Thunder Beings and Story Rewrites

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Introduction

The memoir *Heart Berries* by Terese Marie Mailhot, is about powerful, sacred and spiritual Thunder Beings, Indigenous people living in the confines of a colonial and abusive world. However, no matter how much damage the body, mind and soul take, the lifelines of Mother Earth, blood and bones and the ancestor's stories create resilient spirits that seek to heal. The story of *Heart Berries* is about a woman, carrying the gifts and the wounds of her lineage through a tumultuous life of learning to speak and heal from her own trauma, abuse, family dysfunction and the colonial impacts on an entire cultural people and especially Indigenous women. Mailhot traverses' institutional stays, exploitive relationships with men and raising her children while finding her power and voice as a daughter, woman, mother, writer and Thunder Being herself. The memoir by Mailhot explores how women are medicine, connected to the earth and to each other through their matrilineal heritage and ancestral relations, despite the impacts of colonization and cultural genocide. It is through these ancestral relations and her matrilineal heritage that author Mailhot is able to emerge from intergenerational trauma and colonial limitations on her identity and rewrite her story in the image of her Thunder Being eyes.

Impact of Identity

Like Mary Two-Axe Earley, author Terese Marie Mailhot explores the issues of being an Indigenous woman in a world where Indigenous women are sexualized, demeaned and discredited. Mailhot (2018) describes her mother as seen as "an angry Indian woman", a social worker who confronted the "basic agency" of consent (p. 30). While Montour (2021) uncovers video footage and audio of Mary and allies speaking on sex discrimination in the Indian Act, testifying that people challenged their right to speak and even sent them death threats. Both women confront the ways mainstream society, men and their own people see them, while

learning to express their spirits in an authentic and brave way. However, this expression does not come without costs to their emotional, spiritual or mental well-being. Mailhot (2018) describes how her mother struggled with the power of their cultural teachings, becoming a pipe carrier, teaching her children how to care for ceremonial fire and prepare feasts (p. 31), and at the same time reflecting anger at how much settlers and colonizers have taken from them upon finding the body of a plucked eagle (p. 104). Hints of dysfunction and sexual abuse perpetuated by the violent and alcoholic men her mother dated or built her life with and their own remaining trauma from residential schools, racism and abuses faced, rumble throughout the story (Mailhot, 2018, pp. 104-106). The effects of this are born into Mailhot (2018) herself, who experiences a trail of dysfunctional and abusive relationships, looking to contend with her ‘’sacred blood” that means nothing to white men (p. 97).

In both *Heart Berries* and Mary Two-Axe Earley’s stories, the difference between the treatment of dogs and Indigenous women are stated, reflecting the dichotomy of Indigenous women as either ornamental, beautiful objects ripe for assimilation, or second-class citizens, no better than a “lazy drunken dredge” (Robertson, 2013, p. 130). While fighting the sexist policies in the Indian Act, Mary and allies call out the hypocrisy of the white man’s dog being buried close to the reservation, while they themselves have lost the right to be buried in their own communities upon marrying white or non-status men, no longer considered “Indian” (Montour, 2021). At the same time Mailhot (2018) reflects on wanting to be perfectly ornamental for her white partner Casey, despite knowing “the tenses and the syllables of every rite”, growing up amongst the power of women making medicine (p. 97). She wanted to take up less space for him (p. 97), earning the right to eat by giving her body to him and after all, Casey, like most men fed their dogs more kindly than they fed her (Mailhot, 2018, pp. 24-25). In these words, the theme of

Indigenous people and especially Indigenous women, carriers of life and generations, struggle with their identity, just as a colonized world seeks to enforce its rules and vision on them. In many Indigenous teachings, women are medicine, speakers of story and connected to the Earth. Mailhot (2018) connects this as she speaks of not owning our mothers, just as we do not own the land, but our bodies become a part of it when we pass, becoming a source of ancestral belonging (p. 73) and strength. This duality of identity, sacred and "squaw" (Robertson, 2013), woman and Indigenous are reflected in her given Salish name "Little Mountain Woman", a being of the universe that finds power in the mountains (Mailhot, 2018, p. 101). However, unable to reconcile that, she moves away to the desert (p. 101) and has a lifelong struggle of feeling like a "feral thing with greasy hair" (Mailhot, 2018, p. 90). It is reflected in her first child being taken away from her, in washing her face with alcohol when she feels like a squaw (p. 94) and in continually opening a scab on her head, knowing that some part of her pain is inherited and spiritual (Mailhot, 2018, p. 71). The matrilineal heritage is one of blood inherited medicine, power and struggle, reflecting the interconnection of community, spirit and the earth on her experience of belonging, identity and wholeness, themes Mailhot explores in depth.

