

The Common Plot: Transient Characters of Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Narratives

Abstract

*In this manuscript, I investigate key differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives to highlight the ways traditional Western beliefs are deficient and pernicious. Working out of Lisa Brook's influential text *The Common Pot*, I examine "A Squamish Legend of Napoleon" and Edward Ahenakew's *The Voices of Plains Cree*. I argue that both Indigenous works foreground the historical and cultural importance of the common pot, forced adoptions, and Indigenous understandings of diplomacy. In tandem, these core values leverage a belief in the interconnectedness of all life that cannot be denied or circumvented by the cultural assumptions that presuppose traditional Western views.*

Keywords:

Indigeneity, Decolonization, History, Literature, Canada

Characters of legend and history like the Duke of Wellington and Napoleon Bonaparte are much more than generals whose achievements are enshrined into Anglo-French accounts of the Napoleonic wars. These figures have been immortalized, in part, because they represent a cultural mindset that discourages diplomacy and condescends peaceful resolution. Conversely, characters of Indigenous narratives reveal a set of cultural values that understands and respects the interconnectedness of all life, the necessity to share resources and to embrace different perspectives. In what follows, I examine the official narratives of the Napoleonic wars, and the recuperation of historical figures of the West

into Indigenous narratives, to show the ways in which traditional histories are deficient. Then, I consider various ways contemporary Indigenous authors, like Armond Ruffo's *Treaty#* and Katherine Vermette's *The Break*, examine different perspectives that work toward a common humanity. While Indigenous and non-Indigenous spaces (mindsets) exist in literature, they find expression historically, culturally, geographically, and epistemologically. Therefore, characters who transcend Indigenous and non-Indigenous literary traditions are particularly significant. They are not only able to transit between two worlds shaped by different perspectives but reveal how these differing world views encompass similarities thus unveiling a common humanity by braiding a common plot. An understanding of these transient characters is important now more than ever with an increasing awareness that Canada's history was not just a series of wars of conquest. In actuality, the British and Canadian governments made several treaties with different Indigenous groups then broke those treaties once European settlers arrived in large enough numbers. This pattern of broken treaties becomes so prominent in the latter half of the eighteenth-century, and first half of the nineteenth-century, that some indigenous groups, like the Ojibway, maintain a history in which war with the English has not officially ended (Borrows, 1997, p. 152). Added to this the shameful acquisition of land is the legacy of residential school systems, the deliberate separation of Indigenous children from loving families, and attempted cultural genocide. Such a shattered history

of animosity must find a way to be reforged lest Indigenous groups and the settler nation of Canada never learn to peacefully co-exist.

In *Why Indigenous Literature Matters*, Daniel Justice (2018) tackles the question of how do we learn to live together despite our fractious, violent past:

The problem has never been a lack of available options, alternatives for finding meaning and purpose in relationship with one another. What's too often missing is love in all its forms. Finding common ground that honours justice, embraces the truths of our shared histories, and works for better futures takes courage and imagination – but most of all, it takes love. (p. 171)

I believe Justice has hit the nail on the head. A family cannot function without a black sheep, not because every group needs a scape goat, but every unit of peoples need a common narrative. It is a belief in the value, or lack thereof, of each other and the 'other' that gives a group its solidarity.

Unfortunately, for too long the majority of Canadians have ignored the voices of Indigenous peoples, relegated their cries to the 'unimportant other' and dismissed many of their grievances, claims, values, and epistemologies despite no lack of common ground. I fear most humans are insecure creatures, willing to tell lies about others simply because it makes them feel good, makes them feel important, and gives them a sense of place in their communities at the expense of others. But what is missing in Canadian and Indigenous diplomacies is love: love in all its forms. Diplomacy, after all, has only as

many options as the relationship between individuals or groups will allow. Thus, we must find a way to realise Justice's claim, that diplomacy transacted in a relationship that encompasses love in all its forms has infinite possibilities. In fact, the implication of Justice's claim is that because diplomacy between governments and Indigenous peoples have not been transacted through loving, familial relationships, true diplomacy has never been tried in the hundreds of years since first contact to the present. We are long overdue for new narratives; narratives that provide a common plot upon which to find common ground, legends that honour justice, histories that embrace ugly realities and rework our imaginations for a brighter future for all.

