

“Through White Man’s Eyes”: Beatrice Culleton’s *In Search of April Raintree* and Reading for Decolonization

Introduction: Teaching, Reading, and Decoding Domination

This essay is particularly concerned with the teaching of Aboriginal literatures, and emphasizes that such teaching is an endeavour embedded within a broader social context.¹ The dynamics of power and domination, rooted in North America’s colonial history – and present – that shape interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples necessarily come into play. As such, this pedagogical endeavour is and must be tied to questions of social responsibility, as it is a political project with material consequences for Aboriginal people (Episkenew 65; Womack 14). Teaching Aboriginal literatures in a socially responsible manner entails exercising critical reflexivity in reading.² Further, it entails a decolonizing approach to Aboriginal literatures. Without a critical approach, the potential exists to perpetuate or exacerbate systems of oppression targeting Aboriginal people, particularly in that Aboriginal literatures often address such oppression. Beatrice Culleton’s *In Search of April Raintree* is a text that continues to do so, powerfully, over twenty-five years since its initial publication, calling its readers to reflect on racism in Canada and beyond. It is precisely this call that must call readers also to exercise a vigilant critical consciousness, and to seek out spaces in the text that require – in Sherene Razack’s words – “unmapping” (5). In this paper, I employ aspects of

¹ The question of defining “Aboriginal literature(s)” is one that deserves its own nuanced study. Suffice it to say here that I do not seek to posit a unified, homogenous, or finite body of texts when I refer to Aboriginal literatures. For further discussion on approaches to Aboriginal literatures, including the dangers of assuming homogeneity, see Kristina Fagan’s essay “‘What About You?’: Approaching the Study of ‘Native Literature.’”

² My intent at present is, in particular, to address the question of teaching Aboriginal literatures within a social context ideologically characterized by white supremacy and colonialism; not all schooling, it should be noted, fits this rubric.

Sherene Razack's formulations on race and space in a decolonizing reading of *In Search of April Raintree*, with a twofold purpose: first, in order to demonstrate the decolonizing approach to reading that I am advocating, and, second, to locate readers' social responsibility to read with a decolonizing approach within the context of relations of domination in North America.

Before I move on to my theoretical and textual analyses, it is important for me to locate myself in this work. The question of how to responsibly teach Aboriginal literatures is one in which I have a professional and a personal investment. As an educator, I am dedicated to working for transformative education, or education for social justice – what Roxana Ng has called “critical teaching” or what bell hooks has called “revolutionary feminist pedagogy,” for instance (Ng 148-50). I see education as a site at which social transformation can be encouraged, and I see educational institutions themselves as social sites where oppression occurs and in which, consequently, social transformation is required. I incorporate Aboriginal literatures into my English courses as part of a transformative project, as I believe in the liberatory potential of texts that challenge the hegemony of North America's white mainstream. However, in this essay I am formulating a constructive complication of this agenda through the notion of decolonizing readings, in order to map out and perhaps thereby to avoid some of the pitfalls of teaching Other(ed) perspectives within mainstream contexts.

More personally, my commitment to anti-oppression education is informed by my location and experiences as a queer, feminist, Métis woman. Despite being Métis, I grew up with few connections to other Aboriginal people or to Aboriginal cultures, and through my mainstream education I became rooted in the culture and epistemology of

white Canadian society. However, I am increasingly developing my own connection to Aboriginality and my understanding of Aboriginal perspectives, as well as my sense of agency and responsibility in relation to Aboriginal issues. Much of my own (eager) reading of Aboriginal literatures has been inspired by my need to (re)connect across the amputation of my Aboriginal roots – and I find that many of the texts I encounter (including *April Raintree*) echo this attempt at (re)connection.³ As a Métis person within a largely white-identified Métis family I have experienced a range of feelings, such as fragmentation, fraudulence, and loss, in response to my racial identity, and I identify with the struggles of other Métis and mixed-race people – including April in Culleton’s novel – in pursuing a racial sense of self. Part of my inspiration in working on Aboriginal education is a desire to help change the structures of education so that Aboriginal youth can gain experiences – to which I did not have access – during their education that teach them about and help them to value their identities, cultures, and histories. This sense of social location strengthens my conviction in the anti-colonial framework I am bringing to Aboriginal literatures and to English teaching.⁴

Contexts for Anti-Colonial Reading

³ I use the term “amputation” here in keeping with George Dei’s insistence that amputation of the past, culture, and history must be resisted. His concept of amputation echoes that in Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. See, for example, Dei (125). For more discussion of reading literature for themes of “(re)connection to culture” as a Métis reader, see for example Jonathan Dewar (57, 63, 69, 75).

⁴ Like Dei, Hall, and Rosenberg, I insist upon a distinction between “anti-colonial” and “post-colonial” and the importance of the former for Indigenous perspectives (7). Merely one reason for this emphasis is that, from the perspectives of Aboriginal peoples, Canada is not *post*-colonial (Dhruvarajan and Vickers 10). Also I use both “anti-colonial” and “anti-racism.” Because racism and colonialism constitute each other to the extent that they are mutually inextricable, anti-colonialism necessarily also entails anti-racism.

