

Beyond the “Talking Cure”: The Practical Joke as Testimony for Intergenerational Trauma in Eden Robinson’s “Queen of the North”

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DISCUSSIONS OF TRAUMA often address the subject of language, particularly the limitations of language as a mode of representation in the face of overwhelming experiences. However, a related yet distinct dimension of these critiques involves a consideration of the efficacy of language as a restorative for trauma. Critical studies of trauma often focus on a particular therapeutic paradigm when exploring the efficaciousness of narration, a model which is, of course, innately dependent on both language and narrative, namely, the “talking cure.” An analysis of current discourses reveals that responses to the effectiveness of talk therapy, or what is commonly referred to as traumatic testimony, as an alleviative are characterized by two parallel yet contradictory narratives. The “talking cure” is designated as both a superior reconciliatory strategy for coping with trauma and an insufficient curative agent. Judith Herman, a psychoanalyst and social critic, supports the former position, believing that through the act of rendering the traumatic episode, this debilitating mental wound is ultimately treatable. Although she recognizes the difficulties involved in bearing witness to trauma, particularly the victim’s painstaking attempts to find a language with which to communicate the past, Herman argues that by telling their stories, survivors modify or transform pathogenic memories into accessible, articulate renderings, a speech act that engenders “relief of many of the major symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder” (183). Literary critics Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman and psychologist Dori Laub, on the other hand, predominantly subscribe to the notion that trauma is untreatable as it defies representation. Trauma’s precise inscription of history demands a vocabulary and syntax in some sense incommensurable with

what went before it, and therefore testimonies cannot treat trauma; they can only indicate that the event is ultimately unknowable.

In his recent discussion of representation and the Holocaust, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra implicitly responds to this debate. However, as an intellectual historian, LaCapra is not, of course, interested in the clinical efficacy of potential restoratives for trauma. His analysis focuses on issues of aesthetics, society, culture, and politics, and explores the significance of analeptics within a theoretical framework where rhetoric, cultural studies, and psychoanalysis intersect. I intend to base my analysis on these same terms. Within this context, LaCapra implies that the ambivalence which characterizes the aforementioned debate is not equally balanced; the polarity is tilted. The narrative that implicitly situates the “talking cure” as an insufficient and ultimately reductive form of treatment is often privileged in recent thinking, particularly in works by literary critics who discuss fictional representations of trauma. According to LaCapra, this penchant is attributable to critical fixation “on acting out, on the repetition compulsion” (145), a priority that has served “to eliminate the *possibilities* of working through [the traumatic event], or at least not to provide much insight into them” (150; italics added). Ultimately, “one remains within or identified with the traumatized victim,” LaCapra posits, a subject position that leads to a “psychoanalytically based fatalism” (150-51), whereby trauma is designated beyond remedy.

In the face of intergenerational trauma, the sufferer in Eden Robinson’s short story “Queen of the North,” the closing piece in her collection *Traplines*, exhibits this ambivalence. Even though it recognizes the therapeutic benefits of the “talking cure,” Robinson’s work explores the difficulties that prevent the victim of trauma from engaging in it, and ultimately accepts the limitations of this paradigm of treatment. However, rather than succumbing to the “psychoanalytically based fatalism” exhibited by current discourses, Robinson’s work unwittingly answers LaCapra’s call to move beyond this stagnant conceptual space by considering narrative alternatives. Robinson’s text asks how one deals with trauma when the “talking cure” is not a viable healing stratagem. In “Queen of the North,” the sufferer intends to gain a therapeutic sense of agency by confronting her abuser with a historical account of her traumatic history, a testimony that takes the form of what Freud would deem a “tendentious” practical joke. This paper will primarily focus on the status of the practical joke as a narrative paradigm and cultural artifact, and consider the ways in which the joke both deviates from established nar-

rative formulations of testimony and disallows essentialist notions of Native culture. In LaCapra's terminology, I want to "provide insight" into the practical joke as a "possibility of working through" trauma. In doing so, I not only endeavour to tip the scales (if only slightly) so that interest in narrative modes of reconciling trauma might begin to gain more critical attention; I also simultaneously offer a distinctly psychoanalytic reading of Robinson's work. I accomplish the latter goal particularly by considering how the joke is received as a possible therapeutic. Ultimately, this tendentious joke is not situated as effective; in fact, it is an unsuccessful method of therapeutic empowerment. However, despite these reservations, Robinson's text uses the joke to go beyond the point of what LaCapra calls "a paralyzing all-or-nothing logic in which one is in a double bind: either totalization and the closure you resist, or acting out the repetition compulsion" (145). Although both dimensions of this dichotomy are addressed in the text, "Queen of the North" also uses the joke to venture into uncharted territory: the working-through of trauma. Before investigating the particulars of the practical joke as a model of testimony, I will offer a historically informed definition of the "talking cure" and consider the ambivalence that surrounds it as a therapeutic agency for intergenerational trauma in the story.

The "Talking Cure" and its Limitations in the Face of Intergenerational Trauma

Usually, references to the "talking cure" conjure up images of couches and intensive psychoanalytic consultations. Indeed, literary representations of this model of therapy in Canadian fiction certainly support these stereotypes. For instance, in Robertson Davies's *The Manticore*, the second novel in his *Deptford Trilogy*, the psychoanalytic process is used as a means of potentially satisfying the demands of the detective genre. However, a close reading of Anna O.'s case in *Studies on Hysteria*, the account where the term "talking cure" is coined and the procedure first described, reveals that the process only involves recollecting, relating, and reliving traumatic memories in the presence of an attentive listener, and does not include any form of analysis. In their study of Anna O., Freud and Breuer reveal that this young Jewish-Viennese woman, who is actually named Bertha Pappenheim, suffers from hysteria caused by "reminiscences," what we now term traumatic memories. These memories are represented by somatic symptoms, corporeal signs that serve as replacements or substitutes

for the original trauma. By acting as detective, Breuer uses these symptoms as clues to reveal the circumstances under which they first appeared. With Breuer's prompting, Anna O. recalls each instance when the symptom initially manifested in the exact reverse chronological order, a speech act that allows her to express intense emotions associated with the event. In their theoretical chapters, Breuer and Freud recognize that this release restores intracerebral "constancy" or emotional balance. The process of remembering, telling the story of trauma, and expressing emotions associated with the event is designated a "talking cure" by Anna O., a procedure that is later termed abreaction or hypnotic catharsis by Freud and Breuer. This regimen, Allan Young clearly indicates, should not be confused with Freud's later psychoanalytic projects: "In abreaction, events must be remembered . . . but their specific nature and significance are, in themselves, irrelevant to the clinical process. The therapist simply listens to the patient's memory; he has no motive for helping him interpret it" (74).

