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"I was at war—but it was a gentle war": The Power of the Positive in Rita Joe's Autobiography

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> *The Residential School experience was, beyond question, intolerable. . . . [All] too often, "wards of the Department" were overworked, underfed, badly clothed, housed in unsanitary quarters, beaten with whips, rods and fists, chained and shackled, bound hand and foot, locked in closets, basements and bathrooms, and had their heads shaved or hair closely cropped.*
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> —John Milloy, *A National Crime*

> *We cannot understand the full horror of Indian Residential Schools until we understand that their very existence, in however benign a form, constituted an abomination.*
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> —Roland Chrisjohn and Sherri Young, *The Circle Game*

> *Still, today, I do not regret going into the Residential School.*
>
> —Rita Joe, *Song of Rita Joe*

Canada's official residential school policy, functioning between 1879 and 1986, acted as a weapon in a calculated attack on indigenous cultures, seeking—through such now infamous procedures as familial separation, forced speaking of non-Native languages, and propagandist derogation

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of precontact modes of existence and Native spiritual systems—to compel its inmates into assimilation. The results of this onslaught are now widely documented. Native children were divorced from their traditional Native cultures yet at the same time were refused entry into prosperous white Canada through inferior educational practices and racism, institutionalized to occupy a liminal space characterized by disillusion, identity crisis, and despair. The legacy of the residential school system ripples throughout Native Canada, its fingerprints on the domestic violence, poverty, alcoholism, drug abuse, and suicide rates that continue to cripple many Native communities. Okanagan author Jeannette Armstrong identifies residential schooling as "the single most devastating factor in the breakdown of our society. It is at the core of the damage, beyond all other mechanisms cleverly fashioned to subjugate, assimilate, and annihilate."[1]

In the past fifteen years the residential school issue has exploded into Canadian public consciousness on the heels of revisionist historical scholarship, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, and the more than ten thousand lawsuits raised against the federal government and church authorities as of the year 2000.[2] The prime source of evidence for each of these critiques has been survivor testimony, generally oral but also written. Because it has been used primarily to illustrate the culpability of church and state and the need for redress, such testimony, when invoked in literature and the courtroom, has tended to focus on neglect, abuse, and other forms of victimization.[3] Testimonial focus on the voicing of trauma has simultaneously been championed by certain forms of healing theory that suggest that disclosure can contribute to individual and collective catharsis for indigenous survivors. Grand Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Phil Fontaine argued in 1991 that "the only way" for the Native community to overcome the history of residential schooling is to "talk about our collective experience. It should never leave our memory and non-aboriginal people should know what was done to our people. The motive for disclosure is to stop our people from killing themselves."[4]

The mobilization of indigenous memory to articulate the trauma inflicted by residential schooling, while politically expedient, historically valuable, and potentially effective in struggles toward healing, has created a discursive climate that conditions how survivors are expected (both by the public and by the academy) to recall their residential school experiences. Readers expect to find in residential school memoirs what Kanien'kehaka scholar Taiaiake Alfred has termed a "'contentious' posture in relation to the state."[5] So ingrained is the notion that survivor testimony must attend to trauma and mistreatment that alternative positions and narrative techniques have at times been resoundingly criticized if not ignored altogether. For example, Ojibwa author Basil Johnston's decision to focus predominantly on the humorous and resilient actions of students in his memoir *Indian School Days*, rather than on the oppressive actions of overseers, prompted reviewer Menno Boldt to suggest that "the author has evaded or repressed the true meaning of his experience."[6] And what of a writer who even more urgently guards against narrating the negative? In her autobiography, as elsewhere in her oeuvre,

Mi'kmaq poet Rita Joe focuses her narrative energy on what she terms "the good" at the expense of fully formulated discussions of considerable trauma endured. Outlining how she will deal with her residential school years in *Song of Rita Joe*, she writes: "Yes, I had some negative experiences. . . . But I do not like to dwell on the negative if I can help it. The positive outlook that I have worked on for so long now turns me off the negative. I look for the good."[7]

Joe's unwillingness in *Song of Rita Joe* to conform to the dominant body of writing on indigenous life at residential schools elicits the question with which this essay is concerned: can noncondemnatory discussions of residential school history participate in the very real struggles for healing, justice, and political and monetary redress in which Native individuals and communities are currently embroiled? In other words, can positive renderings of residential school life evoke a viable politics? The way I approach this question impacts not only political issues but also the study of indigenous autobiography. Part of the difficulty with standard survivor testimony is that it is relegated to the realm of evidence, discussed for its content and never its artistry. Yet how the past is represented is as political an issue as the content of the representation. For this reason I will examine the political potential of Joe's autobiography through analysis of the text's aesthetics and its author's literary methodology. Such analysis can only proceed, however, from a foundation of knowledge regarding personal and tribal history, so I will begin with interrelated discussions of Mi'kmaq history and Joe's personal experience of colonialism.

RITA JOE AND MI'KMAQ COLONIAL HISTORY

Geographically fated to endure the initial wave of European colonialism on what would become Canada's eastern coast, the Mi'kmaq have undergone an arduous, protracted, and often traumatic postcontact history. Having experienced European settlement within their ancestral domains from the 1520s onward, the Mi'kmaq were among the first tribes to acquire foreign implements, to engage in nation-to-nation relations with the European monarchies, to accept Christian baptism in large numbers, to take up arms in the colonial wars, and to suffer the agonies of dispossession, relocation, poverty, and persecution. Yet despite the extremity of their colonial experience, the Mi'kmaq have remained resilient, consistently manifesting a combination of resistance, adaptation, and accommodation that has aided their physical and cultural survival. Thus, remarkably, despite being "among the earliest in Canada to be colonized by Europeans," the Mi'kmaq "are still to be found in their ancestral lands (although admittedly on only a tiny fraction of what had once been theirs), and retain a lively sense of their cultural identity."[8]

