Inside a Métis Community: Space, Collective Trauma, and the Impact of Colonialism

Ginevra Bianchini
Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

bianchig@tcd.ie

Abstract: With Katherena Vermette's novel *The Break* (2016) as a case study, this paper analyses a narrative that portrays an attempt of an Indigenous Canadian community to reclaim its voice, identity, and space. The plot is centred around the reconnection with land and culture, while tackling the complicated topic of epistemic violence inside Métis Canadian communities. The novel's title already frames the narrative and the importance of space in this story and in Indigenous cultures: indeed, the 'break' is the name of the land where the sexual assault takes place. This word is used to symbolize and anticipate the 'brokenness' that will define the narration: sexual violence creates a crack inside an individual, but also in society. On a more metaphorical level, the 'break' symbolizes a fracture that Indigenous communities have experienced in their personal and cultural histories and that has led to intergenerational cycles of violence. It is a metaphor of how Indigenous spaces and cultures have been shattered and violated, both physically and symbolically, by white colonialism. Throughout the story the characters are confronting the epistemic violence consequential to colonialism that has created a division within and between them, while they try to reunite with their own identities and one another through acts of 'resurgence.' Despite *The Break* is highly characterized by trauma and 'brokenness', this paper highlights how its powerful narrative deals with the possibility of healing from intergenerational trauma and of breaking cycles of violence that have been imposed on Indigenous communities.

Keywords: Indigenous studies, Intergenerational trauma, Sexual violence, The Break, Katherena Vermette

1. Introduction

In Katherena Vermette's critically acclaimed novel *The Break* (2016) the reader encounters a layered narrative structure that depicts the current living situation of Métis people in Winnipeg, Manitoba. At the centre of the story is a Métis family (see Figure 1) rocked by the tragic rape of one of their youngest daughters, Emily, and their struggle in trying to come to terms with the event. Through an ensemble-structured storytelling composed of ten different voices that alternate with each other, the author, a Métis woman as well, weaves a harrowing and intricate narrative that recounts Emily's sexual assault and its aftermath from multiple perspectives, including the perpetrator's one.

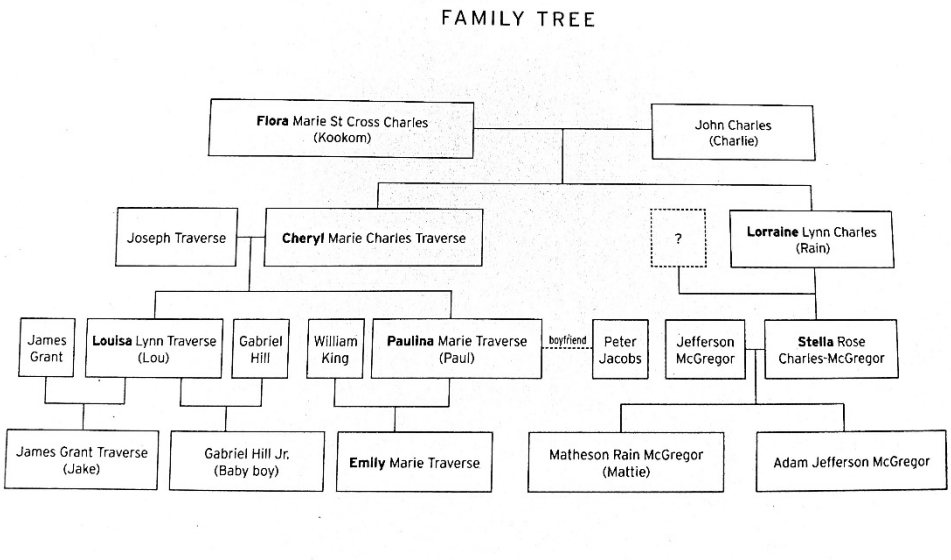

Figure 1: Family Tree, *The Break*

It is frequent in Indigenous communities and families to experience violence as a shared trauma, in which all members of the 'unit' participate, willingly or not. This form of experiencing violence doubtlessly has a stronger impact, as an event affecting one individual reverberates on entire communities. Nonetheless, it can become a strength when the main victim of the violence is trying to heal – as they have the support of the entire family/community and are helped and enabled by it. This idea of sharing a burden (but also of equally