My work in this paper is located within the context of my broader work on anti-colonial education, which focuses upon decolonizing the teaching of Aboriginal literatures – specifically in English classrooms in Canadian public education. Such teaching requires critical focus for several important reasons, not the least of which is that Aboriginal people continue to be marginalized by racism and colonialism in Canada and North America. Further, schooling for Aboriginal peoples has historically been and continues to be a site of colonial and racist domination, one which requires significant transformation if it is to become a positive process for Aboriginal peoples – and for non-Aboriginal people, who are also immersed in the colonial framework of mainstream schooling and therefore internalize racist and colonial epistemologies.⁵ As such, curriculum – including the texts taught in English and related disciplines – plays a significant role in conveying to students not only facts, but also ideological values and ways of knowing, such as those of racism and Eurocentrism. These values and epistemologies are tied to the settler nations of North America, which shape the mainstream ideologies through which much education operates.⁶ Aboriginal students in these spaces variously struggle with, internalize, and resist these colonial aspects of their education.⁷ Literature, in this context,

⁵ The colonial nature of schooling in Canada, specifically, historically and presently, is a topic that has been explored in depth by numerous Aboriginal theorists. See, for example, writings by Marie Battiste, Marie Battiste and James Youngblood Henderson, Eber Hampton, and Jean Barman, Yvonne Hébert, and Don McCaskill.

⁶ Willie Ermine examines the epistemological colonization that occurs within education, arguing that western education systems promote specific (and limited) Eurocentric ways of knowing. Further, he argues that this epistemological colonization threatens Aboriginal students' capacity to become rooted in Aboriginal epistemology and its accompanying holism and ethics (110). Colonization at the epistemological level, combined with racism and colonization at other levels, makes this kind of schooling hostile for Aboriginal students (Battiste xvi, Battiste and Henderson 89-92, Hampton 37-38). Eber Hampton states that "education, as currently practised, is cultural genocide" (35).

⁷ Eber Hampton identifies five distinct definitions of his term "Indian education," one of which, "schooling for assimilation," entails the type of colonial practice I am discussing here. He describes "schooling for assimilation" as follows: "education of Indians is carried out by Anglos using Anglo models to satisfy Anglo purposes . . . In contrast to schooling for self-determination, these schools for assimilation have been characterized by high failure rates in literacy and educational attainment, having assimilation rather than

becomes a key site for transformation in the English curriculum. The teaching of literature entails the opportunity to bring diverse and multiple perspectives into the classroom, including those that challenge the norms and hierarchies of Eurocentrism and white supremacy. Further, I echo Craig Womack's statement that literature itself is a meaningful vehicle for cultural self-determination (14); because it carries this potential, literature can be a profound site of decolonization within education.

However, the teaching of Aboriginal literatures is not inevitably a decolonizing process.⁸ There exists the potential for significant harm to be done if such teaching is conducted without critical awareness, or without challenging the norms of (white, colonial) society that, by default, perpetuate the oppression of Aboriginal peoples.

Himani Bannerji has stated that racism pervades Canadian society to the extent that it is "cultural common sense" (77) and this logic can be extended; anti-racist and anti-colonial education therefore requires conscious and critical challenges to ideologies of domination. Without such a critical approach, the teaching of Aboriginal literatures may remain entrenched in colonizing perspectives, and therefore perpetuate the oppression of Aboriginal peoples. In other words, I agree with Sharron Proulx and Aruna Srivastava's argument that

it is perfectly possible (and is often done) to teach Aboriginal literatures in deeply racist, colonialist, ahistorical and disrespectful ways – often unintentionally – and . . . it is possible for students and teachers . . . to read

self-determination as goals, poor school-community relations, negative attitudes towards Native cultures, and prohibition or non-use of Native languages" (9). In such settings Aboriginal students must often struggle against assimilation to maintain their Aboriginal identities and cultures.

⁸ I do not wish here to deny or underestimate the liberatory potential of Aboriginal perspectives that are brought into mainstream classrooms through literature, as I maintain that this potential is immense. However, I believe that uncritical pedagogy can work substantially to undermine liberatory possibility.

the literature and to take in the knowledge of Aboriginal and Indigenous people in such disrespectful and close-minded ways that it is infinitely more harmful in many ways to read these texts at all than not to. (189)

In this paper, as I have stated, it is my aim to counter this potential for harm in the reading and teaching of Aboriginal literatures – that is, the potential for encoding, rather than decoding, non-Aboriginal domination of Aboriginal peoples.⁹

I have chosen to discuss the potential for such perpetuation of harm particularly in relation to Culleton's novel because of the powerful balance between reinscription and resistance that it embodies as its characters struggle with oppression. Some literary critics, including Janice Acoose and Jo-Ann Episkenew, have also expressed their insistence upon careful readings of *April Raintree*. Acoose states that the text “may leave readers with mis-informed notions about the Métis,” and contends that readers must “look outside the text and take responsibility for their own education” if they expect to learn “something about Métis history and culture” (235). Episkenew, similarly, sees a risk that the text will perpetuate “an interpretation that is both canonized and flawed in that it is based on deeply ingrained ideology of the colonizer culture and is one that many Métis people in this country find particularly problematic” – that being “the icon of the confused and alienated Halfbreed” (57). She in turn insists that readers must resist placing their own ideological impositions upon the text, and do the legwork required to