Much of the distinctive character of Mi'kmaq colonial history emerges from the tribe's early relationship with the French.[9] By 1663 there were only three thousand French settlers in all of what would become Canada and just five hundred in Acadia (now Nova Scotia), compared to the more than fifty thousand Protestant settlers strewn throughout New England, leaving the French dependent on their Mi'kmaq neighbors for economic and military stability. The diminutiveness of the French Acadian settlement, which neither

threatened traditional migratory patterns nor dispossessed the Mi'kmaq of large portions of their land, further ingratiated the Mi'kmaq to engage the foreigners in diplomatic relations. Each determined to avail itself of the other's assets and united against British expansionism; thus, the French and Mi'kmaq developed during the early colonial period what Harold Prins identifies as "a symbiotic relationship."[10]

With the signing of the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713—which ceded French Acadia to the British, while allowing the French to retain what would later become Cape Breton and Prince Edward Island—Mi'kmaq colonial conditions altered drastically. Because the British imagined the French to have extinguished *a priori* aboriginal title to Acadia, they foresaw (or claimed) no need to negotiate with the Mi'kmaq during their acquisition of Acadian lands. Because, however, French colonial policy had never sought Mi'kmaq removal or relocation through signed treaties, but rather established proxy authority through nation-to-nation alliance, the Mi'kmaq found themselves after 1713 in the bizarre and unenviable position of being without land rights in their own territory under British colonial law (despite the fact that the British had elsewhere treated aboriginal title as inherent until officially ceded through treaty).[11]

The establishment of British colonial rule in Mi'kmaq lands inaugurated a new and debilitating stage in Mi'kmaq history. The "symbiotic relationship" they had forged with the small and generally propitious French settler population was supplanted by a relationship of "subordination and domination."[12] As the British began building towns on traditional Mi'kmaq hunting grounds, roads on and across traditional Mi'kmaq migratory routes, and ports along the Mi'kmaq coastline, the Mi'kmaq became "squatters on their own lands and poachers of their own game."[13] The situation was exacerbated in the 1780s by the influx of some thirty-two thousand British Loyalists fleeing the American Revolutionary War, which thoroughly engulfed the Mi'kmaq, who dwindled to a mere 5 percent of the total Nova Scotia population. Although lands were eventually set aside for Mi'kmaq use by the British colonial government, these were procured by "government grants or legislative acts, not by negotiated treaties."[14] Such dispensation of noncoastal, largely undesirable land exemplified the changes by which the Mi'kmaq were encumbered: no longer were they internationally perceived as the independent nation that had negotiated alliances with the French and maintained their migratory lifestyle and sovereignty within a colonial setting, yet neither had they become the common tribal nation that strategically cedes its land rights to the British in return for a reserved land base and economic and political concessions; the Mi'kmaq were a neither/nor pariah, perceived by the colonial government as completely under its authority, while beset on all sides by an ever-growing hegemonic settler population to whose concerns that government continually capitulated. Relocated and marginalized, without even recourse to the legal foundation of treaty rights available to most other Native tribes in Canada, the Mi'kmaq persisted in the first half of the twentieth century in varying states of extreme poverty, powerlessness, and alienation that constitute the necessary context in which to understand the life of Rita Joe.[15]

Orphaned at the age of five and offered into a cycle of foster care that saw her physically, mentally, and sexually abused, Joe endured an excruciatingly difficult pre-residential school existence. The pervasive atmosphere of fear, neglect, and abuse throughout Joe's foster years constituted the context in which she, at the age of twelve, placed herself in Shubenacadie Indian Residential School in 1944, unlike most students who were forcibly removed at the behest of Indian agents or the clergy. These entwined historical conditions—the Mi'kmaq experience of severe and lengthy oppression and Joe's personally traumatic childhood—impact the unique position out of which Joe remembers, analyzes, and articulates her residential school experiences. As we will see, however, the relationship between circumstance and authorial voice and vision is far from programmatic.

WRITING SHUBENACADIE

A few years prior to the publication of *Song of Rita Joe* in 1996, one of the poet's contemporaries at Shubenacadie, Isabelle Knockwood, published a historical work on the school entitled *Out of the Depths* (1992). Despite both authors being Mi'kmaq from similarly impoverished backgrounds who conferred with each other during the writing process, and both books containing autobiographical elements, the two texts could scarcely present more disparate pictures of Shubenacadie existence. Whereas Joe presents the school in a relatively positive light, Knockwood details exhaustively the violence with which Shubenacadie's assimilationist mandate was enforced and the brutality of some of those entrusted with children's care and education.[16] Following Fontaine and other advocates of disclosure, *Out of the Depths* endeavors to "heal" its Mi'kmaq audience by giving public voice to the trauma endured by Shubenacadie students. Unable to "understand why the hurt and shame of seeing and hearing the cries of abused Mi'kmaw children, many of them orphans, does not go away or heal," Knockwood strives through "the act of writing . . . [to] help [herself] and others to come up with some answers."[17] Elsewhere Knockwood explains: "'The reason I wrote the book was to heal the people who were in there. There's a lot of healing that has to be done. Many negative feelings that we carry around are because of that place.'"[18]

Ironically, perhaps the most damning testimony in *Out of the Depths* comes from none other than Rita Joe, who recalled the following incident during an interview with Knockwood in the late 1980s:

> I was in the dining room with Mary Agnes and she asked the nun. "May I leave the room." And when she said, "You may leave," Mary Agnes said, "Swine." Sister heard her and asked her, "What did you say?" and Mary Agnes said, "Nothing." So sister went around asking the girls what she said and someone told her, "She called you swine."
>
> The Sister took Mary Agnes near the big boys' table and began to smack her around, all the while hollering at her. She kept smacking her, smacking, smacking until Mary Agnes' back was on the boys' table—smack right in the face. The other Sister was peering over the

