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Chapter 3

Flowing with the Stream: Real and Magical Waters in Joseph Boyden's *Through Black Spruce*

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Abstract: North American writer Joseph Boyden sets his second novel on several Native American contested landscapes where the environment undergoes the consequences of economical and political tensions between communities. However, far from being a pessimistic pamphlet denouncing the lack of sovereignty of the first nations over their land, *Through Black Spruce* displays an interesting literary plea for individual self-reinvention. Infused with myth, nature challenges its inhabitants' expectations and questions their place in reality, thus participating in the main character's personal quest for closure.

Drawing on Gaston Bachelard's works on the imagination of matter and Helen May Dennis's study of the Homing-in paradigm in Native American literature, this chapter aims to study how the permanence of water, declined in its different states throughout the novel, offers guidance to the main character towards a reinvented sense of self on postcolonial land and subsequently grounds her whole community into a reenchanting and congruous environment.

Keywords: contested landscapes, self-reinvention, totemism, reciprocity, water, ecopoetics, Native American literature, myth, postcolonial literature, environmental justice

Can the 'disenchanted' land of the reserves, a land bearing the stigmata of broken promises and false hope, be re-enchanting by literature? In contemporary novels, Native writers make a clear connection between racial

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and environmental injustice. Likewise, they highlight the necessity of healing the land, in other words reenchanting it, to heal the individuals belonging to the land. How does this re-enchantment process reconcile the novel's Western genre with the specificities of non-Western thought?

In her keynote address at the June 2016 ecopoetics conference held in Perpignan on “Dwellings of Enchantment¹,” Joni Adamson referred to the space-time continuum used by Native writers as a prominent feature of their literature. Indeed, in many indigenous novels from North America, characterization and narrative strategies draw as much on oral traditions as on immediate contemporaneity. Thus, much Native writing challenges the boundaries between realms that Western thinking holds as separate: between ancestors and their descendants, between the human and the nonhuman, between territories thousands of miles apart and yet linked by a common mythical and mystical history. In her 1986 introduction, Laguna Pueblo literary critique Paula Gunn Allen already asserted the importance of the creative flux at the core of this indigenous worldview, for it relies on the acknowledgment that nature is animated by spirit:

American Indian thought is essentially mystical and psychic in nature. Its distinguishing characteristic is a kind of magicalness—not the childish sort described by Astrov, but rather an enduring sense of the fluidity and malleability, or creative flux, of things. This is a reasonable attitude in its own context, derived logically from the central assumptions that characterize tribal thought. The tribal person perceives things not as inert, but as viable and alive, and he or she knows that living things are subject to processes of growth and change as a necessary component of their aliveness. Since all that exists is alive and since all that is alive must grow and change, all existence can be manipulated under certain conditions and according to certain laws. These conditions and laws, called 'ritual' or 'magic' in the West, are known to American Indians variously. The Sioux refer to them as 'walking in a sacred manner,' the Navajo as 'standing in the center of the world,' and the Pomo as 'having a tradition.' (Gunn Allen 1986 2)

This distinctive worldview permeates contemporary Native literature, revealing itself through the many 'magical' and eerie occurrences that disrupt the conventional realistic linearity of the narrative: “In magical realist texts, ontological disruption serves the purpose of political and cultural disruption: magic is often given as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation” (Zamora and Faris 3). Scholars do not always agree on the notion of “magical realism” to designate Native literature. Bo Schöler, for instance, prefers the use of

“mythical realism.” Native writers undeniably use magic as a tool of critical thinking to introduce alternative discourses to the dominant voice. However, magic cannot be reduced to an artificial literary device, for it is constituent of a complex system of belief. In March 2018, when asked the question: “Do you believe in magic?” by French journalist François Busnel, Ojibway novelist Louise Erdrich answered: “I don't know if it's magic. I only know that it's another form of reality. The question is not to believe or not in magic. I know these things actually happen.” In Native American worldviews, different simultaneous realities overlap and interact, giving way to magical events.