Effects of Colonization on Mental Health

Mailhot (2018) paints a cold picture of what may be a well-meaning, albeit culturally insensitive mental health institution in her memoir. Much like the dichotomy of Indigenous women as ornamental prizes or "squaws", the western institutional view of mental health treatment compared to the Indigenous understanding of the impact on relationships on the mind, body, spirit opposes one another. Mailhot (2018) voluntarily committing herself under the condition she is allowed to write (p. 15), mentions the smell of the nurses, like lunches, homes and living, a contrast to everything else including the women in treatment as sterilized and

rendered the same (p. 22). What is missing, in the westernized approach to mental health, which mainly focuses on the absence of illness, and the parameters of diagnosis set out in the DSM is the wholistic, Indigenous approach of restoring balance to a person through relationships with themselves, others and the natural world (Linklater, 2014, pp. 20-21). The belief of the mind as sick leaves little room for the need of "her grandmother's eye's" on her, acknowledging that which can truly heal her and her people as the instinctual knowing of their ancestors watching them with love (pp. 16-17) as they navigate the world they are left with, pain being transformed through ceremony (p. 28). Linklater (2014) highlights this generational concept, and how a wound is re-experienced "in a multi-traumatic context" of the current and ancestral, encompassing a multi-generational cycle and blood memory (pp. 22-23).

The catastrophic wound of colonization, cultural genocide, residential schools, and intergenerational trauma are reflected in Mailhot's memoir in tender detail. She describes herself and body as part of her mothers "pine and winter willow", her "grandmother's olive seed and red hill earth" (p. 128), the bones of her lineage that now live within the strong bones of her Thunder Being baby (pp. 81-82). A matrilineal gift which can be used to transform and transcend the limits of colonization on psychological, physical and emotional health, though not a simple journey, Mailhot finds this strength in telling her story for herself, for her children and for the mainstream world to face. Lavallee & Poole (2010) reinforce this idea through explaining how colonization has wounded not only the physical and mental health of Indigenous people, but their spirits, self-esteem and identity and then labelled them as having ill mental health avoiding the fact that the global rates of addictions, diseases, loss of cultural and community ties and death are actually symptoms of the "attack on cultural identity" (pp. 274-275). Focusing on psychiatry, medication and diagnoses has missed the holistic and relational aspects of mental health which

are important to anyone, yet have especially detrimental impacts on Indigenous people, marking colonization as a direct influencer on the social determinants of health. The effects leak into family bonds, increasing rates of domestic violence, lateral, institutional and gender-based violence (Linklater, 2014, p. 44). Mailhot's (2018) memoir layers the experiences with her mother, father, siblings, children and ancestors upon each other, reflecting on the bonds as sources of both harm and healing for herself and for each other within their family circle.

Decolonial Indigenous Approaches to Healing

Centered in Indigenous approaches to healing are the circular relationships of self to the earth, community and spirit, often represented through storytelling. Mailhot (2018) approaches her memoir as a form of decolonial healing and presencing. As she writes to her white partner Casey, or directs her words to the reader, her story weaves social, political and historical impacts through the lens of Indigenous women, presencing their stories, truths and experiences (Savarese, 2017, p. 170). Often, throughout the memoir, Mailhot (2018) shares not only her memories but also comments on the way her people contend with colonial reality, reminding the reader about the ripples of relationships and systems. Though the story is her own, she is part of them. When she says, "the gravity of Indian women's situations, and the weight of our bodies, are too much" (Mailhot, 2018, p. 30) she shows the overwhelm of both the wounding and the responsibility that lives within Indigenous women. When pregnant, attending an Indigenous writer's residency Mailhot (2018) states things felt "more Indian" as her partner stood there to support her with a black eye, she had given him, realizing she had hurt him because like her father, it felt justified (p. 77). The act of telling this part of her story moves towards unshaming, presencing and bearing the contrasts of healing as a colonized person, while pursuing one's voice as an Indigenous writer and woman living her story even as she writes it. When her child is born,