> fat Sister who was pinching and hitting. Mary Agnes struck out, and her right fist landed on the other Sister's face. Then the two of them got into it. After they were done beating her, the fat one pushed Mary Agnes all the way to the scullery and told her to get to work. When the kitchen Sister came from the dining room, Mary Agnes hid behind the door, but not quickly enough and she was seen. "Who is that behind the door?" Mary Agnes stepped out and you couldn't recognize her because one side of her face was all swollen—her eye, her mouth and nose were bloody. And the kitchen Sister said, "My gosh, what happened to you?" And Mary Agnes couldn't answer so she just puckered up her mouth and faced in the direction of the refectory. The kitchen Sister said, "You march right up to Father Brown and show him what they have done." I was told to leave and I went to the recreation hall and told the other girls what happened. We hid under the open window of the reading room and listened. Father Brown was hollering and talking real loud. He was so angry! It was the first time I had ever heard a priest swear. And we heard her crying. Later when I tried to find out I was told that she was taken to the infirmary on the third floor. She stayed in that infirmary from that time on. Then we [heard] she was taken to the hospital. Then, sometime later, we [heard] that she was dead. The incident was so fresh in my mind that when Sister announced that she died because her bones were too big for her heart, I didn't believe her.[19]

As astonishing as is the violence depicted here, just as shocking is Joe's decision not to describe the incident in her autobiography, a decision that signals her methodological divergence from the disclosure-based approach of Knockwood. She indeed alludes in *Song of Rita Joe* to the beating of a girl, but she does so in order to illustrate the kindness of Father Brown rather than to indict the guilty parties. She writes: "Father Brown . . . was a gentle man. I only heard him raise his voice once, when he was angry that one of the girls had been severely beaten."[20] Never does she describe the "severe" beating the girl received (and she herself witnessed) or mention that the girl likely died from her wounds. She simply states that a beating took place and moves on to other matters.

The essential difference between the work of Knockwood and of Joe is not of intent but of strategy. Both authors promote what Jace Weaver calls "communitist values" by attempting "to participate in the healing of the sense of grief and exile felt by Native communities and the pained individuals in them."[21] Like Knockwood, Joe suggests that the "basic reason for [her] writing and speaking is to bring honour to [her] people" and to help them triumph over the indignities of colonial history; however, unlike Knockwood, Joe believes "if one wishes to be healed, one must dwell on the positive." Joe does not presume that announcing to the world the suffering she and others endured at Shubenacadie will necessarily speed their healing. In fact, Joe admits "hat[ing] to remember those bad stories" and preferring "to dwell on the good ones."[22] Knockwood and Joe adopt in their work what might

be crudely referred to as contrasting "victim" and "survivor" postures.[23] For Knockwood the act of speaking her victimhood provides a level of narrative control over traumatic personal history that creates the conditions in which a possible catharsis might occur. Joe, on the other hand, refuses to proclaim herself a victim, despite the injuries she has endured, thereby creating a narrative voice that already assumes itself empowered. Implicit in this position is the near scandalous assumption that focusing on past trauma risks binding oneself to its negativity and thereby stalling rather than encouraging personal healing. This does not mean pretending the trauma did not occur but rather using analysis of more positive personal history to overcome its potentially disastrous effects. The crucial point here is that Joe's literary methodology, which I will analyze next, is not a denial of the negative past but a strategic focusing of narrative attention on positive aspects of personal experience on which an empowered future might be built.

In this way Joe's reticence to include certain details about her residential school experience in *Song of Rita Joe* should be viewed, I would argue, as different in kind rather than in degree from the type of self-censure that Shubenacadie administrators solicited (often by threat) from their students in order to hide their own abusive behavior. Knockwood recalls

> Sister Superior coming into our classroom to lecture us about loyalty to the school and how it was our responsibility to keep its reputation good and not bring disgrace to it and to Father Mackey. "You give the school and your teachers the same loyalty you give your parents. For example, you don't go around telling the whole neighbourhood when your parents have a fight so you do the same thing here. Don't repeat what you've seen and heard about the fights or punishments in the school especially when you go on vacation because we have ways of finding out if you do."[24]

Joe is not trying to mask the mistreatment of children at Shubenacadie or to suggest that her time there was invariably joyful and positive. Rather she is suggesting that narrative focus *solely* on the negative things fails to forward the social and political goals she desires of her writing; she is suggesting that transfixing ourselves with the negative aspects of the past is a dead-end road unless harnessed to a positive outlook for the future. Also it should be noted that by the time she was writing *Song of Rita Joe*, an abundance of information regarding the negative aspects of residential schooling had been made publicly available, through such texts as *Out of the Depths*, and as such was not in danger of being entirely lost without her focusing on the negative in her autobiography.

A POSITIVE LITERARY METHODOLOGY

Anishinabe writer Gerald Vizenor cautions against the critical reduction of Native literatures to "mere representations" of the historical past, arguing they should "be read as the eternal shadows of the heard rather than as mere

evidence" for tribal lifeways or historical reconstructions. According to Vizenor, "Native American Indian literatures have been overburdened with critical interpretations based on . . . social science theories that value incoherent foundational representations of tribal experiences" at the expense of postmodern literary interpretations that value the motion and play of language beyond the "burdens of conceptual reference" that bog down the critical "literature of dominance." Vizenor calls distinctly "literary" analyses of indigenous literatures "a wise departure from the surveillance of the social sciences."[25]

Up to this point I have been discussing Joe's autobiography in terms of its representation and silencing of Shubenacadie experiences (or memories), a critical posture more historical than literary, which surely would provoke Vizenor's ire. As its subtitle declares, *Song of Rita Joe* is the *Autobiography of a Mi'kmaq Poet*; it splices autobiographically charged poetry into the heart of its prose narrative, complicating genre and narrative voice and troubling the pretence that language can straightforwardly represent a factual past. Joe enlists poetry from her previously published collections to expand on, complicate, and even amend her prose narrative, generating meaning through a dialogic collision of authorial voices: poetic, didactic, and autobiographical.[26] Joe had taken on nearly all the major incidents she relates in *Song of Rita Joe* in one or another of her collections of poetry long before she considered presenting her life story as a linear narrative. As Ruth Holmes Whitehead acknowledges in the book's introduction, Joe "constantly works with her past in her writing," poetic or otherwise.[27] Her poetry, written largely in the first person, consistently references settings and individuals (often by name) from the author's life, including herself. The poem "I Am an Indian on This Land" illustrates the open and exposed authorial position from which Joe tends to compose:

> Today I will share what is mine
> Today I give you my heart
> This is all we own.
> Today I show.
> Hello everybody, my name is Rita Joe.[28]

Joe is omnipresent in her poetry, not simply as authorial voice but often as speaker and even subject matter, although these presences are sometimes veiled in the nuances of poetic diction and craft. In an autobiographical essay entitled "Neon Scars" Hopi/Miwok poet Wendy Rose illustrates the vexing relationship that can inhere for the artist between autobiography and poetry:

> Everything I have ever written is fundamentally autobiographical, no matter what the topic or style; to state my life now in an orderly way with clear language is actually to restate, simplified, what has already been said. If I could just come right out and state it like that, as a matter of fact, I would not have needed poetry. If I could look my childhood in the eye and describe it, I would not have had to veil those memories in metaphor. If I had grown up with a comfortable identity, I would not need to explain myself from one or another persona.[29]

Having devoted such meticulous attention to struggling with and rendering her personal history through poetry, Joe, like Rose, recognizes the limitations of expression and effect offered by standard linear prose autobiography. Joe invokes seventy-eight poems or segments of poems throughout *Song of Rita Joe*'s 160 pages, penetrating the obligatory realist style of standard autobiography with the play of verse. Significantly, Joe's poetic insertions, although always thematically appropriate and often directly related by content to the sections in which they are found, are almost never naturalized into the narrative through editorial commentary or authorial discussion. The poems persist on their own in the midst of the narrative, often without breaks or section indicators, with no introduction by the author and no accompanying analysis. In short, Joe refuses to perform interpretive work on the reader's behalf; she strategically permits the fertile tension created between shifting genres to forward her positive literary methodology without resorting to explication.

Joe invokes three poems related to residential schooling in the portion of her autobiography dedicated to the Shubenacadie years: "Indian Residential Schools," from *Lnu and Indians We're Called* (1991), and "I Lost My Talk" and "Hated Structure," from *Song of Eskasoni* (1988). After detailing in the prose narrative the circumstances underlying her decision to place herself in Shubenacadie at the age of twelve, Joe introduces her residential school experiences with "Indian Residential Schools." Expertly contextualizing her discussion of Shubenacadie within (and against) a predominantly negative contemporary discourse of disclosure, she begins:

> Today on television I heard a discussion
> Of residential schools across the country.
> I saw a man talk about sex abuse done to him
> He even had a hard time saying it.[30]

The poem evinces the author's intention to shift discursive attention toward positive aspects of residential school history. Although the speaker admits that "there was physical abuse where I was / Not sex, but mind mistreatment" and that "with me, there was one individual who did this," she insists on bringing to light the "fact" that

> people who came from schools
> Have turned into productive persons.
> Even women who had it hard have become nuns
> And men from across the country their dreams realized.[31]

She proclaims,

> The four years [at residential school] have given me strength.
> My life to this day has gained courage.
> I know who I am, and my people are the prize.[32]

While acknowledging the existence of the negative conditions that have preoccupied public discourse on residential schooling, "Indian Residential Schools" offers an interpretive alternative that views residential schooling in relation to positive developments for Native individuals and communities that have emerged in its wake, not declaring residential school a "positive experience" but rather recognizing the part it played in creating conditions that have led to some progress.

Joe's willingness, in the poem, to view residential school experiences outside the preconceived categories of mistreatment and abuse and in relation to positive effects in Native communities appropriately sets the stage for the prose passage that follows. Although again she admits briefly "that bad things happened," Joe focuses her prose narrative on positive events and relations that sustained her throughout these potentially alienating years. She talks of the "very kind" Sister Rita, whom the children "all loved" because she "taught" them what they "were supposed to learn," "did not look down" on them, and "even befriended [them]." She speaks of the nun who worked in the laundry and "every day" would give her "a candy or a chocolate or a little gift—perhaps a notebook or pencil or box of crayons," gifts that were "simple" but "very important" to the motherless child's senses of belonging and of being loved.[33] Joe also tells of an act of selfless kindness by a nun that profoundly affected her ideological outlook. Having no living parents at the time and siblings either in the army overseas or mired in local poverty, Joe never received parcels from home at Christmas like the other Shubenacadie children, a source of considerable grief, which she "voice[d]" occasionally to the kind nun from the laundry. After years of bitter disappointment and dejection, Joe finally received a Christmas parcel containing "fruit and candies, a handkerchief, hand lotion and pretty pins for [her] hair." "Oh, I treasured those gifts," Joe writes. "They meant so much to me." Joe told Knockwood that on that day "[she] was the happiest fifteen-year-old in the world."[34] "Anxious to see who [the parcel] was from," however, Joe found the postmark illegible and no indication of sender inside the box. As Joe makes clear, the package must have been sent by the nun from the laundry. Yet when she confronted her about it, all the nun stated was, "'Oh, . . . somebody must care for you.'" According to the author, "she never took credit for the parcel; she wanted me to feel good." This gesture across both the hierarchical chasm separating nun and student and the racial divide helped instill in Joe the power of love and conciliation (as opposed to anger and retaliation) to aid the healing of the wounded, a realization integral to her ideological outlook.[35]

Joe's abrupt turn from these discussions of kindness to a poem dealing with the trauma of institutionalized suffocation of indigenous language, however, produces a somewhat jarring effect on the reader. "I Lost My Talk" reads:

> I lost my talk
> The talk you took away
> When I was a little girl
> At Shubenacadie school.

You snatched it away;
I speak like you
I think like you
I create like you
The scrambled ballad, about my word.

Two ways I talk
Both ways I say,
Your way is more powerful.