distributing the healing aspects of it, rendering the community like a sort of 'hive mind') is strongly related to the Indigenous connection with space and land. This encapsulates both city and nature/reserve as spaces that today are equally inhabited by Indigenous people (Hanson, 2019). Emily's grandmother, Cheryl, highlights this by comparing her family to a pack of wolves: "Wolves teach humility – they teach that we are all in this together, all a part of the same whole. If something happens to one of them, they all feel it. Cheryl breathes out deep and warm, breathes in Emily's pain and gives her back all the strength she has" (Vermette, 2016). During an interview, the author points out how crucial it was to her that her story talked "about these legacies that I think many people, many Indigenous women, can relate to. And […] [that it talked] about the capabilities, and especially the fundamental necessity, of family and community in order to keep everyone strong" (Medley and Vermette, 2016). While conversing with Métis scholar Aubrey Jean Hanson instead, Vermette discusses the significance of a person's link to the space they come from and inhabit, which has even more value for Indigenous authors:

> *You understand a person based on where they come from. You understand me based on understanding how I grew up. If you don't know how I grew up, and where I grew up, and my place in the world, you understand much less about me. So that's what I did. I think that's what many Indigenous artists do [i.e. discuss space and an individual's relation with it]. Many artists of all cultures do that in some way or another. It's the idea of defining yourself and doing that form of introducing. (Hanson and Vermette, 2020)*

The author believes that space defines us culturally and that the connection we have with it shapes the way we enter society and more generally the world. This becomes especially true inside Indigenous communities, where their spirituality resides greatly in the physical spaces they inhabit. In a way, the two also mirror each other. The episode of the sexual assault itself is tightly linked to concepts of space, both physical and metaphorical, but also to the practice of renaming and reconnecting with it by the people that inhabit it. Indigenous communities have always considered nature and the environment as a sacred space, which has nonetheless been conquered, destroyed, and violated by western white imperialism. Indigenous spaces, aside from being linked to nature, have also been transferred over the bodies of their people, and especially over those that belong to women, non-binary, and Two-spirit individuals. These bodies and natural/urban spaces have become sites of conquest and violence by the hands of white imperialism in North America, with the aim to expropriate them from the Indigenous communities they belong to. In the novel there is a strong characterization of space from the beginning, quite literally in the title: the Break is in the author's words "a piece of land just west of McPhillips Street. A narrow field about four lots wide that interrupts all the closely knit houses on either side and cuts through every avenue from Selkirk to Leila, that whole edge of the North End" (Vermette, 2016). Crucially, it acts also as the setting for the rape that opens the novel. It is then emphasized from the start that space, land, and nature play a vital part in the development of the narrative. The opening of the novel progresses with a detailed description of the Break itself, providing a socio-cultural context to its existence and location in the geography of Winnipeg. It is noticeable in the author's choice of words how the Break divides the North End in a manner that almost feels violent, employing the terms 'cut' and 'interrupts.' It's not depicted as a welcoming space, but as a land that is connected to a complex cultural history that belongs to the Indigenous people who live in the neighbourhood that it so drastically divides in two.

2. Reclaiming Spaces of Trauma Through Grounded Normativity

It is crucial to notice that it is Stella, Emily's cousin, who had named this space such. Due to the location of her house on the very edge of the Break she bears witness to the aforementioned rape. This act of giving a name and an identity to an empty natural space fits within a complex postcolonial cultural wave that sees Indigenous people re-appropriating stolen land through the reversing and revising of settler-led renaming. The process of naming spaces, colonial spaces especially, is a powerful act of reassertion of control over lands that are and have always been Indigenous at heart and at the same time another way of showing how deep is the connection that their people have with any kind of space they inhabit. As Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson notes, "[e]very piece of North America is Indigenous land regardless of whether it has a city on top of it, or it is under threat, or it is coping with industrial development […] Reserves are colonial constructs, as are urban communities" (2017).