However, as current theorists such as Judith Herman have indicated, narratives formed during abreaction not only function as efficient personal therapeutics; they are also testimonies with inherently political and collective dimensions (Herman 181). Dori Laub, a psychologist who treats Holocaust survivors, also acknowledges that while his patients tell and relive the story of their trauma, they bear witness, engaging in testimony. This impulse to tell trauma with the express goal of testifying, of engaging in a political action that has communal repercussions, has also become of central concern in Native literature, particularly in response to the trauma of sexual abuse suffered during the period of residential schooling. Works by Tomson Highway, Basil Johnston, Joseph Dandurand, Dale Lakevold and Darrell Racine, Robert Alexie, Beth Brant, Rita Joe, Jane Willis, and Shirley Cheechoo all offer representations of the residential school experience, and indeed, as works of art, they are all testimonies in their own right. However, texts such as Robert Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls* also provide literary representations of talk therapy, and specifically explore its function as a testimonial. Although the act of telling trauma does not involve a formal therapeutic contract between physician and healer, Alexie's work investigates the process of recalling and talking about trauma either as an informal conversation or as a dimension of traditional Native ritualistic practice. Indeed, Alexie incorporates both the "Talking Stick" (183), a tool used for centuries by many American Indian tribes as a means of just and impartial hearing when matters of great concern came before the council, and the ritual of self-staking (188), an act common among Indian warriors, in his cultur-

ally specific adaptation of the “talking cure.” What we have in *Porcupines and China Dolls*, however, is not simply talk therapy modified and integrated into Native practice; the “talking cure,” or what Alexie refers to as “disclosure,” is also depicted as decidedly political and essential for both personal and communal reconciliation. In effect, definitions need to be refined in light of these political preoccupations. In general, then, the procedure involves recovering traumatic memory, expressing emotions associated with the event, relating the trauma story to a trustworthy listener or listeners, and finally recognizing that this narrative is a testimonial.

“Queen of the North” also offers a fictional representation of the “talking cure” and explores this narrative paradigm as a potential reconciliatory strategy for coping with intergenerational trauma. The narrative tells of the sexual abuse Adelaine, a disaffected Haisla teenager at the centre of the story, suffers at the hands of her Uncle Josh. This incest is not, however, an isolated phenomenon; Josh’s actions are directly related to the sexual abuse he suffered at the hands of Father Archibald, a minister at the residential school he attended as a boy. Adelaine discovers this connection when she deciphers a series of clues encoded in a photograph of Josh as a boy and Father Archibald at the residential school. Father Archibald’s hand on the young Josh’s shoulder is interpreted as a suspicious act of intimacy, and the priest’s excessive lament on the back of the photograph confirms her intuition (212). This process of deductive reasoning is further informed by a larger social context of similar abuses in Native-Canadian culture: “‘Looks like he taught him more than just prayers’ ... vaguely remembering that famous priest who got eleven years in jail. He’d molested twenty-three boys while they were in residential school” (212). Adelaine as the viewer here takes a seemingly harmless image and creates the story of Josh’s childhood trauma, filling in what has been omitted. Robinson’s narrative suggests that the subsequent abuse Adelaine suffers is her uncle’s re-enactment of the trauma she deduces from the photograph. The existence of this repetition is apparent when Adelaine deliberately mistakes Josh for his abuser, Father Archibald. At one point, she directly refers to Josh as “Father Archibald,” insisting that she has “said her prayers” (212), an explicit correlation between the two men that finally ends Josh’s aggression. She reinforces the connection the following morning by “say[ing] grace out loud” (213) before breakfast in her uncle’s presence, implying that she is in the company of the man whom Josh mimics when he molests her.

If read in light of current theories of trauma, Josh’s actions can be

interpreted as an unproductive attempt to manage his own abuse. Adelaine's assessment suggests that Josh's behaviour conforms with a pathology Freud deemed "repetition compulsion"; that is, the inclination of survivors to re-enact their traumas after they are out of immediate danger in an effort to resolve inner conflicts. Freud and current psychoanalysts suggest that this "repetitive reliving of the traumatic experience ... represent[s] a spontaneous attempt at healing" (Herman 41). However, Josh endeavours to reconcile his past not simply by replicating his trauma but particularly by inverting the power structure he experienced during his own abuse. This unproductive strategy is suggested by Adelaine's distortion of the photograph of Josh as a boy with Father Archibald. Adelaine replaces Father Archibald's face with a photograph of Josh. In other words, the face of the abuser and therefore the agent is replaced with an image of Josh: he who has become the abuser. This transposition of identity suggests that Josh not only repeats Father Archibald's actions but also gains the sense of agency afforded the abuser when he harms Adelaine. The transference of power implied here is further indicated by the changes made to the face of the young Josh. Adelaine replaces the young Josh's face with a picture of her own. In doing so, she suggests that Josh frees himself of victim status by situating her in his younger self's role. In an interview with Cathy Caruth, Robert Jay Lifton refers to this method of managing trauma as "bearing false witness"; that is to say, "it's deriving one's solution ... by exploiting a group of people and rendering them victims, designated victims for psychological work" (139).