So gently I offer my hand and ask,
Let me find my talk
So I can teach you about me.[36]

Although seemingly inconsistent, "I Lost My Talk" brings together certain threads that augment and alter the way the prose functions. On the one hand, Joe employs poetry here, as elsewhere in *Song of Rita Joe*, to vent pain and anger in a concise form that does not colonize and exhaust her prose. In a manner of speaking, Joe banishes the negative to poetry where the reader must unearth its corrosive content through analysis and interpretation, a much more guarded approach than laying it bare for easy consumption through extended description. In this way periodic poetic struggles with the negative free the autobiographical prose to adopt its positive stance. On the other hand, "I Lost My Talk" is more than simply a mouthpiece for rage toward the systems of power that stole her Mi'kmaq language—the "you" the speaker "speak[s] like," "think[s] like," and "create[s] like." The poem's development signals a movement in thought that nudges its speaker in a positive direction while mapping out a strategy for speaking to power.

After documenting the divestiture of Native voice by white authority, the speaker concedes that the non-Native "way" of talking is "more powerful" than the Native way. The power of English, however, is initially exercised in terms of divisive force. English was the intellectual context in which Mi'kmaq was "snatched . . . away" from Shubenacadie children (with the aid of fists, switches, and the strap); it was the imposition that separated the speaker from her tribal tongue. By contrast, the reemergence of Mi'kmaq is presented as a triumph of (re)conciliation over division. The final stanza begins with the offering of a hand, a gesture of unification that transcends the rage of the opening stanzas, in the very moment at which the speaker instigates a course of action that might restore her language.[37] Thus the final stanza promotes both the reunification of the speaker and her language and the unification of the Mi'kmaq and the white. However, the progression from division to reunification is presented through the vehicle of the "scrambled ballad" in English, suggesting the empowering capacity of that language when harnessed in the pursuit of indigenous self-knowledge. English is "more powerful" in the poem not simply because it has historically participated in the suffocation of indigenous languages but also because unlike Mi'kmaq it can speak to multiple audiences—including Natives who perhaps learned

English in residential school and non-Natives who hold the balance of political power in this country—in the struggle to induce positive change. Joe affirms the positive potential of a particular colonial imposition in relation to healing and empowerment without trivializing the pain the process of imposition has caused. Joe mobilizes "the good" aspects of English in a poem that foregrounds the continuing importance of indigenous languages and the conciliation of Natives and non-Natives.

Given the speaker's deduction that the non-Native way is "more powerful," it is not surprising that the movement toward conciliation is presented as a plea: the speaker "ask[s]" the implied non-Native audience, "Let me find my talk / So I can teach you about me." However, Joe's precise crafting of the poem's final two lines troubles the conclusiveness of this non-Native authority. The onus in these lines is on the speaker, not the audience. She does not ask to be given her language back but rather asks for the freedom to "find" it herself. The speaker claims a degree of power in a nonthreatening yet determined position. The speaker becomes the active party by the end of "I Lost My Talk"—a far cry from the victim of thieving non-Native schoolmasters who "snatched" her talk in an earlier stanza—a progression consummated by the reversal implicated in the speaker's intention to "teach you about me." In contrast to the residential school setting in which teaching was the context for disempowerment, trauma, and separation, the final stanza presents teaching *by the Native speaker* as a vehicle for empowerment, healing, and unification, articulating in the process the ideological horizon of the poet's literary methodology. Joe does not seek to revisit the trauma experienced at the hands of non-Native authority back on the perpetrators through an aggressive, vengeful posture. Joe's writing is always a tool for conciliation, not division.

The poem also acts as evidence that Mi'kmaq thought is neither extinct nor incapable of reaching through the written word. As much as the poem mimics a non-Native "ballad" structure, its words attest to Mi'kmaq experiences of residential school while potentially engendering positive responses; and as much as the final line pronounces the speaker's intention to "teach" the audience about herself in the event that her "talk" can be found, clearly the poem has already taught us about her, thereby initiating the process of conciliation and empowerment the poem appears only to call for. In "I Lost My Talk" Joe salvages an archive of the "good" from her traumatic past—the love of and skill with English poetry—which she mobilizes in her struggle to transcend the negative effects of the residential school legacy. She complicates the predominantly positive prose representation of Shubenacadie experiences that precedes the poem to show not only that "the good" doesn't necessarily exist in isolation from trauma but also that "the good" must be creatively engaged with to achieve its full potency in the fight for empowerment.

After "I Lost My Talk" the prose narrative turns to Joe's departure from Shubenacadie when she was sixteen years old. Building on the impulse toward autonomous empowerment introduced by the preceding poem, Joe describes the feeling of "freedom" she experienced as the "train pulled away" from Shubenacadie:

> I made a vow to myself that nobody was going to tell me what to do again. I was finally grown up, and nobody would ever hurt me again; nobody would ever tell me when to eat, wash, go to bed or go to the bathroom. Most of all, the spiritual part of me would be my own. If I was going to commit a sin, I would commit it with my own free will.
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> The confinement of my will had been going on for so long that I cried just until the school was out of sight. Then I began to giggle—and I sat there, giggling, to my heart's content.[38]

The subversive laughter with which Joe concludes this passage enacts and embodies its emancipationist sentiment. After tending to depict her Shubenacadie experience through its positive elements, from loving nuns, to gracious gifts, to the "freedom of reading," Joe finally turns her narrative to the suffocating regimentation of residential school life, but she does so in the positive frame of emancipation. Joe's first extended discussion of how the "confinement" of residential school left her "aching to have [her] freedom" occurs in relation to the joyous moment of her graduation; thus narrative focus is diverted toward the newly acquired personal freedom that will nourish the young woman's Mi'kmaq identity, and eventually her poetic voice, and away from the traumatic oppression that had heretofore kept her identity and voice at bay.[39]

Joe continues interrogating the relationship among personal freedom, creativity, and empowerment in the section's final poem, which links the physical building that housed the Shubenacadie school to the systemic regimentation the students endured therein—hence the two meanings of the poem's title, "Hated Structure." Like "I Lost My Talk," "Hated Structure" paints a darker picture of residential schooling than that found in the surrounding prose. For the adult speaker returning to the site of childhood trauma, the deserted school building is "a reminder to many senses / To respond like demented ones." In it she sees "a deluge of misery. . . . Where the children lived in laughter, or abuse."[40] The speaker stops short, however, of reentering the building, preferring to expostulate its lingering meaning from outside its oppressive walls:

> I had no wish to enter
> Nor to walk the halls.
> I had no wish to feel the floors
> Where I felt fear
> A beating heart of episodes
> I care not to recall.
> The structure stands as if to say:
> I was just a base for theory
> To bend the will of children
> I remind
> Until I fall.[41]

At its essence, residential schooling was institutionalized divestiture of indigenous autonomy. It sought to control all aspects of Native children's lives, from the language they spoke, to the clothes they wore, to the games they played, to the God they worshipped. The speaker intuits this oppressive force as manifest in the physical structure of the Shubenacadie building. The poem's final words, however, signal a mitigation of the speaker's potential retraumatization through the transfer of control from building and system to individual. The building "remind[s]" of childhood trauma only until it "fall[s]," and as coastal Mi'kmaq readers of *Song of Eskasoni* would have known in 1988 and readers of the autobiography are made aware, the school had recently been torn down. With the absence of the physical structure that embodied the regimented disciplinary impulse of the system, gone is the compulsion to relive the traumatic experiences that system produced. The speaker is now presumed free not only from the bodily coercion of the system but also from the tyranny of memory.

Yet the potential freedom augured by the building's eventual demolition asserts its relevance throughout the poem, even in the building's presence. On a literal level "Hated Structure" tells of a time when the school still stood; it tells of what the speaker felt as she wandered its circumference, and even before the school's demolition the speaker exerts control over how she will remember the period in her life that the school represents. She chooses "no[t] . . . to enter / Nor to walk the halls"; she actively guards against a possible rush of memories she "care[s] not to recall." Much like "I Lost My Talk," "Hated Structure" evidences on the part of its speaker the personal empowerment it appears only to predict. The delicate crafting of the poetry bespeaks the poet's control over the motion of memory and its representation in the same moment the speaker is shown battling the return of living memories—the "beating heart of episodes"—and determining their place in her consciousness.

"Hated Structure" executes Joe's positive literary methodology by liberating the speaker-poet to render history and memory in a manner consistent with the ideals of an empowered future. The poem does not deny the existence of traumatic history but rather asserts narrative control over that history so that it can be dealt with in a manner that will injure neither author nor reader. Within Joe's literary methodology, control over the past forms a precondition for empowerment, and for Joe the primary means of asserting such control is art. Again, this does not mean changing the past but rather building from it in a manner of the artist's choosing rather than as dictated by traumatic memory and psychological symptomology. By purging much of the negative in carefully wrought, highly fertile poems (which are themselves acts of defiance and empowerment), Joe is able to orient her life-narrative toward positive elements on the foundation of which she can struggle toward the healing and empowerment of her people while promoting reconciliation and mutual love and respect with non-Natives.

THE POLITICAL POTENTIAL OF THE POSITIVE

Joe's positive literary methodology is a tool with which to struggle toward empowerment; it is neither the destination nor the ultimate solution. It does not completely annex trauma, but it does provide a strategy for engaging the negative past that gestures toward a more personally and communally healthy future. This being said, Joe is not free, in absolute terms, from the victimization of her past by virtue of her literature. She admits, "Being a survivor means that you don't go crazy or blow your top. At times, it was very hard to survive. The experiences of my childhood, I'm reliving them yet—and I won't stop reliving them until I die."[42] Yet Joe's regular interactions with those childhood experiences in the controlled and autonomous context of creative literature have left her less at the mercy of memory than she might otherwise be. In a tangible way Joe has created conditions that promote her own happiness, both through her actions and through her literary endeavors.

The end of *Song of Rita Joe* depicts a gloriously content grandmother who has overcome adversity to achieve a harmonious and loving place at the center of her community:

> My life is in Eskasoni, with my friends and my children and grandchildren. The more my grandchildren come to visit, the more I love them. And it is not only my own grandchildren—all the children call me grandma. Even older people call me *Su'kwis* (Auntie). I love that. Who could ask for more? Being a survivor has made me build a brave heart—what we would call a *kinap*. Our tradition tells of the men who are *kinaps*, but I think there must be women *kinaps*, too. I leave behind the memory of an orphan child, picking herself up from the misery of being nobody, moving little grains of sand until she could talk about the first nations of the land.[43]

Here "leave behind" must refer to producing an archive of, rather than discarding, the "memory" of the "orphan child" because it seems through the course of *Song of Rita Joe* that it is indeed the act of "talk[ing]" and writing about the orphan child's history according to a positive literary methodology that has created the foundation on which the author now stands. The question remains, however: is Joe's literature effective externally as well? Will it aid in the healing and empowerment of the Mi'kmaq community in the wake of Shubenacadie and five hundred years of colonialism?

Clearly *Song of Rita Joe* will not be invoked in courtrooms. It will not provide evidence to provoke punitive vengeance on institutional perpetrators or help gain for Shubenacadie survivors monetary reparations from the federal government and the Catholic Church. *Song of Rita Joe* dances well outside the standard frames for revisiting residential school experiences, and therein lies its potency. The authorial power Joe exhibits in her autobiography offers a remarkably fertile model for the empowerment of Mi'kmaq readers because it depends on neither government apologies and remunerations nor church-led conferences and healing circles; in fact, it requires nothing from white

authority at all. *Song of Rita Joe* is the exercise of its author's own healing and empowerment. It is a pure expression of indigenous sovereignty and charts a course that others might follow in similar efforts toward autonomy and healing. *Song of Rita Joe* does not demand that all Mi'kmaq readers adopt its author's positive position. In fact, it encourages others along the paths of their choosing because at its essence Joe's literature is a call for individual engagement with personal history, an act that must always remain autonomous, while it nonetheless functions according to a communitist impulse.