⁹ I do not wish to posit here a rigid divide between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. As Jennifer Kelly states, such categories, “while shown to be arbitrary (i.e., historical) in their construction, continue to have damaging material effects and are intimately involved in and constitute unequal power relations” (155). Also, as I have mentioned, my own position as a Métis has made me feel variously located on both sides of any such divide, or firmly in between. The Métis are among the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, but as I have suggested, and as April's story shows, maintaining a sense of self in relation to Aboriginality when one is Métis is a complex and ongoing process. For further discussion on this point of Métis subjectivity, see Smulders, among many others.

become familiar with the context that informs the characters' experiences in the novel (65).¹⁰

I will be examining *In Search of April Raintree* in order to analyze the potential for colonial readings of the text; in doing so, I will simultaneously be employing the kind of anti-colonial lens that I believe is required in seeking to diminish the potential for harm in teaching. In building my decolonizing approach to the novel, I draw upon the work of theorists and literary critics who advocate socially responsible and "Indigenizing" approaches to Aboriginal literatures, which entail their own, anti-colonial, ways of reading (Armstrong 7, Eigenbrod 83, Episkenew 56-57, Ruffo 7-8).¹¹ These theorists advocate, as does Janice Acoose, using literary texts "as tools for confronting colonialism and locating spaces for decolonization" (52). An anti-colonial perspective can seek to denaturalize, for example, the subjugation of Aboriginal peoples. One key requirement for this kind of decolonizing approach to Aboriginal literatures is incorporating an understanding of the contexts and cultures that inform them, and particularly, as I have suggested, of the historical and social contexts of colonization and their significance for Aboriginal peoples (Armstrong 7, Episkenew 56-57, Eigenbrod 70). Socio-cultural context impacts profoundly not only upon the content of a text, but upon

¹⁰ I maintain that it is not the role of Aboriginal literatures (alone) to positively represent Aboriginal peoples. Culleton's text is artistically significant in that it represents the complexities of Aboriginal identities within the social context of Canada; it is, in many ways and appropriately, a *reflection* of the effects of racism rather than an idealized, didactic portrayal of how Métis people *should* approach issues of racial identity and oppression. Hence the responsibility of the reader. Sharon Smulders, for instance, conducts a detailed reading of the novel and its contexts to examine articulations of Métis subjectivity, positing that April's narrative is an "instrument not merely of cultural production but also of cultural survival, for like Mosionier herself, she is inspired by personal tragedy to put a voice to Métis experience and so to generate from the past a new Métis tradition commensurate with the challenges of the present" (96-97).

¹¹ For further discussion on "Indigenizing" the study of Aboriginal literatures, see also Findlay and Eigenbrod. Eigenbrod insists that non-Aboriginal readers need to indigenize their readings and to "act upon changing the glaring contradiction between celebration of Aboriginal arts and our negligence of Aboriginal communities" (76), thus calling for social responsibility in the context of relations of domination.

the ways in which a text will be heard and interpreted – which in turn impacts back upon relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. As a result, the responsibility of the reader-teacher comes significantly into play.¹²

Unmapping Colonial Relations: Theorizing Race and Space

Sherene Razack, in her introduction and contribution to her edited collection *Race, Space, and the Law: Unmapping a White Settler Society*, formulates a framework for analyzing relations between (appropriately) race, space (both material and social), and the law. Her intent in this formulation is to enable the unmapping – or denaturalization – of such relations, particularly those that constitute “the racial structure of citizenship that characterizes contemporary Canada” (5). She, along with the collection’s other authors, employs what she calls an “interlocking approach” to systems of oppression, consisting of two primary steps: “first, we examine how the systems mutually constitute each other,” and “second, we pursue how all the systems of domination operate at the local level, a task facilitated by attending to material and symbolic constitution of specific spaces” (16). This approach enables the examination of social spaces and of the hierarchization of racialized bodies constituted within them. The social spaces under study in the collection’s analyses are particularly Canadian spaces, as the racial constitution of the nation comes into focus: “our concern is to tell the national story as a racial and spatial story, that is, as a series of efforts to segregate, contain, and thereby

¹² I echo Jo-Ann Episkenew’s insistence upon “socially responsible criticism,” and the need for people teaching Aboriginal literatures to recognize and act upon their responsibility to Aboriginal communities. She, too, highlights *In Search of April Raintree* as an example of a text that requires the reader to be aware of context.

limit, the rights and opportunities of Aboriginal people and people of colour” (17). This vision of the nation is imperative to an anti-colonial vision of Aboriginal education and of the social context that informs Aboriginal literatures.