However, Josh's actions can also be interpreted as coefficients of intergenerational trauma, particularly a paradigm referred to as Historic Trauma Transmission (HTT), which has been developed specifically to address the workings of trauma in Native communities. In *Historic Trauma and Aboriginal Healing*, a text prepared for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, Cynthia C. Wesley-Esquimaux and Magdalena Smolewski refine the work of Yellow Horse Brave Heart to develop the notion of HTT. It is a model of intergenerational trauma where "hidden collective memories of this [Native] trauma, or a collective non-remembering, is passed from generation to generation, as are the maladaptive social and behavioural patterns that are symptoms of many social disorders caused by historic trauma" (iv). In this paradigm of intergenerational trauma, trauma can be transmitted through various channels: for instance, traumatic memory can be passed on insidiously through narrative or storytelling, or trauma can be inflicted through maladaptive behaviour learned from the previous generation (76). It is the latter dimension that most

clearly applies to Robinson's work; intergenerational trauma is certainly the product of "maladaptive social and behavioural patterns" (iv). Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski offer a detailed explanation of this debilitating process:

The cluster of symptoms associated with specific disorders that manifest themselves as a result of historic trauma may be *passed* to next generations in a form of socially learned behavioural patterns. In a sense, symptoms that parents exhibit (family violence, sexual abuse) act as trauma and disrupt adaptive social adjustments in their children. In turn, these children internalize these symptoms ... and fall ill to one of the social disorders. In the next generation, the process perpetuates itself. In this sense, *White Hat* (The Circle, 2001) was correct in stating the trauma continues: the trauma understood as a relentless causal agent. (65)

In light of these findings, Uncle Josh's violation of Adelaine can be read not simply as therapeutic mismanagement but as a distinct dimension of his traumatic experience. In keeping with the precepts of HTT, Josh internalizes the antisocial behaviour suffered during his specific historic trauma of residential schooling and passes it on to the next generation.

Josh's actions obviously have debilitating effects on the succeeding generation. Adelaine is clearly traumatized by Josh's ongoing abuse, exhibiting the self-destructive behaviour and shame that results from trauma, psychological dimensions that will be discussed in further detail later in this paper. However, an analysis of these repercussions can extend beyond the victim's psychopathology, particularly in light of Glenn Willmott's critique of Robinson's collection. In his essay "Family in Native Literature," Willmott explores configurations of subjectivity in *Traplines*, and argues that Robinson's work moves away from a paradigm of the individual self and towards a distinctly Native model of the kindred self or what he terms the "figure of the family" (895). Citing Thomas King's discussion of Native kinship in *All My Relations*, Willmott explores the workings of the kindred self or "kindred I":

"All my relations' is at first a reminder of who we are and our relationship with both our family and our relatives ... More than that, 'all my relations' is an encouragement for us to accept the responsibilities we have within a universal family by living our lives in a harmonious and moral manner" (King, ix). ... the self [in King's reading] [is] identified 'first' by way of our immediate family, then by our equally ineluctable

'human' and 'universal' kinships. ... 'who we are' is not a self-identification, psychic structure of belief, but a partly external and practical dependency and reciprocal responsibility. (895-96)

Willmott goes on to argue that this kindred self is destabilized in Robinson's collection. He interprets this disruption of subjectivity in terms of genre, positing that it evokes a new kind of postmodernism. Unlike canonical postmodernism that decentres "the represented individual self" (902), Robinson's work "is a postmodernism that schizophrenically performs the figure of the family" (903), that ruptures the self defined as a coefficient of the family: "Every one of the stories turns upon the figure of family relations displaced from a normative birth family ... In the fourth story ["Queen of the North"], a young woman is torn between the identity already formed in relation to a sexually abusive uncle and one being formed in relation to a young, naïve lover" (902). Willmott's fine analysis considers the implications of this destabilization, focusing on issues of literary classification; however, a psychoanalytic reading of "Queen of the North" adds another dimension to his critique by offering an explanation for the fragmentation of subjectivity that he describes. In the story, it is specifically intergenerational trauma that destabilizes the family and, by extension, the model of subjectivity based on kindred relations. By molesting Adelaine, Josh disregards "reciprocal responsibility," "the responsibilities [members of Native cultures] have within a ... family by living [their] lives in a harmonious and moral manner" (895-96), and, in effect, Adelaine's subjectivity as a "kindred I" is fractured, inducing her to look for family "relations" elsewhere.

When confronted with intergenerational trauma, the survivor, Robinson's narrative recognizes, should engage in abreaction. This requisite may seem doubtful in light of Robinson's depiction of professional therapy in *Monkey Beach*, the novel that incorporates details of plot and character from "Queen of the North," published four years after her collection *Traplines* was released. In *Monkey Beach*, Robinson focuses on the trials of a distinctly minor character in "Queen of the North," namely Lisa, the sister of Adelaine's boyfriend, Jimmy. While mourning the death of her Uncle Mick, Lisa is referred to a counsellor at the local hospital. However, her therapeutic encounter with Ms. Doris Jenkins is not a productive union but an otherworldly, demonic experience. Adhering to the aesthetics of the popular horror, the scene sees Ms. Jenkins manipulated by a "thing" with "no flesh, just tight, thin skin over bones" (273). Lisa watches the demonic figure cling to her therapist and later to her, "feed-

ing” on her counsellor’s insecurities and her own traumas: “While the thing was feeding, I kept seeing Mick’s body as Dad pulled it out of the boat, Mick’s empty eye sockets in his lipless face, the fishing net embedded in his skin” (274). Despite the pair’s respective assurances that it “was a very good session” (274), the symbolic status of the “thing” as an agent of exploitation suggests that the professional therapeutic space is a site of danger and not of recovery. Pain and fear in this context are expressed in order to satisfy ambiguous malevolent agencies and not to engender therapeutic relief.

This scene may indicate Robinson’s wariness of a formal therapeutic contract; however, in “Queen of the North,” her skepticism does not extend to the healing process of articulating pain and expressing emotion to a trustworthy listener. We see this commitment to the “talking cure” when Adelaine exhibits a desire to bear witness, so she can discharge constraining affect, a need evidenced when she forms an intimate bond with her boyfriend Jimmy: “I wanted to tell him. I wanted someone else to know and not have it locked inside of me” (200). However, she is denied this release because she cannot find what Dori Laub designates an “addressable other” (“Bearing” 68) or an understanding listener “who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness” (68). On three separate occasions, Adelaine attempts to engage in the abreactive process but refrains from articulating her story and her feelings, as she anticipates negative responses from her potential auditors (189, 196, 200). In effect, Adelaine’s nickname, Karaoke, signifies her muted state. Like a karaoke singer, who is denied her own lyrics or her own language, Adelaine is reticent on the subject of her trauma because the absence of a suitable addressee makes the “talking cure” an infeasible method of treatment.