At this stage in colonial history a polyphony of Native voices raised in the service of empowerment is immeasurably preferable to the siphoning of Native resistance into a finite number of preordained categories, often the creation of non-Native scholars and "experts." In the words of Robert Allen Warrior, "unifying categories . . . obscure crucial differences in a discourse much in need of recognizing the variety of contemporary American Indian experiences. Cohesion, on this reading, is neither beneficial, possible, or necessary."[44] In the years since Shubenacadie's closing in 1967, non-Native academics have claimed a degree of control over the dissemination and interpretation of Native works that unfortunately mimics the control over language and voice inflicted by residential schools (muted and less violent, to be sure, but an imposition nonetheless). An example of this control is the way academic discourse has created certain expectations about how indigenous survivors of residential school ought to remember their experiences in government or church captivity through narrative (read Boldt on Johnston). As Métis author Marilyn Dumont argues, "There is a connection between domination and representation. . . . The misrepresentation of me makes me doubt my experience, devalue my reality and tempts me to collude in an image which in the end disempowers me."[45] For some, residential school was the most horrifying and debilitating of possible experiences, but this does not de facto make it so for all survivors. Joe had a difficult time at residential school, but her experience was conditioned by certain loving relationships that she was able to forge there, as well as by even more difficult foster experiences. She declares, "Still, today, I do not regret going into the residential school," and there are absolutely no moral grounds from which to insist that she should.[46] Her experiences are her own, and if we, as critics, deny her representation of them, then we collude in her oppression. Late in her autobiography Joe articulates "one of the [most] important things" she attempted to instill in her children: "we are the ones who know about ourselves. 'Don't fear declaring anything . . . because you are the ones who know. You may not be an expert, but you do know.'"[47] The power of this statement is everywhere in *Song of Rita Joe*, endlessly battling the infection of external control, from residential school to academia and back to Eskasoni. As she gently instructs her critical audience: "Analyze, if you wish, but listen."[48]

NOTES

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1. Jeannette Armstrong, "Invocation: The Real Power of Aboriginal Women," in *Women of the First Nations: Power, Wisdom, and Strength*, ed. Christine Miller and Patricia Chuchryk (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1996), ix–xii.

2. For details on lawsuits see "Hidden from History: The Canadian Holocaust," http://canadiangenocide.nativeweb.org/intro2.html (accessed 9 January 2006).

3. Numerous historical studies on residential schooling have been published in the last fifteen years, from the broad and inclusive systemic overviews—J. R. Miller's *Shingwauk's Vision* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996); the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People's Report (Ottawa: Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996); Judith Ennamorato's *Sing the Brave Song* (Schomberg, Ontario: Raven Press, 1998); the Assembly of First Nations' *Breaking the Silence* (Ottawa: Assembly of First Nations Press, 1994)—to individual studies of institutions—Secwepemc Cultural Education Society's *Behind Closed Doors* (Kamloops: Secwepemc Cultural Education Society, 2000); Constance Deiter's *From Our Mother's Arms* (Toronto: United Church, 1999); Elizabeth Furniss's *Victims of Benevolence* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 1995); and Celia Haig-Brown's *Resistance and Renewal* (Vancouver: Tillacum Library, 1988). All of these have employed testimonial evidence. Most use it as their prime resource.

4. Quoted in Agnes Grant, *No End of Grief: Indian Residential Schools in Canada* (Winnipeg: Pemmican, 1996), 269. For an excellent discussion of the limitations of healing discourse based on regurgitation of trauma and unattached to a program for systemic change see Roland Chrisjohn and Sherri Young, *The Circle Game: Shadows and Substance in the Indian Residential School Experience in Canada* (Penticton, BC: Theytus Books, 1997), 61–87.

5. Taiaiake Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1999), 76. In this quotation Alfred is referring to a particular posture he argues is necessary for indigenous leadership to adopt in order to promote positive change. However, the posture he identifies, it seems to me, is precisely what critics of residential school literature have come to expect.

6. Menno Boldt, review of *Indian School Days*, *Canadian Literature* 124/125 (1990): 312.

7. Rita Joe, *Song of Rita Joe: Autobiography of a Mi'kmaq Poet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 14, 48. Similarly, when approached by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation about contributing to a documentary on residential schools, Joe declared, "If I do go on the air about residential schools, it will not be negative. It will be positive" (quoted in *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Authors*, ed. Hartmut Lutz [Saskatoon: Fifth House, 1991], 256).

8. Olive Patricia Dickason, "Amerindians between French and English in Nova Scotia, 1713–1763," in *Sweet Promises: A Reader in Indian-White Relations in Canada*, ed. J. R. Miller (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 46.

9. The unique flavor of Mi'kmaq-French relations was epitomized by the peculiar condition of an enduring indigenous sovereignty within French-claimed domains. On the one hand, as Cornelius Jaenen notes, "It seems evident that the French never doubted their right to acquire lands not already under Christian control" and thus perceived themselves as rightful owners of Mi'kmaq lands under international law (Cornelius Jaenen, "French Sovereignty and Native Nationhood during the French

Régime," in *Sweet Promises: A Reader in Indian-White Relations in Canada*, ed. J. R. Miller [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991], 30). On the other hand, because "the land was vast and the French were few," the French did not extend their claims to Acadian soil against its indigenous inhabitants but rather harnessed Mi'kmaq sovereignty against the potential intrusion of the British (Harald E. L. Prins, *The Mi'kmaq: Resistance, Accommodation, and Cultural Survival* [New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996], 134). In what Jaenen terms the "innovative dualism of native self-determination under French sovereignty" (Jaenen, "French Sovereignty," 34), the French pursued a colonial policy in Acadia that recognized Native nationhood while maintaining Crown sovereign authority over the land in an abstract sense.

10. Prins, *The Mi'kmaq*, 69.

11. Prins glosses the situation as follows:

> By asserting the Crown's supreme power in the colonies, the British government "required that extinguishment of aboriginal title be purchased by treaty, and reserves be set apart for the aboriginal population" (Bartlett, 581; Upton, 62).
>
> However, the king's officials in Nova Scotia acted as if the proclamation did not apply to their region. They conveniently presumed that all Mi'kmaq territory (as former French colonial domain) was legitimate Crown land and did not see any reason why the government should invite the chiefs to formally surrender their aboriginal title. Accordingly dispossessed by default, the Mi'kmaq received nothing in compensation for these lands. (Prins, *The Mi'kmaq*, 154)

12. Ibid., 151.

13. Ibid., 165.

14. Dickason, "Amerindians between French and English," 160.

15. Treaty rights, of course, have not always saved other Native peoples in Canada from illegitimate seizure, removal, and outright theft.