Razack’s framework for analyzing space and race has several important implications for anti-colonial work in the context of Aboriginal peoples and literatures.¹³ It enables, for example, a denaturalization of outward symptoms of Aboriginal people’s subordination within white settler society – such as poverty and substance abuse, which are portrayed in *April Raintree*.¹⁴ In her analysis of the social contexts surrounding the murder of Pamela George, an Aboriginal woman working as a prostitute in the city of Regina in 1995, Razack delineates the naturalization of violence in the social spaces of Aboriginal womanhood and prostitution. She challenges this naturalization and the converse naturalization of the violent and colonial brutalization of Aboriginal women by white men, which allowed the significance of the two white men’s murder of Pamela George to be diminished by the legal justice process. In her words, she exposes the fact that

the men’s and the court’s capacity to dehumanize Pamela George came from their understanding of her as the (gendered) racial Other whose degradation confirmed their own identities as white—that is, as men entitled to the land and the full benefits of citizenship. (126)

The violence enacted against Pamela George, as Razack argues, must be seen within the broader context of the “colonial project” with its intrinsic racializations and racialized

¹³ The law is, of course, a significant aspect of Razack’s analyses, but it is not my focus here.

¹⁴ This is simply an abbreviation; all references are to the 1999 Critical Edition of *In Search of April Raintree*. I do not refer to the revised edition of Culleton’s novel, entitled *April Raintree*, which in itself is worthy of study, as Peter Cumming demonstrates.

hierarchies (126). I will echo this insistence below in my discussion of the violent brutalization of April in Culleton's novel, which strikingly parallels that of Pamela George.

For the purposes of this paper, I wish to take up Razack's formulations, particularly as represented by the concepts of "degeneracy" and "civility" as they characterize racialized social and material spaces. In her analysis, Razack describes the ways in which "the murder scene and the Stroll [the urban space of prostitution in Regina] were described as spaces somehow innately given to illicit and sexual activity" – and therefore characterized as "degenerate space" occupied by racial Others.¹⁵ She contrasts this degenerate space with whiteness's territories – "spaces of civility" or "respectability," including the "the university and white suburbs" (143-145). She also, importantly, extends this contrast between degeneracy and civility to social spaces, namely to the subject positions occupied by the killers and by Pamela George. When whiteness is characterized by civility and Aboriginality by degeneracy, Razack argues, Pamela George comes to be seen as "a *rightful target* of the gendered violence inflicted" by her white killers (144, emphasis added). In her article, Razack employs these concepts of race and space to challenge the legal articulation of "justice" that was shaped through the trial of George's murderers; my intent in this paper is to employ them in order to further denaturalize the portrayal of parallel spaces within Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree*. Specifically, I want to examine April's resistance against being or becoming that "rightful target." Because the struggles of Culleton's protagonist are located amidst the characterization of Aboriginality and whiteness as, respectively, degenerate and civil

¹⁵ Razack states that she uses the term "'degeneracy' . . . to denote those groups Foucault describes as the 'internal enemies' of the bourgeois state . . . in short, all those who would weaken the vigorous bourgeois body and state" (274).

spaces, Razack's formulations offer strategies for unmapping the text and constituting an anti-colonial reading.

Race, Space, and *April Raintree*: Unmapping April's Search

Beatrice Culleton Mosionier's *In Search of April Raintree* is the story of two Métis sisters, April and Cheryl Raintree, and their differing struggles to find a sense of self in relation to their Aboriginal legacy.¹⁶ The primary setting of the sisters' story is Winnipeg, where, as young children, they are taken away from their parents and placed in separate foster homes. April in particular experiences abuse, neglect, and exploitation at the hands of one family, the DeRosiers. As they grow up, Cheryl receives encouragement to connect to Aboriginality, while April receives and internalizes the values of broader white society.¹⁷ This contrast between the sisters parallels their physical appearances, as April, with her mother's "pale skin," can pass for white, while Cheryl's black hair and brown eyes and skin leave "no doubt" that she is "of Indian ancestry" (Culleton 11).¹⁸

Throughout the ensuing tale, April conceptualizes Métis identity as a "degenerate space," and it is during this early part of the novel that she begins to internalize the oppression targeted at Métis and other Aboriginal people. As a child, living with the DeRosiers – where she is insulted as a "half-breed" and exploited for household labour –

¹⁶ Critics have discussed the extent to which the novel is autobiographical; see, for example Agnes Grant's essay "Contemporary Native Women's Voices in Literature," Dawn Thompson's "Technologies of Ethnicity," Sharon Smulders' essay, which I have already mentioned, or Beatrice Culleton Mosionier's "The Special Time."

¹⁷ See Sharon Smulders' discussion for a more nuanced look at how the sisters' differing perspectives relate to Métis subjectivity in particular.