Even though the Break is an empty space of Hydroelectrical land and as Carleigh Barker underlines "[it] is defined in settler terms – land as empty and valueless until validated by electricity" (2016), the way that Stella names it, is highly symbolic of her familial and cultural story and history of intergenerational colonial trauma. It

goes back to the terra nullius concept over which Canada was founded in the first place. Indeed, the name of the space and title of the book have a symbolical meaning which discloses what is at the centre of the plot: the physical and psychological 'brokenness' of Métis people and more generally of Indigenous populations in Canada and North America. The fact that the place where the violence at the centre of the narrative takes place is called 'the Break' is crucial to understand what the effects of rape and colonial violence on Indigenous communities have been. In every context, sexual assault is an event that has the capability of breaking an individual, but in this particular instance it also symbolizes a split, a crack in society or more specifically in a community, which takes physical shape in the real, empirical space of the Break and in Stella's resistant action of naming it as such. Therefore, the title signals from the start the strong presence in Indigenous people's lives of the history of colonialism and residential schools in Canada, bringing to the surface unwritten and untold realities of 'unspeakableness' and intergenerational trauma.

The Break creates a contrast between the natural and the urban space in Winnipeg. This stark fracture is repeated in the wider Canadian landscape, where we see a fundamental interruption between the city and the reservation. Even though the Break at first sight creates a physical division between these spaces, they are extremely connected with one another in Indigenous cultures, and chiefly in this instance for a Métis community for historical reasons. Settlers have created this divide that did not exist for Indigenous cultures before colonialism, as they lived in harmony with nature and one another. Additionally, Indigenous people have stereotypically been depicted by settlers as only living in reservations, far away from the city, rendering them inexistent or invisible in the urban space. This idea was born out of the desire of North American settlers to portray in their cultural propaganda (or quite literally make) Indigenous peoples as invisible and to ghettoize them in places distant from their new urban spaces. By doing this, settlers could avoid engaging with the Indigenous people who represented a living, breathing memory of their colonial past that comprised genocide and land appropriation/dispossession. This mentality is what then created the Canadian peacemaker myth that lives on to this day and is in dire need to be deconstructed, as for instance settler scholar Paulette Regan attempts to do in her work *Unsettling the Settler Within* (2010).

However, throughout her narrative, Vermette proves how this concept of division between the natural and the urban space is only a colonial construct, since Métis and more generally Indigenous people today equally inhabit both places and have tight links with either of social, cultural, spiritual, and historical nature. Susan Birkwood comments quite interestingly on this matter, by highlighting how

> *Vermette engages in a type of reclamation in the case of certain streets. A reader unfamiliar with the North End has only to take a close look at a map of the area to see that Stella Avenue and Jefferson Avenue cross McGregor Street, while Flora Avenue crosses Charles Street and runs parallel to Stella Avenue. Flora Charles is Emily's great-grandmother, and, as mentioned earlier, Stella Charles-McGregor is a witness to the assault. Stella's spouse is Jefferson McGregor, and Jefferson Avenue is one of the streets on the western edge of the Old North End. The character names derived from the grid put the Métis family on a map otherwise populated by colonial officials, settlers, and surveyors, and they have the potential to overwrite the settler names on the original map. (2019)*

Vermette and her characters are re-appropriating their urban spaces as well, asserting their physical presence, since Métis people inhabit them and are an integral part of the city's socio-cultural landscape – more than colonizers. Despite it being a settler fabrication and a means of appropriating Indigenous spaces, this idea of separation between city and reservation/nature has created a more complex relationship with the land and with how Indigenous people perceive their cultural and spiritual worlds. Consequently, a topic often found in Indigenous cultural productions is the reconnection with nature and with spiritual roots that have been forcefully eradicated by settlers in Canada. Scholars Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Glen Coulthard designated as 'grounded normativity' and 'place-based solidarity' the physical and psychological movements that Indigenous people can practice to re-establish a link with nature and familial kinships. These terms refer

> *to the ethical frameworks provided by these Indigenous place-based practices and associated forms of knowledge. Grounded normativity houses and reproduces the practices and procedures, based on deep reciprocity, that are inherently informed by an intimate relationship to place. Grounded normativity teaches us how to live our lives in relation to other people and nonhuman life forms in a profoundly nonauthoritarian, nondominating, nonexploitive manner. (Simpson and Coulthard, 2016)*