A Squamish Legend of Napoleon: Our Interconnected Histories

E. Pauline Johnson was born to a Mohawk Chief and English mother, she recounts many Indigenous stories at the turn of the century, narratives that had been passed down orally for generations accumulated through her travels across Canada. "A Squamish Legend of Napoleon" stands out as a historical narrative that braids together the events of Europe and North America during the Napoleonic wars, and the reality of a shared history between settler and Indigenous communities. It is a story that comes from the east, from French sailors aboard a Russian whaling vessel and while the direction from whence this knowledge sprang is significant, that is a subject for another paper. For our purposes, I would like to examine the legend at face value, that is, as a history as real and acceptable as the official histories of the West concerning Napoleon.

As the official narrative goes, Napoleon Bonaparte's defeat at the battle of Waterloo in 1815 marks a watershed moment in European history. At the beginning of the nineteenth-century, France was the world leader with more than twice the population, wealth, and land of Great Britain (Simpson, 2009, p. 4). It was France, not Britain, whose horizons seemed destined to dominate the pre-industrial world. Although Napoleon's legacy was short lived, the effects of the wars and diplomacy during the Napoleonic era were far-reaching. For example, it is hardly a coincidence that the American colonists decided to wage war against Britain the same year (1812) Napoleon marched on Moscow. Napoleon had, beginning in 1795, put down the revolts in Paris, successfully invaded Italy, brought Austria to its knees, annexed land along Austria's Italian border, conquered Prussia, and proclaimed himself Emperor by taking the crown from the pope while his political rivals stood paralysed. In the spring of 1812, the French occupation of Moscow reshaped the old geo-political landscapes of Europe and these triumphs allowed Napoleon to become a key developer and promoter of nationalism as a unifying force among French peoples (Simpson, 2009, 142). Yet, for all his accomplishments and impressive military victories, traditional Anglo narratives describe his demise at Waterloo as occurring "abruptly," as the consequence of marching the elite Imperial Guard up an open slope, in broad daylight, against dug-in British cannoneers. Even if Napoleon was pressured by a westward advancing Prussian army, a tactical blunder of this magnitude stands in opposition to everything we know about him.

It is in this murky understanding of Napoleon's demise that Johnson's "A Squamish Legend of Napoleon" illuminates the deficits of traditional, historical Western narratives as it intertwines Indigenous and non-Indigenous histories. In her retelling, the legend is the story of a young Squamish warrior unmatched for his day, who killed a water serpent and harvested one of its vertebrae into a talisman. This talisman had been 'witched' by the magic men to create a paralysis of the beholder's enemies (Johnson, 1911, p. 130), and could only be held by a man as women did not engage in the bloodshed of war. On his deathbed, the warrior possessed no sons to entrust with this incredible heirloom. Thus, he charged two Frenchmen, sailing aboard a Russian whaling vessel, to gift his talisman to Napoleon.

Johnson notes that the particular details of how the talisman made it back to the Emperor are 'indefinite' but claims "the voices of the trumpets of war, the beat of the drums throughout Europe heralded back to the wilds of the Pacific coast forests the intelligence that the great Squamish charm eventually reached the person of Napoleon" (Johnson, 1911, p. 133). That a Corsican artillery general put down the Paris riots is not incredible. However, Bonaparte's lightning campaigns across Europe, the seemingly endless string of victories in foreign territories against superior numbers and quality of troops, has always seemed dubious. Yet if we attribute his successes to the sea-serpent charm, what chance did his foes stand? Thus, the Squamish perspective reduces our faith in myth of Napoleon's extreme merit as the impetus behind the many French victories.

Now we return to the battle of Waterloo and its anti-climactic ending. How could the British account of the battle be true, that the conqueror of Europe orchestrated his own demise by committing such an obvious strategic blunder? According to the Squamish legend, “he lost the Squamish charm- lost it just before one great fight with the English” (Johnson, 1911, p. 134). The chief confirms that this ‘great fight’ was, in fact, the battle of Waterloo. Through the transitive power of the talisman Napoleon moves from a man of stratagem and brilliance in non-Indigenous spaces (narrative and perspective) to a fearless warrior in Indigenous spaces. Moreover, this explanation of Napoleon’s achievements can only be truly appreciated if we adopt a different perspective of life altogether. It is a perspective subtly referenced above, in the explanation for how the Squamish peoples ‘knew’ Napoleon had received the talisman, and it is an explanation that illuminates the Indigenous understanding of interconnectedness.

