carry us through these historical atrocities and into a place of intellectual maturity. She calls for cultural augmentation instead of traditional adherence. In *Ravensong's* counter-hegemonic ethnography, it is the collision of systems that must

be studied and formed into story as opposed to ostensibly bounded or taxidermic cultural groups.

In *Ravensong*, Stacey's subjectivity is itself a product of cultural collision. Stacey crosses the bridge between white town and her own village more than any other character. She acknowledges that her thinking is shaped by the customs of both places. For example, when she learns of her mother's affair with Ned, Stacey "felt her stomach turn" and thinks, "No wonder the priests think we are immoral. We are" (68). Yet her knowledge of both cultures generates a comparison between her mother and Polly, whose classmates judged her for her passion and drove her to suicide. Although Stacey is relieved that nobody in the village knows about her mother's affair, she is conscious of her own prejudices: "She blushed at her relief: getting caught was worse than the act itself, ran through her mind. She felt like Polly" (69). Stacey approaches Ella for guidance, who tells her the story of Snot Woman, "full of risqué humour and passion" (71). Through this oratorical process, Stacey learns that "Polly and Momma were the same woman — good hearted and passionate. In the white world her momma would have perished" (71). Stacey's equation of Polly with Momma demonstrates the impossibility of a strict line of division between white settlers and Indigenous peoples. Although Stacey recognizes a gulf of ignorance between them, she repeatedly folds them together and studies their collision.

In "Oratory on Oratory," Maracle explains that Western theory's hierarchical illusion of objectivity is incompatible with Salish oratory. Instead, she says, readers must study story itself, examine its context, see ourselves through story, and most importantly transform ourselves based on our understanding of the story: "If we fail to master study, to question the direction from which looking occurs, or to ponder the motive for seeing and studying, then study becomes reactive, reproductive, and colonial" (57). In *Ravensong*, discomfort allows Stacey to question her own motives for seeing and studying. Rena's question "Why compare us to them?" attains a deeper pedagogical meaning through Stacey's emotional reaction (79). In this way, the politics of discomfort is integral to *Ravensong's* argument for transformative coalition:

Should we discover discomfort during the process, we track back the source of discomfort from inside ourselves, inside our journey, our history, and face ourselves and our fears, face our discomfort and disconnect it from the subject under study. Then we story this up. We

express the governing impact our history has on the way we see. We story up the blinders and the filters we inherit from our history. In this way, we develop an intimate appraisal of our emotional responses to history, to movement, to the dynamics and conduct of others in relation to ourselves. (“Oratory on Oratory” 66)

According to Maracle, neither the colonizer nor the colonized exists outside the “filters” and “blinders” of history. The purpose of Salish study, to remove these blinders, sheds light on both white settlers’ and Indigenous villagers’ resistance to coalition in *Ravensong*. Although the Indian Act and other forms of colonial violence are primarily responsible for creating these blinders, Maracle believes that both parties have a responsibility to study culture differently, or counter-hegemonically, and to work against traditional narratives of cultural difference.

Throughout the text, Stacey’s observations interpellate white readers in profoundly uncomfortable ways. Hoy explores how her own cultural assumptions are rendered unthinkable from the perspective of Native culture (54). For example, when Stacey tells her mother that Polly has killed herself, she tries to explain their gulf of cultural difference:

She tried to tell her mom how different white people were inside themselves. The littlest things were governed by the most complex rules and regulations. Someone was always in charge in their world. There was someone constantly watching over your shoulder policing your every move. It seemed you were always in danger of being punished at every moment. She could tell that here momma didn’t really believe her. “How can you live that way?” she scoffed. (*Ravensong* 104)

Not only are the cultural assumptions of white settler society rendered unthinkable, but also white readers are implicated in the epidemic deaths of thousands of Indigenous peoples: “Somehow, the business of equal rights for Indians was rife with challenge to white folks. . . . Under the shabby arguments about hospitals being full and doctors already overworked lay an unspoken assumption: white folks were more deserving of medical care” (41). *Ravensong* stories the process and results of cultural collision, forcing white readers to confront their own cultural assumptions and prejudicial regulations. Maracle asks these readers to transform themselves through story and, in doing so, forge a politics of coalition between white settlers and Indigenous peoples.

Ravensong positions settler readers alongside Stacey, not beneath her, simultaneously learning through Salish oratory. In “Raven Understood,”

Maracle explains the necessity of cultural coalition and simultaneous learning:

I suspect those who articulate our culture best are those who understand the culture of others. I know this is true for myself. I neither understood Western ways or my own until I studied white men at their university. I am not sure how much knowledge of Western ways I gained, but I do know I came to understand the words of my great-grandmother, my grandfather, my grandmother and myself during my days at their school. I suspect humans cannot truly know who they are unless they see someone different. Why would they? I did not give a single thought to who I was until I was among people who were not like me. Why would I?