An interesting episode where we can witness this desire to reunite and reconnect with nature is a dream sequence that Cheryl has. In this scene, she is dreaming of snowshoeing in the bush (the word they use to define wild spaces) and of following what the third-person narrator calls a "creature-woman-girl" (Vermette,

2016), as it is shapeshifting at a quick pace in her dream, from Louisa to Rain to a stranger, maybe Emily or her mother Flora – all women part of their family – to finally turn into something she cannot distinguish, a voice in the darkness that disappears in the bush. This voice continues to urge her to speed up and follow her, but Cheryl is too slow and cannot keep up. The dream creature ultimately merges with nature and fades away. This scene represents a buried desire for Cheryl to go back to the bush, to reconnect with nature, her family, and her culture. However, there is still something that prevents her from fully merging with the landscape in the same way the creature does. Even though in this passage it is expressed in a metaphorical way, Cheryl frequently voices her desire of wanting to reunite with nature and her culture in the novel. In this relationship she sees a potential for healing and rebirth – not just for herself but also for Emily.

In Indigenous narratives and in real-life the focus is often directed towards healing from violence through reconnecting with nature, culture, and the body. The potential for rebirth and cure lies in this revitalization, refuting the colonial mindset that has rendered violence endemic and intergenerational in the North End of Winnipeg. Indeed, there is a possibility for growth and redemption, for a fresh start and a way to break out of the cycle of violence – especially for those who have strong familial ties, matriarchal ones in particular. Having a well-structured safety net in the form of her family gives Emily the necessary space and support to recover from trauma. Sweat lodge ceremonies and other traditional healing methods are used by Indigenous people to re-establish sovereignty over their bodies and lands in the aftermath of colonialism and violence. Simpson mentions the use of healing circles as an example of ceremonial curative methods – especially in relation to experiences of sexual abuse. These are employed to emphasize truth-telling and accountability and to separate Indigenous people and women chiefly from concepts of victimhood that have been attributed to them. She highlights how traditional ceremony is embedded in all processes of healing and justice making:

> *The circle of healing involves support for all of the individuals and families involved. It involves the perpetrator witnessing the full impacts of his actions. It involves the larger community witnessing the full impacts of sexualized violence and an accounting for how we contribute to the epidemic levels of violence in our communities. It involves ceremony and Nishnaabeg practices of regeneration. It involves regenerating relationships. (Simpson, 2017)*

Indeed, the final episode of the novel is set at the sweat lodge in the reservation and is crucial and symbolic for the themes and the structure of the book, as it creates a narrational full circle: on the one hand, the story begins with a detailed description of the space where trauma takes place, an area that feels like a wasteland and is associated with heavy words linked to concepts of violence; on the other hand, it ends in another natural space that is, instead, welcoming and represents a place of healing and reconnection with culture, nature, the spirit world, and family. It is quite thought-provoking that this episode's narrative is told through Cheryl's point of view, exactly when we are discussing the theme of reconnecting with nature again: "Completely soaked, she crawls out into the bright day, dirt sticking to her knees. She stands tall and stretches her back out in the sun. She's spent, refreshed, and starving" (Vermette, 2016). Even though the experience of the sweat lodge is intense and tiring, it is "refreshing" and represents a symbolical rebirth, as she "crawls out" from the darkness of the lodge "into the bright day." The process of reconnecting with culture and her roots is equally complicated, as it brings her back to her origins and is an important part of re-affirmation for Indigenous people as inhabitants of those spaces that have been stolen by settlers. The experience of the sweat lodge is extremely physical in itself and allows the people practicing it to purify, to cleanse both physically and mentally, and to re-establish a more intimate and spiritual link with their own body. This practice is traditionally used in Indigenous communities as a psychotherapeutic tool to facilitate "spiritual and psychological balance" (Smith, 2005), but also to construct cultural identity and social cohesion.