According to the chief, it was the drums and trumpets of war that ‘heralded’ this message back to the ‘wilds of the pacific coast’. This claim is anything but “indefinite;” its significance reveals a view from inside Indigenous epistemologies, or ways of knowing, one that lies at the root of all failed diplomacy between Indigenous groups and settlers. Consider, for a moment, how in-tuned and connected to nature one must be to not only notice a change in the vibration of the wilds but also identify the source of that change and what it signifies. This subtle clue is, perhaps, the greatest aspect of the legend as it is reminiscent of the butterfly-effect: the idea that even the smallest vibrations created by a

butterfly flapping its wings can affect major, geo-political events. More importantly, such a belief, in the interconnected nature of all things, presents a different understanding of what diplomacy might mean as well as the significance of this legend.

The Indigenous narratives examined in this essay focalize the importance of relationships in all situations. Even the “Squamish Legend of Napoleon,” a tale ostensibly about a war hero from Europe, locates its credence in the recognition of the interconnectedness of all life on earth. Thus, perhaps the most effective way to understand this legend is through a concept known as the “common pot.” In *The Recovery of Native Space in the North East*, Lisa Brooks (2008) makes several arguments directly relevant to this paper. She offers the following definition of the common pot:

The common pot is that which feeds and nourishes. It is the wigwam that feeds the family, the village that feeds the community, the networks that sustain the village.... Inherent in the concept of the common pot is the idea that whatever is given from the larger network of inhabitants had to be shared within the human community. (pp. 4-5)

For those who might object to the adoption of the French Napoleon into Indigenous narratives, it is important to acknowledge that, from a certain perspective, the accounts of Bonaparte’s many accomplishments were not for the French to hoard in their great bibliothèques like Ktsi Amiskw hoarding fish in his great damn (Brooks, 2008, p. 14). Rather, pride in Bonaparte’s achievements should be shared with the wider human community. After all, the interconnected human community is not sustained by bread and

fish alone but through shared narratives lest it become fractured by broken treaties, disconnected histories, and failed diplomacies.

Further, the recuperation of Napoleon into “A Squamish Legend” is a reflection of another historical reality as it concerns the intertwining of red and white, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, spaces. These spaces bear a direct connection to Brook’s definition of the common pot in the practice of taking children captive from frontier settlements that stood in violation of treaties. Curiously, these forced adoptions become central to diplomacy, trade, war, and peace. As Brooks (2008) explains, “[c]aptives . . . often became part of the network of relations, keeping in touch with their ‘families’ long after their release. Colonial and Indigenous decisions were often affected by the presence of family members within adopted communities” (p. 29). Familial intermingling incentivized diplomacy and peace as neither side wished to harm family. Additionally, Brooks (2008) notes that this diplomatic strategy of intermarriage was long practiced by Indigenous groups who agreed to share space and often referred to the land as a bowl (common pot) from which they could all draw sustenance (p. 32).

However, it is worth noting that the common pot is an ideal as much as an idea, one that has yet to be embraced in non-Indigenous spaces (mindsets). Evidence for this claim is ubiquitous: residential school system, broken treaties, illegal acquisition of land and resources, the refusal to make amends in both small gestures, as in the case of Shoal Lake #40, or more grave acts of violence, such as the land disputes over oil. The English, or,

more appropriately, the Canadian government and the powerful commercial interests that seem to drive it, continue to operate under Ktsi Amiskw miserly, hoarding mindset; a mindset that seems difficult to penetrate or crack. Edward Ahenakew's *Voices of the Plains Cree* bravely attempts such a breach. Yet, his ultimate goal is one of diplomacy hence his extensive examination of ideas that could operate as common ground transcending Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives.

According to Deane Reder (2006), Cree peoples have traditionally been more concerned with maintaining good relationships than epistemological differences “because of a belief in multiple perspectives, perceptual differences were accommodated” (p. 56). While I have no reason to doubt Reder's assessment of Cree culture and ways of knowing, I humbly question her later assertion that Edward was a conflicted man, and that his work “does not offer a way to resolve” tensions between Cree protocol and white standards. Implicit in this claim is the idea that there is a tension to resolve but, perhaps, the tension she identified is her tension? In other words, what evidence is there to suggest Edward viewed Anglo and Indigenous ways of knowing as diametrically opposed to one another? Certainly, his work evinces proofs that he understood dramatic differences between the two worlds and their encompassing belief systems, the strengths and weakness of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous narratives, beliefs, and cultures, and, more importantly, that he understood where they overlap. Reder's description of traditional Cree values, of

placing relationships before differences in perspectives, is perhaps the greatest proof that there was, from Edward's view, little tension between the different ways of knowing.