¹⁸ From this point onwards, references to Culleton's novel will simply include page numbers.

she already perceives that her identity is undesirable. She condemns the (naturalized) portrait of Métis people that she is internalizing:

Being a half-breed meant being poor and dirty. It meant being weak and having to drink. It meant being ugly and stupid. It meant living off white people. And giving your children to white people to look after. It meant having to take all the crap white people gave. Well, I wasn't going to live like a half-breed. When I got free of this place, when I got free from being a foster child, then I would live just like a real white person. (47)

April does not simply reject what she has learned about being Métis; she rejects the identity entirely, failing to challenge the naturalization of what “being a half-breed meant,” and determining instead to pursue a “real white” social location. As Margery Fee has pointed out, April perceives her (lack of) options dichotomously: she can either become one of what she calls the “gutter-creatures” or she can assimilate (“Upsetting Fake Ideas” 170; Lundgren 63).

April's decision to pass for white demonstrates the extent to which her social space is conscribed. Cheryl Harris, in her essay “Whiteness as Property” delineates some of the complexities of passing and white privilege. She describes her grandmother's experiences of passing for white in order to work, stating that it was a survival strategy precipitated by the racist social context: “passing is well known among black people in the United States; it is a feature of race subordination in all societies structured on white supremacy” (277). She also emphasizes the self-denial, invisibility, and “risk of self-annihilation” involved in passing, and the extent to which the phenomenon of passing itself exposes the “valorization of whiteness as treasured property in a society structured

on racial caste” (277). April’s determination to pass for white is clearly shaped within the kinds of dynamic that Harris describes: in identifying against herself April becomes “complicit in her own oppression” (Harris 277).

April’s determination to live a white li(fe) is fed by the white people with whom she is forced to interact as a foster child, including the social worker in charge of her and Cheryl.¹⁹ After the girls attempt to run away from the abusive DeRosier family (where Cheryl has briefly joined April), Mrs. Semple gives them “a little speech about what she called the ‘native girl’ syndrome” (62). This speech explicitly introduces the sisters to the degeneracy that, according to their social worker, characterizes Aboriginal identity:

It starts out with the fighting, the running away, the lies. Next come the accusations that everyone in the world is against you. There are the sullen, uncooperative silences, the feeling sorry for yourselves. And when you go on your own, you get pregnant right away, or you can’t find or keep jobs. So you’ll start with alcohol and drugs. From there, you get into shoplifting and prostitution, and in and out of jails. You’ll live with men who abuse you. And on it goes. You’ll end up like your parents, living off society. . . . Now, you’re going the same route as many other native girls. If you don’t smarten up, you’ll end up in the same place they do. Skid row! (62)

Although she does not even understand the speech yet – April remarks to herself that she had “never heard the terms shoplifting, prostitution . . . and what the heck was skid row?” – at this point the sisters must react specifically to this projection of their futures (63).

April determines that she will resist the narrative, and reassures Cheryl: “We’re going to

¹⁹ The immeasurable harm done to Aboriginal peoples through colonial strategies such as residential schooling and foster care has also been discussed at length. For a discussion of foster care in relation to this novel, see Jeanne Perreault’s essay “In Search of Cheryl Raintree, and Her Mother.”

make it. Do you understand me? . . . We are not going to become what they expect of us” (64). Despite her determination to defy it, April remains aware of this “syndrome” as she grows up within a society in which problems such as poverty and alcoholism are perceived as inherently linked to Aboriginal identity.

In responding to the posited degeneracy of Aboriginal womanhood, April continues to deny her position within that social space, and instead to locate herself within a civil space by attempting to pass for white. When she is rescued by a new social worker from the DeRosiers, she leaves behind her degraded role and seizes her first opportunity to blend into a space characterized by civility – a girls’ boarding school. She is successful in doing so: “going to St. Bernadette’s was good for me. I had many friends, and . . . on weekends, I was invited to go to other girls’ homes”; she is able to pass – “I was white as far as the other girls were concerned” (84). Notably, passing at school involves severing her family: April claims that her “parents died in a plane crash” rather than explaining her family’s history (82). She also discourages Cheryl from joining her at the boarding school, having long ago realized the difficulty of “pass[ing] for a white person when [she] had a Métis sister,” and “especially when she [Cheryl] was so proud of what she was” (47). While April loves Cheryl and feels that she “could never cut [her]self off from her completely,” her dream of escaping the conscription of Métis identity into whiteness entails separating herself from her visibly racialized sister, and the distance between them begins to grow.

The sisters’ trajectories continue to split as April moves into her “promising future in white society,” while Cheryl volunteers at the Native Friendship Centre, intending to help her people through social work (97-98). April’s perception of whiteness

as a “civil” space is validated by her experiences of social success within white, middle-class space. While working as a secretary at a law firm, she meets Bob, and before long finds herself freshly married into the luxury-shopping, wealthy, urban Toronto set. April feels that her bright white future – which she had to a certain extent dismissed as “fantasy” – is realized when she settles in with her new husband in his “mansion . . . on a sprawling estate” (98-104). She is thrilled by her new surroundings, and by the time spent entertaining, shopping, visiting hair salons, learning about etiquette, and attending “social events and theatres and concerts and dinners and clubs” with her mother-in-law, “Mother Radcliff” (103). Attention to the role of class and race reveals that Mother Radcliff sees April as being on a different “social level” and disapproves of her son’s marriage, but for a moment April seems confident that she has transcended the social space of being Métis (103-104).