Vermette frames the novel with this circular narrative that leaves the possibility of healing open for the main characters. As Paulina, Emily's mother, bluntly puts it: "We're fucked up but not fucked […] I'm going to give up feeling so hopeless. Or at least, I am going to try to feel hopeful as much as I can" (Vermette, 2016). The author highlights how space and indigeneity are tightly linked with one another and what is their relevance in the shaping of the narrative of Métis life in Canada. By practicing this reconnection Indigenous people rebuild their spaces and bodies, both physically and metaphorically, and heal from trauma. Even though the title of this novel is *The Break,* and the narrative is indeed highly characterized by trauma and 'brokenness,' this is regardless a powerful story of how it is still possible to heal from intergenerational trauma and to break out of cycles of violence. However, throughout the novel there is another distinct division that is constantly perceived between the women and the men inside the community. It appears that this separation is sometimes also reflected in the spaces that they inhabit – like there is an indirect 'gendering' of them. The women live in the city, but still feel a connection to the bush and want to re-embrace that space, as shown in Cheryl's desires. On

the other hand, the men live in the 'rez' – short for reservation – and are detached from urban life, but most importantly from the rest of the family unit that becomes mainly consisting of women. Since space has a significant cultural and spiritual value, it is crucial to pay attention to this division that has taken shape inside the communities and families, with men and women almost completely separated. Cheryl emphasizes it when thinking about her husband Joe, who has chosen to stay in the bush, separated from his family: "Yes, she should call Joe. He would want to know. He will say it's the city, the evil city, and they should have all stayed with him in the bush. Cheryl will want to tell him he should've stayed with his family no matter where they were, but she won't" (Vermette, 2016). Nonetheless, at the end of the book there is an attempt, from the women especially, to reconnect with the men of the family and recreate shared spaces for the entire unit, through the experience of the sweat lodge. From both groups there is a desire to reconnect with the space that they do not inhabit and to also reunite their families into a single unit, in order to practice resurgence together.

3. The Meanings of 'Resurgence' and 'Reconciliation'

I have been careful with using the terms resurgence and reconciliation so far, as they both hold stratified connotations for Indigenous people and settler Canadians, having been respectively coined by the two. Since the findings and the 94 'calls to action' of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) were presented in 2015, the critical and academic discussion on these terms has become more and more convoluted and controversial. The TRC was established as part of the IRS Settlement Agreement,[1] with a mandate to inform settler Canadians about what had happened in these government-sanctioned institutions. The Commission travelled around Canada and documented over a span of six years (2008 to 2015) the stories and truths of survivors or of other people who had been in some way affected by the IRS. The final report determined that residential schools had had an apocalyptic impact on Indigenous lives and had participated in a prolonged attempt to physically and culturally wipe out indigeneity from Canada, causing genocide and erasure on several levels.

Even so, the work of the TRC has been highly criticized and it is not believed to have made up for all the damage done, as it was too concerned with the reconciliation of Indigenous peoples and settler Canadians. Scholar Keavy Martin argues that the concept of reconciliation itself relies upon a form of amnesia that entails "a fixation upon *resolution* that is not only premature but problematic in its correlation with *forgetting*" (2009) and therefore places an excessive focus on the desire of the settler to atone for its mistakes. The word reconciliation – picked by settler Canadians – places excessive emphasis on a desired harmony between dominant and minority cultures, setting aside the Indigenous need for re-empowerment and self-representation. Therefore, Indigenous people and critics have begun to employ the more appropriate term 'resurgence,' which

> *unlike reconciliation, is a socio-cultural movement and theoretical framework that concentrates on regeneration within Indigenous communities. It validates Indigenous knowledges, cultures, histories, ingenuity, and continuity. Resurgence is an Indigenizing impulse; it acknowledges colonialism and domination through resistance but it does not focus solely on colonialism as the most important concern. Instead, […] [it] focuses on Indigenous communities as sites of power and regeneration. […] [it] does not focus primarily on relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. (Hanson, 2017)*

Hanson stresses how important it is to distinguish resurgence from decolonization, since the former focuses on "the process of nurturing Indigenous communities and revitalizing Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing" (2020), whereas the latter entails understanding and then taking apart the whole concept of colonialism itself. Resurgence becomes a way for Indigenous people to not be defined by their colonial trauma and histories, instead it develops into a revitalization of their cultural and spiritual values through artistic