The story’s treatment of Adelaine’s attempts to cope with trauma here does not exhibit the political commentary that characterizes discussions of the traumatic event. Representations of Adelaine’s sexual abuse are situated as part of a larger historical and cultural matrix specific to Native Canadians. Josh molests Adelaine because he cannot manage the effects of his traumatic experiences at the residential school. In its discussion of the event of Adelaine’s trauma, then, Robinson’s story explores both the traumatogenic effects of a historical event specific to Native people in Canada and the trauma of incest. However, the work’s critique of Adelaine’s efforts to heal the psychological and emotional effects of her traumatic abuse does not exhibit a preoccupation with Native culture and history to the same extent.

Current research on recovery from trauma in Aboriginal communities has stressed the importance of exploring definitions of healing and strategies for healing within specifically Native cultural contexts. Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski offer an informed analysis of healing in Native communities. Relying particularly on the findings of Rod McCormick and A. Favel-King, they argue that effective healing in Aboriginal culture relies on “the expression of emotion to restore [physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual] balance; establishing social connections to create interconnectedness; and addressing spirits to achieve transcendence” (9). Indeed, their findings indicate that many existing Aboriginal healing programs already employ the concept of interconnectedness in their initiatives, using the symbolism of the Medicine Wheel or the Healing Circle that integrates different elements of Aboriginal philosophy of life (8). Favel-King aptly surmises the objectives of the healing process in Native culture, recognizing that they do not always coincide with Western conceptions:

Throughout the history of First Nations people, the definitions of health evolved around the whole being of each person — the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of a person being in balance and harmony with each other as well as the with the environment and other beings. This has clashed with the western medical model which, until very recently, has perpetuated the concept of healing as being the ‘absence of disease.’ (125)

In her discussion of “Queen of the North,” Kristina Fagan makes a similar argument for culturally specific readings of trauma, and takes particular issue with healing strategies, especially the role of testifying to trauma in Native communities. She argues that testimony and its coefficients (bearing witness and accusing the perpetrator) are not always positioned as therapeutically efficacious in Native culture, and are often understood as potentially damaging: “These two ethics — of witnessing and of blame — make sense within white, Western, twentieth-century notions of justice and psychological health. But we must remember they are culturally formed and informed. In fact ... [they] are the antitheses of the traditional ethics of many Native tribes” (108). Fagan goes on to use Rupert Ross’s *Dancing with a Ghost* to explain the ethics that discourage the act of witnessing to traumatic events within Native communities (109-10). In her analysis, therefore, Fagan implies that we should avoid imposing not only Western notions of telling trauma but also Western notions of silence on Aboriginal societies. Western models of psychoanalysis posit

that silence is a symptom of either shock, repression, or dissociation. Silence, Fagan seems to suggest, is often not interpreted as a symptom of repression or dissociation in many Native communities; rather, it designates that a sufferer ethically manages his or her emotional responses to trauma.

However, in Robinson's work, Adelaine's reticence is not situated as a therapeutic or ethical response to trauma. In other words, the story's understanding of silence is not in keeping with the cultural assumptions that Fagan posits are often evidenced in Native societies. Rather, the text encourages the reader to interpret Adelaine's muted expression in accordance with Western precepts, which designate reticence a debilitating symptom that must be overcome with the aid of testimony: "I wanted someone else to know and not have it locked inside of me" (200). Indeed, Adelaine's desire to free herself of traumatic knowledge here is akin to the desire to expel a deadly disease, a reconciliatory procedure which Favel-King has designated as a decidedly Western conception of healing (125). However, the story does, of course, also recognize the need for interconnectedness; Adelaine's involvement with the "Helping Hands Society" is perhaps the most evident indication of her unwitting commitment to this Native imperative. Ultimately, Robinson's work exhibits an ambivalent stance in its discussion of trauma, for on the one hand, it encourages the reader to approach the traumatic event in light of historical circumstances specific to Native culture, and on the other, it disallows a culturally specific understanding of traumatic symptoms and cures by promoting, to some degree, accepted Western perspectives. It is a conflicted cultural stance that is also apparent in Robinson's treatment of the practical joke as a form of testimony.

The Practical Joke as Testimony

Adelaine may be muted by Josh's abuse but she is not ultimately silenced; she gives voice to her past through her "tendentious" practical joke, a potentially empowering traumatic testimony. Jokes are often apparent in Native literature and are usually associated with what Allan Ryan deems the "trickster spirit." This penchant for play, trickery, and joking in Native writing often serves a distinctly subversive function; Kenneth Lincoln, for instance, argues that joking and humour in Native culture destabilize established power hierarchies that disenfranchise Native culture. In Robinson's text, jokes serve a similar subversive function; how-

ever, rather than directly addressing white institutions and expectations, the joke subverts established interpersonal power dynamics forged by trauma. Unlike many fictional representations of trauma, “Queen of the North” does not offer a sustained analysis of psychopathology by enacting symptoms of the disease in performative forms of expression. Rather, it subscribes to Judith Herman’s assertion that “empowerment” is one of “the core experience[s] of recovery” (197), and so focuses on the dynamics of power in traumatizing relationships. Before she undertakes the joke, Adelaine has already engendered a shift in the debilitating structure of power between her sexual abuser, Uncle Josh, and herself by confronting Josh with mention of his own unsavory past and, in effect, ending years of abuse (212). She also intends to reinforce this therapeutic sense of agency by confronting her abuser with the narrative of her own traumatic history. Herman’s discussion of therapeutic empowerment via confrontation is supported by the findings of feminist critics and psychologists, particularly on the subject of domestic and child abuse, who assert that the survivor must both reconstruct her traumatic history and maintain her narrative of events in the face of her aggressor (184).