More broadly, Edward's work carefully parses out the similarities and differences in sacred and spiritual beliefs between the Christians of European decent and the Indigenous plains Cree. This critical posture was part of his Cree upbringing. According to Wheeler (2000):

Cree teachings, like Cree stories/oral traditions, have no rigid beginnings or endings. Everyone's personal (his)stories interconnect and overlap, all are extensions of the past, and all are grounded in *wahkotowin*, *kinship/relationship*. [Cree] inherit relationships and obligations to the generations behind, among, and before us, to life on earth as we know it, and to our homelands. (p. 2)

It is quite possible that Edward regarded the stories in the Bible as mutable, changeable, even compatible with the Cree teachings of creation, the legend of the sky woman, and the unifying belief in a great spirit.

Thus, Ahenakew's perspective is significant in multiple ways. First, he was deeply connected to traditional Cree religious ceremonies and sacred understandings yet at the same time maintained a faith in the Christian God becoming an Anglican cleric later in life. Like the forced (captive) adoptions of settler children by Indigenous groups before, during, and after King Philip's War, Ahenakew maintains a relationship with his Cree relations, obliged to defend their beliefs and present their piety as fair, honest, and sincere

expressions of a desire to commune with a higher power. Moreover, he was clearly obligated to record those expressions in a manner that the dominant powers in Canada would tolerate while preserving their essence, so those Cree who would follow long after could learn from him and the people among him, even if only judge him behind the veil of hind sight.

Regardless, Ahenakew's lines of inquiry represent authentic Cree understandings of the world precisely because he does not situate all beliefs in tension, nor feel the need to offer solutions to the tensions perceived by others. To refuse relations with the English on account of epistemological exclusivity would be to reveal the mindset of a newly minted Cree ignorant of the full depth of traditional Cree perspectives. Instead, Ahenakew *Voices of The Plains Cree* attempts to balance perspectives, Cree and settler nations, precisely to show the imbalance of Western understandings of Indigenous peoples and the white man's complete inability to grasp Indigenous epistemologies. His summarization of the problem goes as follows:

I have listened to the talk of the white man's clergy, and it is the same in principle as the talk of our Old Men, whose wisdom came not from books but from life and from God's earth. Why has the white man no respect for the religion that was given to us, when we respect the faith of other nations? (Ahenakew, 1996, p. 47)

While Ahenakew panders to the expectations of settler audiences in some respects, it is difficult to believe that an ardent convert of Anglicanism would obstinately defend and

faithfully record Cree rituals, religion, traditions, and history. Therefore, this apologia only makes sense if we accept Ahenakew's predicaments, that he was a person of two worlds who regarded red (Indigenous) and white (Anglo) spaces with equal respect. From his vantage, it seems he viewed peoples in tension due differences in attitudes, one in particular lacking perspective.

Common Ground that Honours Justice: *Treaty#* and *The Break*

Common ground, whether it be established between two individuals, a family, cultures, groups or nation states requires reflection and the willingness to re-examine the narratives and cultural assumptions upheld. To accomplish this re-examination, 'red spaces' (Indigenous cultures and mindsets) and 'white spaces' (Anglo cultures and mindset) need not abandon their core values to reforge a common history. Instead, those within must consider what they have in common and recognize the full implications of what this common ground signifies in terms of diplomacy. It is a task of the mind, of testing the flexibility or rigidity of certain mindsets, and the awareness and ability necessary to think in both red and white spaces in order to bring about new perspectives.

In this regard, I analyse three poems from Armand Ruffo's *Treaty#* and extend this understanding of red and white spaces expressed in this literature to the psychological, physical, and geographical spaces detailed in Katherine Vermette's *The Break* as they relate to diplomacy. I will argue that in the ebb and flow between the spaces we create in

the mind and in literature we intentionally or unintentionally establish spaces of exclusivity or inclusivity.