[1] "The largest class action settlement in Canadian history to date, the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) recognized the damage inflicted on Indigenous peoples by residential schools in Canada and established a multi-billion-dollar fund to help former students in their recovery. The IRSSA, which came into effect in September 2007, has five main components: the Common Experience Payment, Independent Assessment Process, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Commemoration, and Health and Healing Services." (Tabitha de Bruin, "Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement," in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, last modified January 16, 2020, https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/indian-residential-schools-settlement-agreement#:~:text=Schools%20Settlement%20Agreement-,The%20largest%20class%20action%20settlement%20in%20Canadian%20history%20to%20date,former%20students%20in%20their%20recovery)

expression. Simpson adds the adjective 'radical' to resurgence, however with the meaning of 'root' and not 'extremist,' aiming to embody her ancestral Nishnaabeg energy this way. To her,

> *[r]adical resurgence requires a deeply critical reading of settler colonialism and Indigenous response to the current relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state. Radical requires us to critically and thoroughly look at the roots of the settler colonial present—capitalism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and anti-Blackness. Radical requires us to name dispossession as the meta-dominating force in our relationship to the Canadian state, and settler colonialism as the system that maintains this expansive dispossession. (Simpson, 2017)*

At the foundation of the concept of resurgence she situates a strong intersectional and interdisciplinary approach, which intends to dismantle western colonialism both critically and in practice. Above all, resurgence must concern itself with generating grounded normativity, the reattachment of Indigenous bodies to the land and its spirituality – whether these lands are urban or natural does not matter – by creating non-hierarchical relationships with them (Simpson, 2017). Inside the concept of radical resurgence is enclosed the notion of self-determination of Indigenous people, which is about "a vision and struggle for restructuring relations of domination" (Kuokkanen, 2019) especially in the political discourse with the state, which has always been characterized by deep inequalities. Indigenous self-determination is then a practice that aims to rebuild "the fundamental structural relation of settler colonialism as violent dispossession that extends to Indigenous lands and (women's) bodies" (Kuokkanen, 2019).

Meanwhile, there is a need for settler Canadians to dismantle the peacemaker myth they have been hiding behind. This has become an epitomizing characteristic of settler Canadian culture, a much preferrable choice to acknowledging the damage done and the trauma stemmed from colonialism in North America. Regan underlines how Canadians have been retreating to the peacemaker myth to cast themselves "as heroes on a mythical quest to save Indians" (2010), a move that denies the collective responsibility behind the treatment reserved to Indigenous peoples. According to Regan, there is a need for the descendants of settler Canadians to indeed 'unsettle the settler within,' to dismantle all the colonial beliefs at the core of western cultures that have created injustices. This would enable not only Indigenous people, but also settler Canadians to finally break free of intergenerational cycles of colonial violence.

4. Conclusion

As demonstrated throughout this paper, the concepts of resurgence and grounded normativity are at the basis of Vermette's novel, even though they are never directly mentioned. The Charles-Traverse family embarks on a healing path that is characterized by the theoretical frame that sustains the concept of resurgence. The sweat lodge episode that closes the story epitomizes the idea and employment of grounded normativity in order to regain the connection with the land and heal from colonial trauma, symbolized by the collective trauma that Emily's assault generates. The characters progress toward a reconnection not only with the physicality of their bodies and of nature, but with the cultural and spiritual spaces they inhabit in the city and in the bush. Cheryl and her daughters Lou and Paul represent this resilient attitude more than anyone else in the novel: the manner in which they are characterized emphasizes their strength and persistence in enduring trauma, as they bend but not break under its pressure. This can be noticed in one of Paul's chapters, when she learns about her daughter's hospitalization: "When Paul hangs up the phone, she doesn't think, just starts moving. That's what Paul does when something happens, she just goes. That's what they all do […]. They just go, figure out what needs doing and do it, don't think too much, don't feel anything, and don't freak out, just go. Take care of your family. Go" (Vermette, 2016). Lou uses similar words to express resilience, by saying "I turn off my brain. Don't let myself feel, don't let myself cry. I just go" (Vermette, 2016). Their endurance is what ultimately enables them to dismantle the oppressor's rule since, in Audre Lorde's words, the master's tools would never dismantle the master's house. By practicing grounded normativity, they set themselves on a healing path to recover their power and identities as Métis women, not in relation (or opposition) to the heteropatriarchy imposed by colonialism, but to non-hierarchical kinships with the land.

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