The traumatic narrative with which Adelaine intends to engage in this confrontation takes the form of what Freud would deem a “tendentious” practical joke. Adelaine places the altered photograph of Father Archibald with his hand on a young Josh’s shoulder, a blood clot in a Ziplock bag (which she retrieves from her menstrual cycle following an abortion that terminated an unwanted pregnancy attributed to Josh’s abuse), and a note stating “It was yours so I killed it” all in a hatbox tied with a “bright red ribbon” (213), and waits for Josh to uncover it. In keeping with the generic conventions Richard S. Tallman attributes to the practical joke, Adelaine’s prank is a “game, riddle . . . or competitive play in which one of two opposing sides is consciously aware of the fact that a state of play exists; for the joke to be successful, one side must remain unaware of the fact that a play activity is occurring until it is ‘too late,’ that is, until the unknowing side is made to seem foolish or is caused some physical and/or mental discomfort” (260). Josh certainly has no idea what awaits him in the hatbox, and because the box is tied with a ribbon, will presumably assume it is a pleasing gift until it is “too late” and he uncovers the amended photograph, blood clot, and scathing missive. However, although Adelaine’s prank conforms with the conventions we associate with practical jokes, it does not simply function as a playful game that excites amusement and mirth in the prankster and, potentially, the victim of the joke. Joyce Bynum’s study of practical jokes indicates that these

sorts of pranks usually “allow us to express hostility toward another person” (370). Freud certainly supports this notion in his study of “tendentious” jokes, where he posits that the joker’s intentions are ultimately aggressive. Adhering to the impulses of “tendentious” jokers, Adelaine’s motives are certainly belligerent; she wants her uncle to feel the pain and humiliation she herself has experienced as a result of his repeated abuse when he opens the package. This desire to harm has precedence in the story. In Adelaine’s recurring dream, she brutally beheads and severs the limbs of her uncle and deposits him in her closet to be discovered later by her cousin Ronny (187).

This “tendentious” joke not only intends to satisfy Adelaine’s “hostile,” “aggressive” impulses (Freud, *Jokes* 140); it also formulates a narrative that functions as a traumatic testimony. This narrative bears witness to Josh’s history of abuse, and by extension similar abuses in the Native community. It also tells of his mismanagement of his own traumatic past and its influence on Adelaine, particularly the abortion she attributes to his mistreatment. And finally, it expresses her feelings of contempt for her abuser.

As a model of testimony, the practical joke does not exhibit the conventions usually associated with narratives articulated during the abreactive process. From their earliest inception in the theories of Sigmund Freud, Joseph Breuer, and Pierre Janet, accounts produced during the “talking cure” have relied on the spoken or written word. Freud and Breuer point to the “verbal utterances” (*Studies* 57) that constitute abreactive narratives. Janet, a nineteenth-century theorist of trauma, developed a similar paradigm of treatment that he termed “psychological analysis,” and recognized that the “action of telling [the] story” of trauma relies on “linguistic operations” (661). Indeed, current theories of testimony have avidly returned to discussions of language. Critics such as Cathy Caruth, Dori Laub, and Shoshana Felman are influenced by post-structuralism, positing that trauma destabilizes language and demands a vocabulary and syntax in some sense incommensurable with what went before it. Although they do not support the assumptions of Freud and Janet, who endorse the ability of language to convey traumatic history, these recent theories do situate language as a central sign-system in the rendering of traumatic testimonies.

Unlike established models of testimony, Adelaine’s practical joke does not exclusively rely on the spoken or written word. In Saussure’s terminology, language is one among several sign-systems that formulate the narrative of Adelaine’s joke. Adelaine may leave a note, “It was yours

so I killed it,” where she uses language to state both her action — aborting a fetus — and her intentions for doing so. The manipulated photograph, blood clot, and red ribbon are also signifiers, but they do not belong to a verbal sign-system. Of course, all elements exist only in the words Robinson uses to describe them. The image of the amended photograph in particular is translated into a prose picture, what W.T.J. Mitchell has called an “imatext.” In effect, language is still a key component in rendering the joke to the reader. However, within the fictional world in which the situations and events narrated occur, the diegesis so to speak, Adelaine has composed a narrative where a photograph and tangible objects are crucial referents for her intended reader, Josh. The word, then, is primarily withheld in this articulation of childhood trauma.

Not only is language of central importance in Freud and Janet’s definitions of traumatic narratives; they also depend on explicit statements, a convention best articulated by Janet in his discussion of traumatic cures. When traumatic memories have been emotionally controlled and integrated into a survivor’s life story, an explicit narrative of trauma that leaves no room for allusion or implication is manifest, Janet asserts (662). Freud and Breuer reach similar conclusions in their work with Anna O. She renders her traumatic history “in such detail” (*Studies* 91) that any form of opacity is decidedly absent. Although Freud, Breuer, and Janet define traumatic narratives as explicit statements, recent theories of trauma have reconsidered the aesthetics of these narratives by pointing to their allusiveness. According to Caruth, Felman, and Laub, because trauma is beyond representation, testimonies are usually opaque, struggling to render an event that cannot be definitively captured in word or speech. However, those articulating the event do not choose to be unclear in their depictions of the past; the pathology of the disease determines their mode of expression. Ultimately, nineteenth-century theories of trauma foreground explicitness as an aesthetic of traumatic narratives, whereas current theories consider their unwanted opacity.

Robinson depicts Adelaine as detracting from these conventions by deliberately choosing indirect, allusive modes of communication to express her meaning. The significance of these non-linguistic signs is not explicit; rather, in keeping with the technique of most tendentious jokes, they communicate, Freud tells us, through a process of “allusion” (*Jokes* 100) or “indirect representation” (80). The photograph Adelaine includes in the box is what Michel de Certeau would deem a “palimpsestic site” (144), because it is a layered construct that infers several levels of meaning. The original photograph, which sees Father Archibald with his hand

intimately placed on Josh's shoulder, alludes to the abuse Josh experiences at the residential school. The amended photograph implies Josh's repetition of the abuse he suffered, and an inversion of the original power dynamic, which affords him a misguided sense of therapeutic agency. The blood clot in a Ziplock bag is also inexplicit, gesturing to the process and effects of Adelaine's abortion. The opacity engendered by these unstable signifiers is not an indication of unassimilated trauma, as current theories would suggest, but a deliberate strategy. Indeed, Adelaine is strategically allusive when she ties the hat box with a "bright red ribbon." By doing so, she hopes its connotations will mislead her uncle by having him assume the gift is inherently benevolent, as the ribbon's conventional signification implies, rather than ultimately malevolent.