she reflects that he seems like the child her brothers, sisters and herself could have been (Mailhot, 2018, p. 82), hope shining through as her child, her Thunder Being becomes a source of power and direction in her healing journey. The enormity of these relational connections and shared wounds is written as resistance to colonial power. Non-linear, non-chronological, circling back to the past, present and interpersonal relationships like a needle piercing in and out of fabric, stitching together a multi-dimensional offering.

Though each chapter shares heart breaking events, there is an infusion of healing within the storytelling itself, reflecting the way a journey to healing can be messy, convoluted and circular, encompassing generations past, present and future. Through a combination of westernized therapy, counselling, and storytelling, ceremony and reconciliation of both the power and the struggle of family, Mailhot (2018) demonstrates Indigenous, decolonial healing in stark and painful truth. Beyond healing the mind and intellect, decolonization and healing must occur at the macro and micro levels, requiring the colonized to take action through language, ceremony, traditional and cultural teachings and complete disorder that encourages liberation (Asadullah, 2021, pp. 29-30). The very act of being alive, surviving what could crush and dismantle a person, Mailhot represents decolonial healing, and by telling her story, in her words she forces the colonial system to see what colonization has done and witness her rising in her own terms. Dr. Yellow Bird (2020) describes decolonial healing as occurring through decolonization of the mind, quieting, and stabilizing neural networks, through spiritual and reflective practices like contemplation, and focusing on the meaning of special and sacred artifacts. Mailhot (2018) presents her storytelling as an artifact of special meaning and contemplation. Throughout she describes her mother's journey of healing and retribution through ceremony, traditional teachings and energy work, despite her maladapted behaviours and ways

she harmed her own children as she struggled against a colonial world, to be recognized for her gifts, rather than viewed as a stereotype (Mailhot, 2018). The bright hope for her children recognized their inherent sacredness, even as she struggled with her own sacredness and through acknowledging that she is part "of a continuum against erasure" (Mailhot, 2018, p, 116) she connects to her ancestral relations and matrilineal power.

Connecting my Identity to the Text

During one interaction with a man, she was dating, Eric, he commented "You're ethnically ambiguous, and I feel like you should be capitalizing on it" (p. 51). This statement reflected an insensitivity to Mailhot's identity and the complexity of all the things which make up a person, a settler view of worth relating to what can be bought or sold. A statement that has been at play in my own life, as people would often ask me "what are you?" and seeing Spanish, Asian, European and Indigenous within my face. This ethnic ambiguity when I was younger led workplaces to try and use me as an example of diversity. Once, at a political rally I was asked to stand on stage, I refused and remembered looking at the people on the stage noticing the ethnic diversity they were clearly trying to target in their image. The concept of the Indian princess or the Indian squaw resonated, experiencing both being called a "squaw" and a "wagon burner" in my life, or the object of admiration for looking "exotic". However, other things are also true. Growing up I had few role models that I looked up to. I often feel that I am carving a path I have never seen before, which feels scary, confusing and liberating. In an interview with the PBS News Hour (2018) Mailhot talked about the absence of a role model being good for her, providing the room to grow into who she is and that putting role models on a pedestal only leads to disappointment when their humanity counteracts our vision of them. "Indigenous people are not a monolith" (PBS News Hour, 2018), she said, reflecting that while she has made an impact

on the stories of Indigenous people and especially Indigenous women, they, like herself, are so much more than the limited view we give them. In many ways, this statement is an act of resistance to the colonizer's desire to restrict Indigenous people to a view that appeals to them and their expectations. Mailhot refusing to accept that her story should be emulated, models the power of rewriting our stories under the spiritual and energetic power of the journey itself. I write and re-write my own story every day, as I love, attend to my relationships, study, connect with the natural world and remember the way my lineage sings in my blood and bones. Beyond ethnically ambiguous, "squaw" or woman, I am the story I write today, and the one's I write tomorrow, my relations, mother and grandmother spreading the pages out for me to fill, Thunder Beings and earthly medicine in our own ways.

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