Joni Adamson articulates one aspect of the mythical or magical realism as she chooses to refer to Native American worldviews as 'cosmovisions' explaining that they are directly linked to current cosmopolitical movements seeking environmental justice along with social justice: “Cosmovisions are laying the foundation for cosmopolitics that are thousand of years in the making” (Adamson 6'30). Forming part of these endeavors, literary cosmovisions offer animalistic figures meant to be integrated as thought experiments: they act as boundary crossers thanks to their potential transformative powers inherited from the 'Dreamworld.' They are shapeshifters and, to that respect, offer mediation between the different strata of reality: “Contemporary indigenous writers weave the characteristics of anthropomorphic animals, androgynous and monstrous human figures from the oral tradition into their indigenous characters” (Adamson 5'10). These liminal beings abound in Ojibway Louise Erdrich's novels as well as in Chickasaw Linda Hogan's. This chapter focuses on the novel *Through Black Spruce*, part of a trilogy by Joseph Boyden, a Canadian writer claiming mixed Scottish, Irish, and Métis ancestry². I argue that his postcolonial ecopoetics has actively contributed to modeling the element of water into a thought experiment by rewriting and reinventing totemism. In his novels, the multidimensional nature of water often opens the doors of perception, giving the protagonists access to a panel of renewed versions of themselves while grounding the characters into contested landscapes. In their introduction to the *Studies in American Indian Literatures* “Water is Life: Ecologies of Writing and Indigeneity” special issue, scholars Christina Boyles and Hilary E. Wyss note that “[w]ater inherently is linked with both sovereignty and climate change” (Boyles and Weiss 5). They explain that “water forms and re-forms the land, bringing structure and change to our ways of life” (Boyles and Wyss 5). This elemental plasticity is a key feature found in Joseph Boyden's novels. Thanks to it, water reveals the Native characters' inner disparities and challenges their assumptions. Doing so compels them to confront the intricacies of their hybrid identities as postcolonial subjects in between two cultures.

Through Black Spruce comes second in the trilogy while forming part of a five-novel cycle, two of which are still to be written. The three novels issued so far display a similar narrative structure, alternating several characters' first-person interior monologues. They are related by a close genealogy tying different generations of the same family together³. The first novel, *Three Day Road*, narrates Xavier Bird's return home after fighting during World War I. The novel starts with the reunion of two main characters, both Canadian Crees, Xavier, and his aunt Niska on the train platform. It unfolds as they make their three-day canoe journey back to Moosonee in northern Ontario. During this travel, which parallels the three-day journey of the newly deceased souls to the realm of the dead in Cree cultures⁴, Xavier and Niska go back in time to retrieve memories about the combat zone (Xavier) and the end of her tribal bush life (Niska). In *Three Day Road*, water acts as an essential channel toward healing: it literally carries both characters on their way back to the Ancestors' land and metaphorically frees their voices by allowing them to put their personal ordeals into words, the stream of words embracing the pace of the river. Boyden's third novel, *The Orenda*, takes place in 1640 in an unspecified location in the Canadian outback. Three characters, Snow Falls, a young Iroquois girl, Christophe, a French missionary, and Bird, a fierce Huron warrior who abducted them, each tell their versions of the gruesome events that eventually led to the entanglement of their destinies. The three characters travel along the net of rivers flooding the land and, they do so, weave close ties between cultures which thereon start to share a common and yet contested history, thus prefiguring future Canada and announcing its enduring social inequities between the First Nations and the descendants of European colonists. In this novel, water operates as both a geographical link between people and a battlefield, absorbing the blood shed in the name of conquest and keeping the memory of past struggles.

As for *Through Black Spruce*, it is set nowadays in Moosonee, northern Ontario, a faraway city situated on the James Bay shore. The story adopts the perspectives of two homodiegetic narrators: Will Bird, Xavier's son, and Annie, his niece. At the novel's beginning, Will is in a coma after a brutal attack. In his mind, he speaks to his nieces, Annie and Suzanne. He then evokes past tragedies, explains what deed constrained him to fly up north into the bush, and what ordeals he thereafter met before being able to rebuild his sense of self. Meanwhile, urged by the hospital nurses to talk to the unconscious man, Annie begins to narrate the hardships she faced when she went down south looking for Suzanne, her missing sister who had left for the cities of Toronto, Montreal, and New York City to become a model. Her meaningful trip will not allow her to find Suzanne, who will reappear at the novel's end without giving any explanation. However, Annie's travel from one city to the next gradually evolves into an initiatory journey and eventually brings her closure. Thus,

Will's and Annie's narratives similarly give their accounts of past events without answering each other directly. Nevertheless, the act of storytelling, because it takes place once the protagonists have regained their familiar landscape, in other words, reserve grounds, makes their analogous trials significant and fully relevant. The intermingling narratives make sense of what happened and what is still to come by inscribing the characters' destinies into heroic cycles.

The unromanticized landscape described in the novel shows the crude reality of an isolated city affected by unemployment, poverty, alcoholism, and drugs. Likewise, the depiction of the bush, a remote flat marshland with a harsh climate, reveals its inherent roughness. At the same time, Joseph Boyden depicts its fragility owing to the aggressions of Western consumerism as when Will notices plastic refuse thrown back on the Bay James shore after a storm. In the novel, men and nature are subjected to similar pressure; environmental injustice mirrors social injustice as, to borrow Joni Adamson's expression, all *earth beings* undergo the same lack of consideration.