This joke is not only a narrative paradigm whose conventions detract from those exhibited in established forms of testimony; it is also a cultural artifact. As Wesley-Esquimaux, Smolewski, Fagan, and others have recognized, critical discussion of traumatic symptoms and cures needs to be culturally contextualized. However, a reading of Adelaine's joke as a distinctly Native form of treatment proves to be difficult. Indeed, these difficulties extend to cultural readings of the collection as a whole. In her analysis of *Traplines*, Helen Hoy recognizes that most of the collection "does not overtly feature Native characters or focus on Native communities" (153). Hoy maintains that for the most part Robinson's stories do not deploy fixed and static signs of Indianness. Willmott's analysis of the collection also recognizes that it is "radically ambiguous and ambivalent" (901) in its representation of the characters and events. However, unlike Hoy, he reads *Traplines* as a text that deals primarily with First-Nations people, particularly in its depiction of the family as a "kindred I" (896): that is, "a contingent, shifting, flowing, ongoing process of inter-dependencies that each person must map for themselves and share with others" (897). The critical discourse that surrounds the collection, then, is characterized by debates about its status as an identifiably Native text. There is an exception to this discord, however: both Hoy and Willmott concede that, as Hoy puts it, "the final story, 'Queen of the North' ... is the most conventionally 'Native' in its account of a young Haisla woman and her response to sexual abuse" (153). Even Eden Robinson has designated "Queen of the North" as the "only one of the stories ... about First Nations people" (DaCosta) in the collection. However, I believe that the cultural status of Adelaine's joke in this story cannot be reduced to a universally recognizable inscription of "Nativity" either. The story in this collection that is most identifiably Native thus continues to be allu-

sive, although perhaps less overtly, in its representations of Native culture. Like Cree-Métis poet Marilyn Dumont, Robinson resists the pressure to “infuse everything you write with symbols of the Native world view, that is: the circle, mother earth, the number four or the Trickster figure” (47), as she recognizes that these signifiers risk essentializing Native identities.¹

On first glance, however, if read allegorically, Adelaine’s actions when partaking in the joke do subscribe to fixed signs of Indianness, as she resembles a trickster figure, a figure often adopted by writers to designate a quintessentially Native world view. Like the antics of Coyote that, according to Ellen Rosenberg, often serve a critical function (156), Adelaine’s practical joke is intended to critique her abuser’s actions. Her methods of holding Josh accountable are also in keeping with those exhibited by trickster figures in other Native-Canadian works, particularly Tomson Highway’s play *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. Both Adelaine and the trickster Nanabush in Highway’s play orchestrate reminders of traumatic pasts. Adelaine intends to confront Josh with a photograph that encodes his history of trauma; Highway’s Nanabush takes on the guise of Black Lady Halked and magically re-enacts the horrifying birth of Dickie Bird Halked for Spooky, Pierre, and Zachary. In this flashback, Nanabush as an inebriated Black Lady Halked continues to drink throughout her labour and delivery. Unsupported by her child’s father, Big Joey, Black Lady Halked is left alone to deliver her child on the floor of the Dickie Bird Tavern. This trauma is not merely individual, affecting Black Lady Halked and her son, who will later exhibit signs of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome; it is also communal, insidiously influencing the Native community. As Simon, another participant in the scene, indicates after Nanabush’s performance: “The fact of the matter is, it never should have happened, that kind of thing should never be allowed to happen, not to us Indians, not to anyone living and breathing on the face of God’s green earth” (94).

However, the practical joke’s status as a literary intertext complicates any simple parallel between Adelaine and the Native trickster, for the joke is also aligned with Anglo-Canadian literary traditions, specifically those exhibited in James Reaney’s short story “The Box Social.”² Adelaine’s intent and methodology when engaged in this practical joke bear a striking resemblance to the joke performed by James Reaney’s central protagonist, Sylvia. Published in 1947 when Reaney was an undergraduate and causing “campus scandal” (Stingle 194) at the University of Toronto, Reaney’s short story also tells of a young female sufferer of incest. Both Adelaine and Sylvia play practical jokes on a sexually abusive relative as

a form of retribution by placing evidence of the children fathered by their abusers in boxes — Adelaine uses the blood clot linked to her abortion; Sylvia, on the other hand, deposits her stillborn child. Both announce their disdain for their violators: Adelaine includes a pithy missive, “It was yours so I killed it”; Sylvia whispers “I hated you so much” (12) to her abusive father when he opens the box, having purchased it at the box social auction. Both boxes are tied with ribbon, suggesting they contain benevolent gifts rather than holding a dark surprise — Adelaine’s is “bright red” (213); Sylvia’s is black.

By disallowing a definitively “Native” understanding of the joke, Robinson’s work does not fall back on universalism — that is, a type of humanist approach that functions to negate all difference. The joke is, in fact, a Native cultural artifact, but it acts as such in accordance with Robinson’s conception of Native culture. Robinson’s fiction offers a complex and dynamic understanding of “Native” society that is ambiguous and eclectic. Native culture is a nuanced matrix that is not divided into rigid categories of Indian and Non-Indian; for Robinson, bannock or “Ichiban” are as ‘Native’ as “Kraft or hot dogs” (204). As Helen Hoy asserts, “Robinson can be seen to . . . inhabit Homi Bhabha’s ‘Third Space’ of enunciation and cultural translation, evading stubborn binarisms” (181). The text situates Robinson’s culture at the intersection between Native and Non-Native societies; however, this liminal and diverse space is not a fixed, stationary point. The ambiguity and ambivalence that proliferate in her work allow for dynamic, constantly shifting configurations of the Native world.

Between Acting-Out and Therapeutic Closure: The Beginnings of Working-Through

As a narrative alternative to the “talking cure,” Adelaine’s joke is ultimately ineffective. Despite her intentions, the joke does not confront her abuser and, in effect, reinforce her agency, as the box is not opened by Uncle Josh but by her lover, Jimmy. This failure is reinforced by Jimmy’s response to the new knowledge he uncovers in the box. The final scene sees him with Josh boarding the “Queen of the North,” the latter’s seiner, embarking on a fishing trip. Robinson’s subsequent novel, *Monkey Beach*, elaborates Jimmy’s motivations for joining Josh, clearly indicating that he enlists as a crew member to murder Adelaine’s abuser as a reprisal — “For what he did to Karaoke, he knew that Josh deserved to die” (*Monkey* 369)

— and is ultimately killed in the process. However, devoid of the novel's context, the story's ending does not offer definitive conclusions; it allows for the possibility that Jimmy may be forging an alliance with Josh and leaving Adelaine as a response to discovering evidence of an aborted child that he believes to be his own. Both readings leave Adelaine not only unsatisfied in her attempts to confront her abuser but also bereft of her only hope for a genuine personal connection.