Karl Marx says we begin history as people “of ourselves,” it is not until we change that we become people “for ourselves.” This becoming people “for ourselves” is the seat of conscious intelligent being. (251)

In this passage, Maracle argues that membership in the dominant culture of white settler society hinders our ability to become mature thinkers. By engaging settler readers in a process of counter-hegemonic ethnography, *Ravensong* engages them in the process of becoming people for themselves. Similarly, time in university and in white town allows Stacey to understand the customs and traditions of her own culture: “Raven could never again be understood outside the context of the others” (134). The purpose of Stacey’s ethnography and cultural study is self-transformation as opposed to the demarcation and delineation of distinct cultural groups. This new ethnographic purpose does not erase cultural difference but acknowledges the necessity of transformative change through an acknowledgement of inter- and intracultural fragmentation and contradiction.

The figure of Raven illustrates *Ravensong*’s most contentious contradiction. In Maracle’s story, Raven is responsible for the epidemic. It is intended to bridge a gulf of segregation between the settlers in white town and the villagers:

[Raven] considered her plan to drive the people out of their houses. She knew they stayed confined to their villages for false reasons: segregation between the others and her own people had as much to do with how her own felt about the others, as it had to do with how the others felt about the villagers. Raven saw the future threatened by the parochial refusal of her own people to shape the future of their homeland. Somewhere in the fold between dark and light her people

had given up, retreated to their houses in their raggedy villages and withdrawn into their imagined confinement. She had to drive them out, bring them across the bridge. She was beginning to doubt this was possible, however. (23)

Hoy has considered the potentially inflammatory nature of this rhetoric for both Indigenous readers and non-Indigenous allies (56). Raven's wisdom seems to establish epidemics and colonization as necessary evils, and this risks absolving white settlers of responsibility for violent genocide. Yet, reading *Ravensong* alongside medical anthropology, Leggatt contends that Raven's plague emphasizes the "culturally constructed nature of dirt and disease" and the chasms created when different models of pollution and sickness come into contact with one another. Those in Stacey's village believe that the settlers suffer from a spiritual sickness; thus, "each culture holds the knowledge to cure the disease that afflicts the other" (Leggatt 171). As I have argued, Maracle's counter-hegemonic ethnography posits a pedagogical mode that dismantles such culturally constructed boundaries, simultaneously acknowledging their origins in settlers' anthropologically justified violence.

A superficial reading of Raven might suggest cultural assimilation and undermine the Indigenous right to sovereign nationhood that Maracle herself has advocated for decades. However, Hoy insists that "there is something grandly revisionist about such a history. Maracle inverts the significance of the entire European invasion, transforming it from a self-generated imperialist undertaking into Raven's salvific plan, a plan to staunch the far-away bleeding of the earth by transporting the ravagers to 'Raven's shore' and conferring Raven on all people" (56). Raven encourages Indigenous peoples to become pedagogical leaders, teaching white settlers to study and understand culture differently: "Raven considered the others: poor, pale creatures who had forgotten their ways centuries before" (*Ravensong* 23). Raven, in this sense, engages both white and Indigenous readers in a counter-hegemonic process of becoming. As Maracle encourages, both groups must remove the blinders of history. Nevertheless, the "imagined confinement" of Raven's people is fostered by the Canadian government's pseudo-scientific definition of Indianness, the inside/outside binary of the Indian Act, and its subsequent reserve system.

As a result of genocidal history and the Indian Act, change is fraught for Stacey's community. Taking this history into account, *Ravensong* does not absolve white settlers of responsibility for the gulf caused by their

violent and oppressive behaviour:

[T]he villagers had resisted these people who had behaved even worse than first anticipated. They gobbled up the land, stole women, spread sickness everywhere, then hoarded the precious medicine which could heal the sickness. With each sickness the silence of the villagers grew. . . . Epidemic after epidemic had not birthed the shame Raven had hoped for among the villagers of white town, so the villagers remained staunch in their silence. (134)

The gulf between Stacey's village and white town results from settlers' lack of shame for their actions. In "Of Course They Count but Not Right Now: Regulating Precarity in Lee Maracle's *Ravensong* and *Celia's Song*," Dallas Hunt analyzes the "mundane settler frames" that rationalize a hierarchy of medical care and perpetuate an ongoing war between Indigenous peoples and settler-colonizers (172). According to Hunt, Maracle's work disrupts mundane frames of settler-colonial war and normative biopower (175). I agree and add that Maracle specifically disrupts regimes of ethnographic knowledge production, confronting traditional anthropology's function as a primary frame for rationalizing hierarchies of care and perpetuating settler shamelessness. *Ravensong* encourages settler readers to enact a form of study that disables their position of violent cultural dominance.