However, April’s attempts to displace her Métis identity inevitably fail, and her unsustainable married life is ruptured. In many ways, Cheryl embodies April’s inability to leave her Métis self behind: she reappears in this role when April invites her to Toronto for the Christmas holidays. Cheryl is conspicuously out of place and targeted as a racial Other in Mother Radcliff’s social world, and April feels the discomfort of trying to reconcile her fractured and oppositional loyalties (103-112). It is after Cheryl’s visit that April’s marriage breaks down. April overhears a conversation that exposes Bob’s affair with another woman (who is white) as well as Mother Radcliff’s desire to sabotage the marriage because of her fears of miscegenation: Bob’s mother proclaims “I would simply dread being grandmother to a bunch of little half-breeds!” (116). April confronts Mother Radcliff and the mistress: “that Bob’s mother would rather have a person like

you, a hypocrite, an adulteress, as her daughter-in-law, rather than risk a few grandchildren who would have Indian blood in them, well, that's beyond my comprehension" (116). April's response here is significant, suggesting that the betrayal she is experiencing pushes her towards self-reconciliation. However, it is worth noting that, although she condemns her mother-in-law, April's internalized attitudes parallel Mother Radcliff's: "I did have a fear of producing brown-skinned babies. How could I give my loving to such children when I still felt self-conscious about Cheryl?" (117). Nonetheless, April leaves her illusory life with Bob behind (with a hefty divorce settlement), and not long after is called back home to help Cheryl, who has meanwhile had her own illusions shattered by a successful search for their father.

Up to this point in the text, Cheryl has been the main source of perspectives opposing April's perception of Aboriginality as inherently degenerate space. Cheryl consistently challenges April on her views of Aboriginal people and on the "shame" she exhibits, and seeks to explain the socio-historical dynamics that shape the contemporary reality of Aboriginal people (101, 105). As Smulders states, Cheryl's voice in the text "disrupts the linearity of April's retrospective narrative, correcting its bias, enlarging its awareness, and disputing its conclusions" (84).²⁰ One conversation in particular exemplifies Cheryl's attempts to decolonize her sister's perspectives. The sisters are discussing Cheryl's work at the Friendship Centre helping young Native women when they begin to argue:

"What you aim to do is very commendable, Cheryl, but I can't see
you changing a whole lot of people. . . It's the ones who are dirty and

²⁰ Smulders' focus on the link between "generic indeterminacy" and "new narrative possibility" – in that the novel incorporates "a métissage of points of view, of literary forms, and of modes of discourse" – is most useful here.

unkempt and look like they've just gotten out of bed with a hangover and who go to your neighbourhood department store, they're the ones who make a lasting impression."

"Well, there are just as many white people out there who are in the same state," Cheryl shot back.

"It's not the same. I don't remember the white ones, I only remember the drunk natives. It seems to me that the majority of natives are gutter-creatures, and only a minority of whites are like that. I still think that's the difference."

"I still think our project with the native girls is worthwhile. Damn it, April, why do you have to be so prejudiced?" she exclaimed.

"I'm not prejudiced, Cheryl. I'm simply trying to point out to you how I see things."

"Through white man's eyes." (105)

Cheryl's retort here is incisively apt, and provides the key to an anti-colonial reading of Culleton's novel: because April overwhelmingly sees the world and herself "through white man's eyes," it is consistently necessary to maintain a critical distance from her perspective.

Thus, through an anti-colonial lens, Cheryl's critical awareness and pride thus far establish her as a positive foil for April, by contrast exposing the extent to which the oppression April has internalized precludes her from achieving self-acceptance as a Métis woman. However, the shift that follows Cheryl's meeting her biological father exposes the nature of her own "fantasy" – that is, her idealized vision of their parents (98). She

had imagined her father as “a tall, straight, handsome man” who, “in the olden days,” could have “been a warrior if he had been all Indian” (198), but upon meeting him she sees instead “a gutter-creature!” and decides that she “should have listened to April” and abandoned her search (198). Her meeting with her father precipitates the collapse of her foundations – “all [her] dreams to rebuild the spirit of a once proud nation are destroyed in this instant” – and she loses her motivation for resisting the naturalized “native girl” identity, apparently unable to envision any alternative – or less illusory – basis for doing so. Within the terms of the story, Cheryl loses her self-respect, and abandons herself fully to the degeneracy of the social space around her, quitting university, becoming alcoholic, moving in with an abusive man, and taking up work as a prostitute. Her earlier pride and anti-colonial perspectives are revealed as stemming from an unsustainable idealization of Aboriginal identity.²¹ Therefore, although Cheryl provides a great deal of support to an anti-colonial reading, we cannot rely entirely upon her, either, and it is vital to see both the potential and failures of Cheryl’s attitudes about Aboriginality.