The frustrated ending of Adelaine's joke is not foremost a commentary on its therapeutic effectiveness; rather, it seems most explicitly an extension of the aesthetics that characterize the story. Robinson's narrative disallows systems of closure, a priority evident in her frustration of both the *Bildungsroman* and the teleological plot. What Susan Fraiman calls the "progressive development" of the *Bildungsroman* towards "masterful selfhood" is denied: although the story episodically chronicles Adelaine's development, real maturity facilitated by an instructive crisis is repudiated. Adelaine has moved from childhood to adolescence; she has ended the sexual abuse that has been the source of emotional crisis; her "nerdy" (195) interest in astronomy, supported by Jimmy, promises personal development beyond her established identity as violent brawler. However, the story closes with yet another vignette that sees Adelaine in an affray, "go[ing] down" (214). Rather than developing her identity and recognizing her role in the world, Adelaine perpetuates the self-destructive violence that has remained a constant throughout the narrative. Ultimately, genuine growth is arrested in the story. The teleological plot is also stunted; Jimmy and Adelaine's romance is not happily resolved. By disallowing the growth and rebirth attributed to the *Bildungsroman* and Romance, Robinson's work seems to adhere to the conventions of dirty realism. However, Willmott has convincingly argued that this generic designation is more apparent than real, as the collection "sheer[s] away from realist depth, history, and causality ... stripping away from realist descriptions of the temporal backgrounds, spatial contexts, and causal relations that would ordinarily interpret the represented phenomenal succession of the present" (901). Instead, Willmott argues, the story and the collection as a whole exhibit a "jagged or alternative postmodernism" (903).

Although the joke's failure most obviously reinforces the story's generic conventions, within a psychoanalytic context it also can be read as a therapeutic of limited value. These limitations are attributable to the allowances made by jokes for a retraction. To say "I'm joking" is to negate the significance of an assertion. Indeed, when Adelaine's joke is rep-

licated in *Monkey Beach* (with only minor alterations) and goes awry, she opts to retract the importance of its contents by recognizing it as merely a joke: “she uncomfortably said it was meant as a joke, Jimmy was never supposed to find it” (365). This option to negate the importance of a traumatic testimony encourages a reconsideration of the joke’s effectiveness both as an individual and communal therapeutic. Current theorists stress the need not only to reconstruct the event of trauma but also to accept the responsibility for that history in order both to gain therapeutic relief and to satisfy the ethics of representation. Indeed, Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski also insist on the importance of testimony during the healing process for Native cultures: “The story must be told and told so loud that everybody will listen; Aboriginal people who were silenced and forgot how to remember; non-Aboriginal people who often know the Aboriginal world only from biased western movies and text books; and government institutions who still have the power to decide on the fate of Indigenous people” (82). Ultimately, we must question the efficacy of the practical joke as a configuration of testimony if it allows for that history to be negated. This possibility for a repudiation of the past leaves unsatisfied the ethical imperative to render and to maintain the significance of trauma.

However, by situating the joke as a remedy with limitations, Robinson’s work is not simply pessimistic; this repudiation also suggests that her text avoids reducing the complexities of trauma and its cures. “Queen of the North” is not what Eric Santner would deem a “fetishistic narrative.” It does not “attempt to reinstate the pleasure principle prematurely, without inscribing trauma and the work of mourning” (LaCapra, *Representing* 221). Robinson’s work skirts these reductions by refusing to offer any complete, closed, or naïve solutions to an involved process of recovery. We are left with a sense that relief of trauma’s pathology will not be uncomplicated for Adelaine.

By resisting simple and tidy therapeutic conclusions, Robinson’s narrative has unwittingly enforced one side of a dichotomy that LaCapra believes characterizes current thinking on trauma: “a paralyzing all-or-nothing logic in which one is in a double bind: either totalization and the closure you resist, or acting out the repetition compulsion” (*Writing* 145). Robinson certainly repudiates “totalization” and “closure” in her discussion of traumatic cures; the practical joke she situates as a therapeutic alternative is decidedly ineffective and problematic as a form of testimony. But, by doing so, she has not exclusively opted for this dimension of the double-bind. Indeed, in keeping with the interests of current

theorists, her work offers an in-depth reading of the other pole in this binary opposition: namely, the unconscious repetition of the traumatic episode that Freud deemed acting-out.

Robinson's exploration of unconscious repetition deviates from several literary representations of this phase of trauma. Developing Freud's notion of compulsive repetition, particularly in "Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through," as well as the work of current theorists, LaCapra links "acting-out ... with possession by the repressed past, repetitious compulsions, and un-worked through transference" (*Representing* 209). Literary studies of this initial stage of trauma, what Caruth recognizes as a form of latent incomprehensibility, focus on its inscription through performative modes of expression. Particularly apparent in the work of Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth, this symptom of trauma is located in literature as a speech-act; that is, these theories consider the ways in which trauma is enacted by language. Robinson's narrative does not enact this dimension of trauma but directly represents it through repeated depictions of Adelaine's violent, compulsive, irrational behaviour, which we commonly associate with acting-out. The story offers three graphic vignettes of Adelaine engaged in impromptu brawls with others (188, 199, 214). Indeed, her nickname, Karaoke, is linked to another episode of inebriated aggression, in which she brandishes a switchblade to keep people away from a karaoke machine (192).

There is, however, a darker dimension to these episodes of acting-out: the text suggests that Adelaine has adopted her abuser's self-soothing strategy to manage her own pain. Like Josh, Adelaine victimizes others in an effort to contend with her own feelings of victimization. She does so particularly by beating weaker girls: "there are four of us against her. It doesn't take long before she's on the floor trying to crawl away. I want to say I'm not part of it, but that's my foot hooking her ankle and tripping her while Ronny takes her down with a blow to the temple. The girl's now curled up under the sink and I punch her and kick her and smash her face into the floor" (188). However, there is a distinct difference between Josh and Adelaine; she recognizes the problematic implications of her actions when conceding "I want to say I'm not part of it" (188), whereas Josh never exhibits remorse.