Thus far, the motif of red and white spaces has applied to historical narratives, legend, cultural values, and geo-political events. Here, red and white spaces exist in more concrete terms of the individual's psychological foundations, especially of those children of two worlds (or spaces) in Ruffo's *Treaty*#. From this perspective, I read the first two poems, "#1. Red Space" and "#2. White Space," as one for a few reasons. First, the corresponding titles suggest a connection through sequence, like the page numbers in a longer poem still encompass a singular work. Second, the two poems share a common space - a common pot - as these poems face each other thus do not require the reader to turn the page. Third, the artificial breaks in consciousness, marked by the hyphen placed mid sentence, remains the hallmark of both works. I would argue this reflects one mind operating in separate spaces: the breaks present a lack of a uniform psychology attempting to be in one world or another and not considering the possibility of existing in both simultaneously.

Additionally, poems #1 and #2 can be read as a single page. For example, the first line in the second poem can be read as an extension of the first line in poem one: "accolades gather upon her – And she sits nearby on clouds [#1] / She asks me why I write *influenced* – aren't we all? [#2]" (Ruffo, 2019, pp. 18-19). While they can be read as one poem reflecting a singular albeit bi-focal psychology, they are marked by considerable

differences. Namely, in poem #1 the speaker is clearly aware of the effects of internalized racism and is struggling to grapple with the continued repression of his culture, language, and identity: “What? Of course this is only my interpretation / condemn those white Indians ... what I could say is I became – Became what? Became Human? / ... Can you say that in Anishinaabemowin? / my mother ... was a squaw – There it is... I was turned into shame” (Ruffo, 2019, p. 18). On this page, there is an unfamiliarity with self and ancestry that seems familiar to the speaker; a child of two words marked by his own words as a “white Indian.” Conversely, in poem #2, white space depicts the inverse, that is, a familiarity with the unfamiliar that continues as a stream of consciousness and unifies the first break of successive lines:

I say, my white space - I remember standing in front of a mirror /
goes back to the 1700s - ... /
when a Spanish navigator - ... /
working for the British - ... /
jumped ship. Ever wonder - ... /
why way up in northern Ontario
there’s an Espanola - .../
a Spanish River? - (Ruffo, 2019, p. 19)

The speaker describes his white space as occurring in his mind’s eye, recollecting a time when he looked in the mirror and attempted to connect his family’s history to what he

sees. Obviously, he is familiar with the image of his younger self but an unfamiliarity contrasts the familiar image via the interweaving imperial interests of British and Spanish peoples into a foreign landscape. The irony, that the speaker is a descendent of a navigator who chose to become lost in the wilds of northern Ontario yet is forced to constantly navigate the white and red spaces of his mind, is not lost on the reader. By necessity, children of two worlds are navigators who bear a heavy burden yet stand in a unique position to navigate differences of perspective between Indigenous and non-Indigenous spaces thus representing ideal agents for diplomacy.

This juxtaposition of perspectives is eerily consistent with the theme of navigation, adventure, travel, and the different perspectives that come into contact is Ruffo's "Why don't you write." Like the previous poem, this one considers red and white spaces as existing in a psychological sense but deals extensively with the issue of a mindset lacking perspective, namely, the traditional Western views originating in white spaces which do not acknowledge the interconnectedness of the human community (Brooks, 2008, p. 37). Hence, the examination it performs is not the split of red and white spaces in the liminal space of the mind of a child of two worlds but rather an observation of the harmful effects of keeping separate white spaces from red spaces.

For example, "Why don't you write" begins with a speaker viewing a postcard containing the image of a "grinning Indian / sprawled out clutching a whisky bottle, the stereotypical bulbous nose / and goofy face" (Ruffo, 2019, p. 38). This image is a clear attempt to

dehumanize a member of the Ojibway people by making light of an obvious tragedy. Although it is just a picture, it reflects a reality all too familiar within the broken homes of various communities regardless of race and culture. If we consider the historical context, the residential school systems, forced adoptions of Indigenous children, and the breaking of Indigenous families and communities, it does not require much ingenuity to piece together the tragedy of this man's life: in place of a family, he has a bottle; in place of loving relations, drunkenness offers escape from the ugly reality of being disconnected from a caring community and forcibly inserted into a culture indifferent to his misery. This lack of perspective is described by the speaker:

I flipped the card over and read aloud the name /...

Nearly a century later, I could feel Lily's ignorance enter the room /

Like absence, like cancer, and drill down to the bone / ...