16. Isabelle Knockwood, *Out of the Depths: The Experiences of Mi'kmaw Children at the Indian Residential School at Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia* (Lockeport, NS: Roseway, 1992). Even a cursory glance at *Out of the Depths* will provide ample evidence for Knockwood's methodology of disclosure. The following are merely the tip of the iceberg in terms of testimonial accounts of sexual and physical abuse, neglect, and psychological mistreatment. Knockwood quotes survivor Peter Julian: "'Sister Paul of the Cross put a strapping across [the] bum [of a runaway] and after the first blow he rolled right over on his back with his front showing. But Sister didn't stop at that. She laced it right across his privates and the poor boy let out a scream that could be heard all over the dormitory and Sister hollered, "The longer you lay that way, the longer I'm going to keep whacking." So he rolled back again. She was a sadist'" (Knockwood, *Out of the Depths*, 87). Knockwood also quotes a different male student with reference to the sexual interference he suffered and his coping strategies:

> Some of the other kids told me the secret of how to deal with that was to run away to the pipes. When we finished showering—they'd powder you—and sometimes they'd powder your genitals a little too long. . . . One of the kids that was with me used to tell me, "Run away to the pipes." In the

> shower room there used to be pipes and he told me to pretend that I'm up there on that pipe. Really think about it. You're crawling down to the end—and then there's dust—and then you meet the joint—the elbow—one pipe would be too hot—so you don't go down there—you go down the other one. By the time you're finished travelling the pipes—usually the act is over. That's how I learned to cope with it—by running away to the pipes. (ibid., 93)

Knockwood further discusses the nature of sex education for girls at Shubenacadie:

> The nuns and the school principal provided us with their own version of sex education, which was that all bodily functions were dirty—dirty actions, dirty noises, dirty thoughts, dirty mouth, dirty, dirty, dirty girls. [One nun] took [a] girl who had just started her first period into the cloakroom and asked her if she did dirty actions. The little girl said, "I don't know what dirty actions are Sister. Do you mean playing in the mud?" [The nun] took the girl's hand and placed it between her legs and began moving it up and down and told her, "Now, you are doing dirty actions. Make sure you tell the priest when you go to confession." (ibid., 52)

17. Ibid., 7.

18. Quoted in Joe, *Song of Rita Joe*, 48.

19. Quoted in Knockwood, *Out of the Depths*, 107–8.

20. Joe, *Song of Rita Joe*, 50.

21. See Jace Weaver, *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), xiii.

22. Joe, *Song of Rita Joe*, 14, 157; quoted in Knockwood, *Out of the Depths*, 38.

23. I don't invoke the terms *victim* and *survivor* in a value-laden manner. Both authors use narrative in the service of their community and search for effective means of encouraging healing.

24. Knockwood, *Out of the Depths*, 142.

25. Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 68, 71, 74, 77.

26. Although I will analyze quite closely the dialogue created between poetry and prose in Joe's autobiography, I do not intend to contextualize my discussion in terms of Bakhtinian dialogism. This is not because I deem Bakhtin's theory to be inappropriate to the issues at hand but rather because Bakhtinian theory has been somewhat overused in the criticism of Native literatures. In introducing his tribal-specific critical theory, Creek scholar Craig Womack denounces, with tongue somewhat in cheek but also with indignation, the redundant non-Native criticism of Native literatures that is "[strung] . . . together with the same damn Bakhtin quotes we've all heard a million times." As Womack's exasperated tone infers, this particular approach has been done to death. See Craig Womack, *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 8.

27. Ruth Holmes Whitehead, introduction to *Song of Rita Joe: Autobiography of a Mi'kmaq Poet* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 9.

28. Joe, *Song of Rita Joe*, 69.

29. Wendy Rose, "Neon Scars," in *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native*

American Writers, ed. Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 253.

30. Joe, *Song of Rita Joe*, 49. Although *Lnu and Indians We're Called* was first published in 1991, when public disclosure was first gaining attention, the retelling of abuse and mistreatment remained the dominant course of action for residential school survivors in 1996, when *Song of Rita Joe* was published.

31. Joe, *Song of Rita Joe*, 49. Although it is always dangerous to collapse poet and speaker, I believe Joe's inclusion of these first-person poems within the narrative of her autobiography (neither sectioned off with markers nor highlighted as unique by title) gestures toward vindicating such a move in this case. As mentioned above, Joe's poetry is remarkably autobiographical, and the poem in question, "Indian Residential Schools," deals specifically with the unenviable position of being a residential school survivor and being forced through economic necessity to place your own child within one, conditions relevant to Joe's life. In 1956 Joe placed her five-year-old daughter, Phyllis, in Shubenacadie when the family was "barely surviving," after she had been requested to do so by her husband (the child's stepfather). Although this was extremely difficult for both mother and daughter, Joe writes in the poem, "My daughter says she didn't have it hard /. . . . [She] knew the forgiving song" (Joe, *Song of Rita Joe*, 78).

32. Ibid., 49–50.

33. Ibid., 50–51.

34. Quoted in Knockwood, *Out of the Depths*, 40.

35. Joe, *Song of Rita Joe*, 53–54.

36. Ibid., 55.

37. It should be noted, as well, that Joe has always used poetry as a vehicle for analyzing, remembering, and relearning the Mi'kmaq language. Many poems in *Song of Eskasoni* actually contain Mi'kmaq phrases and terms.

38. Joe, *Song of Rita Joe*, 56.

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid., 57.

41. Ibid., 58.

42. Ibid., 25.

43. Ibid., 169.

44. Robert Allen Warrior, *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 43.

45. Marilyn Dumont, "Popular Images of Nativeness," in *Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*, ed. Jeannette Armstrong (Penticton, BC: Theytus Books, 1993), 48.

46. Joe, *Song of Rita Joe*, 49.

47. Ibid., 96.

48. Ibid., 158.