Adelaine's imitation of her abuser can be taken further in light of Sándor Ferenczi's theories of trauma. Ferenczi studied trauma between the two World Wars, and so his analysis is often elided. Although he was one of Freud's most brilliant disciples, Ferenczi deviated from his mentor's accounts of childhood trauma by theorizing the illness as a

purely external event and not as a product of unconscious libidinal conflicts and drives. From this only a slight step was needed, which he took, to attribute neurosis to the reality of a trauma that assaulted the passive and innocent child in the form of a brutal, erotic aggression (Ferenczi 175). Ferenczi believed that at the moment of trauma, children suffered a shock that destroyed or dissociated all mental associations and synthesizing function. In an effort at appeasement, the child would mimic or identify with the abuser. As Ruth Leys explains in her analysis of his work,

Ferenczi placed the problem of *imitation* or *mimicry* at the center of his conceptualization of trauma when he suggested that in the traumatic moment the victim's best solution to the crisis was not to resist but to give in to the threatening person by *imitating* or *identifying with him (or her)*. For Ferenczi, the process of imitation or identification with the aggressor — the mimetic acceptance of unpleasure, including the incorporation or introjection of the aggressor's guilt — held the key to the victim's split or fragmented state. (124-25)

What Leys designates as Ferenczi's "mimetic" theory of trauma helps to explain Adelaine's responses during this period of acting-out. She imitates and identifies with Josh not only by unwittingly adopting his reconciliatory strategies but also by "incorporat[ing] or introject[ing] [his] guilt" (124). This assimilation of the abuser's guilt manifests as Adelaine's intense shame. Likened to the smell on her body that she attempts to remove with vigorous scrubbing in the bath, the shame Adelaine feels after she is forced to abort her uncle's child will not dissipate: "I was smelly and gross. I scrubbed hard but the smell wouldn't go away" (204). Adelaine's nickname, then, has added significance. Karaoke is a mimetic art form where the performer imitates another by singing his or her lyrics. During the party where she earns her nickname, Adelaine engages in this imitative performance while "singing Janis Joplin songs" (191). But, in light of Ferenczi's theories, this mimesis extends to Adelaine's response to trauma; she acts-out by imitating her aggressor's actions. It should be noted, however, that in Robinson's work imitation during trauma has an alternative function: it also serves to remove the victim from the traumatic event, to dissociate her from the aggressor. While being abused by Josh, Adelaine mimics the figures on the television screen: "'Moooo.' I *copy* the two aliens on *Sesame Street* mooing to the telephone" (190; italics added).

Again, Adelaine relies on imitation to cope with trauma; however, rather than imitating her aggressor, she “copies” characters on television, hoping that by negating her own identity she can repudiate the ensuing abuse.

This mimetic theory of trauma has potentially problematic political implications, however. Theorists of trauma who have a commitment to feminist politics, such as Judith Herman, do not subscribe to this model, Leys tells us, as it suggests that the victim, by imitating her abuser, is “mimetically complicitous with the violence directed against her” (299). Leys recognizes that this identification undercuts a victim’s agency as she is implicated in the event, feeling a sense of complicity that disallows the valid demand for accountability from her abuser. Mimetic theories of trauma, in other words, disallow the empowerment that Judith Herman believes central to the healing process by suggesting that victims through their imitation of the abuser are in some way accountable. Although Robinson’s work inscribes this mimetic paradigm, it does not imply that Adelaine is complicit in her abuse; indeed, it both advocates her demand for accountability and invests her with a sense of agency. She has no reservations about using her knowledge of Josh’s childhood abuse against him. Empowered with information, she becomes an agent who is able finally to put a stop to years of aggression without any form of outside assistance (213). In addition, Adelaine does not succumb to Arnold’s sexual predation during the fundraiser for the Helping Hands Society. Eyeing her bare legs and arms and asking her a sequence of increasingly personal questions, Arnold deposits twenty dollar bill after twenty dollar bill on the counter to enforce his desire for bannock, after the booth where Adelaine is volunteering has closed down. However, Arnold wants more than just fry bread; he apparently wants Adelaine to fulfill a sexual need that becomes apparent later, when he asks her to let her hair down:

“How should I eat these?” he interrupted me.

With your mouth, asshole. “Put some syrup on them, or jam, honey. Anything you want.”

“Anything?” he said, staring deep into my eyes.

Oh, barf. “Whatever.” (208)

Although Adelaine later lets down her hair when Arnold asks her to do so, she does not submit to his objectifying gaze. Rather than seeing herself as a commodity that can be purchased as easily as fry bread, Adelaine asserts her agency by ignoring Arnold’s attempts to initiate conversation,

choosing to “pick up the money and start towards the cashiers” (209) instead. This assertiveness suggests that despite Adelaine’s imitation of her abuser while unconsciously acting-out her trauma, she is not deprived of power.

Although Robinson’s work explores both dimensions of the double bind proposed by LaCapra, resisting closure and representing acting-out, it also goes beyond this paralyzing dichotomy by investigating attempts to work through the traumatic event. Usually, this phase of trauma is situated in opposition to acting-out; they are often designated as mutually exclusive. However, in his study of the interrelationship between acting-out and working-through, LaCapra draws of the analysis of Laplanche and Pontalis to reveal that they are not necessarily dichotomous:

Laplanche and Pontalis ... mitigate the opposition between acting-out and working-through by noting that “working-through is undoubtedly a repetition, albeit one modified by interpretation and — for this reason — liable to facilitate the subject’s freeing himself from repetition mechanisms” (pp.488-89). Working-through would thus seem to involve a mode of repetition offering a measure of critical purchase on problems and responsible control in action which would permit desirable change. (*Representing* 209).

As a form of controlled repetition of trauma, this stage of working-through is apparent in “Queen of the North” when Adelaine replicates her trauma as a historical narrative articulated in the form of a practical joke. Adelaine does not unconsciously lash out when she leaves the joke for Josh, but constructs a calculated and inventive repetition of her trauma that has a curative function. Although ineffective as a therapeutic, it offers us a glimpse into a possibility of reconciling this debilitating mental wound through an eccentric and creative historical narrative.

NOTES

¹ Helen Hoy’s analysis of the collection offers a convincing argument that points to Robinson’s wariness of essential Native identities, particularly in her reading of Adelaine’s response to Arnold’s advances at the fundraiser for the Helping Hands Society.

² My thanks to Magdalene Redekop for directing me to Reaney’s short story.

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