Concurrent with April’s discovery that Cheryl has been pushed into “degenerate space,” April is raped – an event which constitutes her own forcible confinement in that space. April has returned to Winnipeg from Toronto upon receiving a call stating that her sister is in the hospital, injured from a beating. Cheryl asks April to go to where she has been living to pick up her “things,” as she wants to avoid “a scene” with her boyfriend (125). April agrees, and crosses the social and spatial distance between her world and that of her sister, whose address is “in a rather rundown section of the city” (126). April is then (unbeknownst to her) literally mistaken for Cheryl by three white men who have

²¹ Smulders points out that Cheryl’s experiences “reveal Mosionier’s interest in the difficulties of creating in the present (rather than retrieving from the past) a viable Métis identity” (93).

been waiting for Cheryl, sent by a rival to “put a scare into” her (166). The men force April into a car, drive her out of the city to the countryside, beat her, and rape her. The rape scene is loaded with racialized and sexualized violence. The men call her a “bitch,” “squaw,” “cunt,” “slut,” “whore,” and “savage” as they beat her, rape her repeatedly, and degrade her by “peeing . . . right into [her] mouth” (127-132). They leave her in the countryside retching into the snow, but just before they do, she is “able to make out the licence number” of their car (132), and the men are eventually tracked down by the police. The ensuing court case finds the main rapist guilty, while April remains traumatized by the violences inflicted upon her. It is worth noting that this part of the novel relates to Sherene Razack’s analysis of the murder of Pamela George in more ways than I can discuss here. What is most significant for my argument is the concept of violence and degradation becoming naturalized – as it is for April’s and Pamela’s white, male attackers – in relation to the body of an Aboriginal woman working as a prostitute.

The men’s violence against April becomes an important locus in the text, in many ways forcing a crisis of identification. This crisis of identification is a “brutally literal” one, in that the violence is instigated because April is mistaken for her sister (Derry 209), but it also forces April once again to confront her Métis identity. The multiple aspects of April’s crisis here converge around April’s conflicting feelings that she was both misrecognized and recognized as a “rightful target” – in Razack’s words – of the violence enacted upon her.²²

First, her belief that misrecognition is at work allows her to persistently avoid facing her identity as a Métis woman. As Margery Fee points out, April must make this

²² Peter Cumming would agree with Razack here that the significance of April’s rape extends into a larger colonial history (Razack 26). He states that “the rape is . . . also about what white Europeans have done to Aboriginal peoples during the history of their contact” (315).

confrontation only as long as she still believes that she was the intended target of the men's violence: when she finds out that the rapists had mistaken her for Cheryl, her anguish ceases somewhat – for example, she does not feel the need to take her “ritual bath” that night (Fee 221; Culleton 167). In other words, once April is able to perceive the violence she experienced as having been aimed at Cheryl, she can blame Cheryl for what happened, and once again is able to displace her own Aboriginality onto her sister (167). She strives to dismiss the racialized nature of the violent crimes against her as misrecognition. Her court case resonates overwhelmingly with Razack's description of Pamela George's murder trial, but April resists the racialized narrative interwoven with her de-racialized self-perceptions, insisting that she is “entitled to justice” (Razack 155). She suggests this self-perception during the trial: “that bastard, Donnelly, had raped me. He had done more than rape me. He deserved to be found guilty and nothing else” (169). In her article, Razack states that “Pamela George never left the racially bounded space of prostitution and degeneracy during the trial, a space that marked her as a body to be violated” (148); April, by comparison, is removed from that space, and the “guilty” verdict validates her position. April's revelation that she can displace the blame onto Cheryl further strengthens this self-perception.

However, April must nonetheless deal with the fact that the violence against her was predicated upon a target of degenerate Aboriginal womanhood – that is, with the consequences of recognition. She is initially mystified as to why the men called her a “squaw,” wondering how she could be “mistaken as a native person” (146). This question precipitates her to re-interrogate her question, as she admits: “Mistaken? There's that shame again. Okay, identified” (146). The men have treated her, as did Pamela George's

murderers, as a “licentious and dehumanized squaw” (Razack 133); April is thus thrust (back) into that “space of degeneracy” and must reconcile her experiences there with her sense of self. The rape echoes the dynamic established when April realizes that Cheryl’s Native appearance would always undermine her attempts to pass for white. Through the rape, April’s attempts to disconnect from the degenerate space of Aboriginality are again countered by the social inscription of her sister’s body. It is Cheryl who repeatedly “connects April to a Native world of degradation that she wants desperately to escape” (Derry 209). The fact of literal misrecognition does not completely erase this connection through Cheryl. Further, even when she learns that Cheryl was the intended “target,” she is forced to confront her own conceptions of who a “rightful target” might be, in that she does not want to feel that Cheryl deserved the violence either. Her beloved sister Cheryl, her self, violence, and degeneracy collide for April because of the rape, and she struggles thereafter to extricate a sustainable sense of self.