Unlike Madeleine, a Manitoba Saulteaux woman whose cultural differences are prominent but easily integrated into Stacey's and her village's cultural tableau, white settlers and Indigenous peoples must overcome the obstacles of historical violence in order to engage in a process of transformative coalition. Part of this violence was enacted by deliberately recasting a variety of Indigenous nations under the reductive category of "Indian." According to Lawrence,

This is the logic of extermination — the discursive violence that is perpetrated when colonized peoples have their identities reduced to measurable physical traits or to a strict code of categorization. Through such classification, the citizens of subordinated Indigenous nations were not only to be legally dismembered from their own identities and recast as "Indians," as part of the process of taking their lands, but in the process they were to be dismembered from their pasts and therefore from their futures. (41)

By complicating the inside/outside binary of Stacey's village, *Ravensong*

rejects the discursive violence of reducing identity to strict codes of categorization. In doing so, Maracle does not “invert the axis of political discrimination” (Hoy 55) but repudiates a topos of political discrimination built into the foundation of Western ethnographic epistemology. Before Stacey leaves her village to study in a white university, Raven laments what Lawrence refers to as a “dismemberment” from the future of Indigenous nationhood (41) and the impossibility of returning to a precolonial framework: “We will never escape sickness until we learn how it is we are to live with these people. We will always die until the mystery of their being is altered” (*Ravensong* 134).

In *Ravensong*, Stacey enacts Raven’s urging that Indigenous peoples “become mature thinkers” by studying white settlers at university, collecting the “magic words of white town,” and bringing them back to her village (134). However, since the transformative power of oratory requires collectivity, the hierarchical, genocidal relationship between white town and Stacey’s village is not easily rectified. *Ravensong*’s epilogue gestures toward a new epidemic for Stacey and her people: depression and suicide. Whereas Stacey engages in the oratorical process of studying culture, white settlers refuse to view cultural study as a transformative process, adhering to the hierarchical language of literary theory and anthropological knowledge.

Ravensong leads readers through a process of oratorical learning and epistemic reconstruction. Raven, as the “paramount engineer of social transformation” (“Raven Understood” 252), presides over our understanding of the text. Although Stacey does not possess traditional ethnographic expertise or authority throughout the story, the epilogue reveals her as a facilitator of the reader’s learning process:

“Why did we pay attention to them, of all people?” Rena repeated.

“Not enough Raven,” Stacey answered. They laughed some more. Jacob wasn’t sure what wheels he had turned in the women’s minds but he knew the story was not over. He wanted to know how “not enough Raven” had decided their fate. His lips drew into a faint pout. Celia laughed at his pout. She knew Stacey had answered the question. She also knew it would take Jacob some time to unravel the answer.

“Don’t worry son. You’ll know the answer when you need to.”
(*Ravensong* 140)

By the end of *Ravensong*, readers realize that the text is a written articula-

tion of Stacey's oratory, a storied process of explaining her nephew's suicide to his brother. The epilogue posits readers as young children in need of Stacey's guidance. At the same time, readers are not othered but oriented through oratory as equals in a collective process of understanding.

Stacey's assertion that thousands had died because there was "not enough Raven" critiques settler-scholars' refusal to abandon hierarchical modes of learning and studying other cultures. As Maracle argues, this method of study is disempowering, and it is dangerous to live among disempowered individuals. *Ravensong's* counter-hegemonic ethnography defies romantic taxidermy and demonstrates that cultural tradition and cultural stagnation are not synonymous: "[Raven] has brought us from a simple fishing and gathering village life to the computer age. . . . Raven removed the terror of systems colliding. She removed the terror of epidemic death. She removed the terror of residential school. She removed the terror of racism, sexism, and patriarchy. Raven removed the terror of resistance to colonization. Raven has become the ultimate transformer" ("Raven Understood" 254). As such, *Ravensong's* counter-hegemonic ethnography not only challenges the hierarchical power of Western epistemological systems but also articulates the possibility of transformative social and political change. Maracle counter-hegemonically deconstructs the Indian Act's discursive violence, opening a textual space for alternative pedagogies that emphasize coalition building, resist patterns of cultural domination, and prompt a collective confrontation with ethnography's violent history.

NOTES

¹ See National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls for a more robust explanation of colonial genocide and its ongoing ramifications for Indigenous peoples.

² This is aside from the fact that German Judy is marginalized by a number of factors: her gender, sexual identity, immigrant status, cross-cultural relationship, et cetera.

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