Her impossibility of feeling Uncle Why-Don't-You-Write /

Standing beside her with his little nephew staring up at her. (Ruffo, 2019, pp. 38-39) The vacuous nature of Lilly's perspective could have been anticipated by the original story tellers of Ktsi Amiskw whose hoarding had a vacuous, draining effect on the life sustaining properties of the common pot. Just as Ktsi Amiskw lacked the perspective to see the importance of sharing resources, Lilly hoards her empathy by refusing to extend it to the 'other'. Thus, her vacuous spirit denies the emotional communion necessary to establish and maintain community. Curiously, the primary question posed by the poem

“Why don’t you write?” is answered by the silence of the Indigenous man, a silence that reflects how the voices of his people have been silenced by the traditional, historical narrative of Canada’s founding. It is as if the question “why don’t you write” approaches the same problem of perspective Ahenakew identified when he asked: “why has the white men no respect [for us] ... when we respect other nations?” (Ahenakew, 1996, p. 47).

Although diplomacy is often regarded as the official communication and relations between nation states, diplomacy occurs in our everyday relationships. In *The Break*, Katherine Vermette brilliantly ties together the issues of perspective, relationships, space, and diplomacy into the microcosm of everyday people living in Winnipeg, Canada. Vermette’s work presents a unified narrative despite the fact that it is not always clear who the narrator or speaker is. Moreover, all characters at some point experience breaks in their perception of waking life and enter a dream-like state. These breaks usher the speaker from red spaces to white spaces within their own psychology. Yet equally important is the fact that the spaces character’s desire to inhabit are geographically and culturally significant to the denizens of Winnipeg.

To gain a better sense of relationship between diplomacy and geography requires a rough understanding Winnipeg and how neighbourhoods are arranged along cultural, socio-economical lines. Roughly speaking, the city is marked by the famous “Forks” the place where both rivers meet and fork hence the name. These waterways would have connected the Cree peoples of the region long ago but now serve as distinctive boundaries if not

partitions. In the centre of the Forks are Government buildings and tourism, to the northwest are the working-class communities, and to the southwest are the wealthier, settler communities. East and south of the Forks is the French quarter with its monuments to Louis Riel – still celebrated as a hero – and the remains of the burnt down Basilica in the heart the French district. This district is “more” French in the southeast quarter and most Indigenous in the north east. This rough outline can be confirmed by a quick google search and notice of street names which reflect these cultural groupings. Other names of buildings such as St. Vital Mall situated east of the forks compared to the CF Polo Park Mall oriented central and west, are examples of how buildings and names reflect cultural divisions. And still, hope remains for at the centre of the Forks rests the Human Rights museum, a testament to the type of common ground that honours justice geographically and historically.

Vermette’s *The Break* is a short story about ‘Winnipeggers’ in which the method of story telling reveals as much about the plot as the details therein. It is a narrative built on the voices of several distinct speakers whose identities are usually, but not always, known. At times it seems as if Stella, a main character, is the narrator but her stream of conscious often breaks forcing a new perspective on the reader. On the surface, it is a cautionary tale centred on the murdered of an Indigenous woman whose story is in danger of going untold. *The Break* represents a community, a geographical space in Winnipeg, mostly inhabited by Indigenous peoples of lower economic status than surrounding

neighbourhoods. Somehow, it seems as though the spirit of the deceased is able to brush her consciousness against the awareness of more receptive individuals, at least enough to bring the details of her assassination to the authorities. For example, in the opening chapter Stella reports the murder to the police but when they arrive, her depiction of the murder scene does not match the location of the crime scene. Like Lady McBeth who can't seem to wipe the blood from her hands (and optical illusion), Stella appears to be grappling with the limits of her sensory perception. Thus, belying this narrative trajectory is the affirmation of the interrelated nature of all things, past and present, humans and spaces.