The remainder of the novel following the rape trial offers complex, and in many ways unresolved, developments of April and Cheryl’s struggles against the conscription of their social space. The sisters’ relationship continues to deteriorate, and April never has a chance to make things “okay” with Cheryl (Fee 223). Cheryl ultimately does not survive the collapse of her resistance to “native girl syndrome”: making the same choice their mother had, she commits suicide. April, mourning Cheryl’s death, makes yet another significant spatial journey, entering her sister’s bedroom to “pack all of Cheryl’s things away” so that she can preserve her memories (194). While in Cheryl’s room, April makes another confrontation, this time with alcoholism, which has been so prominent throughout the novel as a marker of the “degenerate space” of Aboriginal identity. She

sees an empty whiskey bottle on Cheryl's dresser, and is "suddenly . . . filled with a deep hatred of what it had once contained" (194). She smashes the bottle "into a million pieces" and screams, crying: "I HATE YOU! I HATE YOU! I HATE YOU! . . . I hate you for what you've done to my sister! I hate you for what you've done to my parents! I hate you for what you've done to my people!" (194). Her anger at alcohol here is significant in that it represents a step away from her previous attitudes, which entailed her blaming alcoholics for their weakness or choices. She condemns her parents earlier in the text, for example, feeling that they "abandoned" her and Cheryl "all for a bottle of booze!" (91). This confrontation also brings her closer to reconciling her sense of self with being Aboriginal.

April's ultimate acceptance of her Métis identity at the very end of the novel coincides with the opening up of a new future raising her young nephew, whose existence she discovers after his mother's death. This acceptance occurs only within a few lines of the story's ending, after April arrives at Cheryl's friend's house to meet and pick up Henry Liberty Raintree:

As I stared at Henry Lee, I remembered that during the night I had used the words "MY PEOPLE, OUR PEOPLE" and meant them. The denial had been lifted from my spirit. It was tragic that it had taken Cheryl's death to bring me to accept my identity. But no, Cheryl had once said, "All life dies to give new life." Cheryl had died. But for Henry Lee and me, there would be a tomorrow. And it would be better. I would strive for it. For my sister and her son. For my parents. For my people. (207)²³

²³ April's belief that Cheryl's death has precipitated her self-acceptance is one example of the ways in which her sense of self shifts in relation to oppression, loss, and violence. For me this resonates with Judith

In this way April's story ends with acceptance, hope, and conviction – although without a vision as to how, exactly, her new future with little Henry will be “better.” April's transformation, occurring over the loss of her sister, is a triumph, as she has overcome so much internalized loathing to arrive at self-acceptance. April's future will no doubt still involve struggles against the racism surrounding her as a Métis woman and with her long-held perception that Aboriginality is inevitably and inherently characterized by degeneracy. In fact, the ending presents no further challenge to the construction of “degenerate space” that April's narration has in many ways naturalized throughout the novel. Nonetheless, April's final self-acceptance and projection of a brighter future, rooted in her bond to her relations and Aboriginality, is redemptive within the text. It is a redemption that gains significance through an anti-colonial reading, opening up space within April's identity and history for decolonization.

Conclusion: *April's Lessons*

In Search of April Raintree engages its readers in April's struggles with internalized colonialism and racism as she variously escapes and confronts the social meaning that overdetermines her identity as Métis. Her sister Cheryl enriches the text, providing important elements of an anti-colonial and anti-racist perspective to the narrative. While Cheryl disintegrates, losing her former strength and agency and ending her life, April gains a new appreciation of the perspectives that Cheryl has represented. Through an

Butler's formulations on identity and injury in *The Psychic Life of Power*. Butler states that, “if . . . we understand certain kinds of interpellations to confer identity, those injurious interpellations will constitute identity through injury” (104-105). April's sites of identity struggle – such as the term “half-breed,” her rape, and Cheryl's death – are concurrently sites of injury.

anti-colonial reading, we can see this text as one that ultimately suggests the importance of challenging internalized oppression, of countering racism and the colonial construction of Métis identity. It is a text that encourages the kind of unmapping that I have sought to carry out here through Sherene Razack's theories of race and space, and is rich with opportunities for critical anti-oppressive analysis.

However, this kind of decolonizing approach to the text entails reading against both Cheryl and April at different times in the story. While Cheryl provides a decolonizing voice, the reader must come to terms with the fact that her pride as an Aboriginal woman is based on illusory and unsustainable ideals. Meanwhile, April's internalized views of what "being a half-breed meant" (47) lead to the fact that she is in many ways the primary voice of racism in the novel. As a result, inasmuch as April spends two hundred pages struggling to come to terms with her identity, the reader must spend those same two hundred pages struggling to maintain a vigilant and critical decolonizing analysis of April's perspective. Negligence on this front risks the perpetuation – for the reader and for the reader's students when that reader is a teacher – of the racist and colonial views with which April struggles. In other words, this text is pedagogically challenging because uncritical readings may impact the reader in dangerous ways, (re)inscribing the normalization of Aboriginal peoples' oppression. In order to read to decolonize, the reader must unmap the social space that April's life experiences lay out for her – that is, we as readers must constantly disagree with and challenge the novel's protagonist. No character within the novel is able to fully envision liberation, and thus the responsibility to continue that work rests with the reader. *In*

Search of April Raintree constitutes a powerful incitement for readers of Aboriginal literatures to work for decolonization.

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