The transient characters in Vermette's *The Break* are the epitome of children of two worlds, ideal agents of diplomacy. Their success and failures, both big and small, are reflective of the success and failures of diplomatic efforts between Indigenous groups and the Canadian government. While there are several examples few stress this tension more so than 17-year-old Phoenix who has found herself in a correctional facility on the wrong side (west, white space) of Winnipeg. A trusted relation and devout Catholic Bishop named Alex (age 26) represents not only a loving relationship but how spaces shape relationships. Breaking out of the correction facility early in the morning, Phoenix first travels to St. Vital mall, a commercial center in the French quarter of the city and close to Indigenous neighbourhoods. There, Phoenix is able to relax and find her calm in a space that is white but nonetheless a common pot for Indigenous and non-Indigenous

peoples. Further, the safety she finds in this location is mirrored in her exchange with Alex who offers her a cigarette, a warm embrace, and eventually convinces her that it is in her best interest to return to the correctional facility. Her story is an uncanny reminder of the legacy of Indigenous children separated from their loving families and forced into unfeeling, institutions of power.

Similarly, space shapes human relations from Stella's perspective. She constantly longs for the time when she took refuge in her grandmother's (kookom's) basement apartment and the loving attachment to her kookom. By comparison, the character Tommy was raised by both parents but neither parental relationship offered him safety or rest. His white father and Indigenous mother were emotionally distant from each other and the text suggest this 'break' was largely the result of unresolved anger issues afflicting his father's mental and emotional states. Unfortunately, Tommy inherits from his parents an uneasy emotional state and a cautious disposition toward other humans, which, for better or worse, separates him from the wider human community. He experiences racism on a regular basis despite being a police officer thus the text posits the idea that our emotions, minds, and bodies are directly connected to, and affected by, the human relationships we form. Within the context of the common pot, a wider human community could provide the sense of belonging that both Tommy and Stella desperately need. Without this assurance, every racist comment provokes traumatic experience forcing constant identity crises hence the relationships between characters detail a diplomacy in microcosm.

Whereas relationships situated within loving, familial relations produce a multitude of possibilities and provides each character safety and sanctuary, unloving relationships of civil duty breed disconnection and discontent.

While *The Break* offers glimmers of hope for restoration it remains, ultimately, a tragedy. It is the failure of the dominant group to develop the perspective necessary to respect and value other groups in more than just words but in the sharing of essential resources such as wealth, land, empathy, and kindness. I fear the work illuminates an ugly truth that has, until recently, only been whispered, and necessarily brings us to the last of Ruffo's poems I wish to examine titled "On the Day the World Begins Again." To be sure, the entire poem is a masterpiece worthy of careful observation and meditation. Regardless, there are two stanzas in particular I wish to highlight:

On the day the world begins again
will it be the strongest animal
the swiftest bird
or the tiniest insect
that carries the news to humankind
announces rebirth in a roar
in a squeak or maybe in silence?/...

On the day the world begins again
will their re/imagined selves

the shape of thought
the shape of prayer
bend like molten steel
in the fire at the centre of the human heart
Will they rise beyond themselves
And find their way home
On the day the world begins again
will the cages open for them? (Ruffo, 2019, pp. 11-12)

The motifs discussed thus far find poetic expression in the above stanzas. Just as the Squamish legend locates its credence in the interconnectedness of all things, Ruffo's opening stanza asserts that the new age will be verified not in the "indefinite" but the definite vibrations received by the wilds. Of course, most humans will be the last to recognize this change or receive the message. Reception requires a reimagining of self, a reforging of perspectives and narratives that reshapes our thoughts and prayers. It is a reformation based on a belief in the common pot and the primacy of loving relationships that open up infinite possibilities for diplomacy.

I would like to conclude with a few thoughts on the last lines of the Ruffo's poem. These words present the prospect of a new dawn unique to those who exclusively inhabit white spaces, maintain systems of oppression, who refuse the truth of our interconnectedness, shared histories, and overlapping beliefs. These paragons of power deny the necessity of

establishing a cities, countries, and economic supply chains based on the model of a common pot because they, chiefest among us, gain from maintain the veil that hides our common humanity. Their ideas, attitudes, and (mis)perceptions of Indigenous spaces in literature, culture, and values may be attributed to their slavish devotion to the lie of scarcity. It is the same lie that gave Canada a history of broken treaties, failed diplomacies, and narratives that dehumanize; the same lie that enslaved Ktsi Amiskw all those long years ago, robing its possessor of any humanity. The new era may be heralded by fellow creatures but it begins with perspective anew: an understanding like Vermette's that reminds us to be sensitive to all around us as we both imprint on and absorb our environments, a view like Ruffo's that offers a reimagined (remembered) self, and the adoption of a perspective like Ahenakew's that affords a common plot.

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