Water completely shapes the novel's territory: the Moose River, which links Moosonee to the island of Moose Factory; a myriad of streams and the multitude of lakes cover the outback, and heavy snow seasonally covers the scenery. It forms part of the Canadian Shield hydrographic basin, a vast region spreading from the Dakotas to the Atlantic Ocean and from Indiana to the Arctic Ocean. Among others, it encompasses the sources of two major North American rivers, namely the St Lawrence and the Mississippi, as well as the five Great Lakes. Home of the Algonquin nations, this once unified linguistic and cultural territory was split into two separate countries. The land thus contains the history of intersecting forms of violence: not only colonial forces thus severed the historical link between the Native populations, but also, they restricted these peoples' movements by assigning them specific reserve land away from coveted natural resources. Furthermore, authorities created a distinctive legal status belittling Autochthons as wards. The situation resulted in what Paula Gunn Allen referred to as the "Separation Trauma," a literary trope permeating Native fiction that she defines in such terms:

Consider the use of the experience of enslavement in works by black writers. [...] For us, the whole issue of enslavement is part of the issue of conquest and colonization. In that context, it becomes a theme that shows frequently in Native writers' stories about jail, boarding school, war, and abduction. In all of these stories, the underlying theme is about forced separation, signifying the loss of self and the loss of personal meaning. (Gunn Allen 1989 8)

However, far from being a pessimistic pamphlet denouncing the lack of Native sovereignty, Boyden's novel offers a compelling plea for individual self-reinvention. Indeed, having accomplished their water-driven initiatory journeys (delving into the darkest depths as well as being washed away by the fastest streams), Annie and Will's renewed glance over the familiar landscape re-infuses the latter with myth, re-enchanting and reinvesting places with a long-lost, symbolical meaning.

In their introduction to the collection of essays entitled *Sounding the Depths: Water as Metaphor in North American Literature*, Gayle Wurst and Christine Raguét-Bouvard note the prominence of a doubleness of water in North American literature. Quoting 18th-century French-American writer St Jean de Crèvecoeur, they observe his water metaphors: “[Rushing water] is a horizontal image, one of the violent collision between *surfaces*, but the inherent doubleness of water metaphors also makes them an excellent vehicle for figurative exploration of *depth*” (Wurst and Raguét-Bouvard 2). Later on, Bernadette Rigal-Cellard explores the use of water symbolism by Ojibway writer Louise Erdrich, setting her novel on the same territory: the Canadian shield. Bernadette Rigal-Cellard then states: “In a land ridden with overflowing rivers and lakes, and covered half the year in lethal snow and ice, the symbolism of water cannot but be polysemous, implying death and excruciating suffering just as often as life and happiness” (Rigal-Cellard 1998 167). Undeniably, the intersecting tales in *Through Black Spruce* also draw on polysemous and ambiguous water images to challenge the characters' perceptions and bring them to face their inner turmoils.

In this chapter, I intend to address the different functions held by water in the novel: I will first explore the notion of whitewater, a water in motion providing a means of travel. Then I will analyze the images used by the characters of pure water as transformative water. Finally, I will study the dense and malleable totemic water that helps characters achieve self-reconciliation. By doing so, I will show how establishing a dialog with the elements of an ambivalent nature allows the Native characters of the novel to reinvent their identity.

Whitewater: Water in Motion

Even though Boyden sets his plot on contemporary ground, the novel regularly refers to traditional practices such as hunting, trapping, and fishing, albeit performed with modern tools. Indeed, the narrators make significant allusions to water acting as a useful commodity and still playing a central role in the characters' subsistence. Water has long been essential to the inhabitants of this faraway land. It was a means of travel, a surface sometimes liquid, sometimes frozen which served as roads to indigenous people, as well as a means of subsistence, a depth where to fish and harvest wild rice in the

good season, and trap animals during wintertime. In *Through Black Spruce*, Annie daily rides her skidoo on the Moose River back and forth to the hospital where Will lies. Likewise, throughout the novel, Will and his friend Dorothy visit each other, borrowing the river taxis. Further on, Will flies away to the outback thanks to his hydroplane, hopping from rivers to lakes.

Meanwhile, Annie and Will regularly use the ancestral knowledge of hunting, especially of beaver trapping, to catch some meat and sell the furs to the store. Accomplishing this gesture, they acknowledge the cultural value of having such skills and also acknowledge the ritual value of hunting and trapping. For instance, Annie asserts this immemorial technique as proof of the common cultural inheritance of the Great Canadian shield Algonquin tribes. She is also grateful for the first catch given: "Just as you always taught me, our first gift from the water is a kit" (Boyden 2010 323). Through its diverse uses, water contributes to ground and legitimate the main characters in a specific *hic et nunc* encompassing every human/non-human interaction that has occurred on the land.

French anthropologist Emmanuel Désveaux, who lived many years among the Big Trout band, the farthest north residing band of the Ojibway nation, notices that the Indians living on this territory have developed unusual mental cartography where streams, rivers, and lakes prevail. He also observes that their spatial awareness defies our western cartography logic, granting the same river or lake several names according to the specific features of their different parts. Hence, their mental projection of space proceeds from punctual locations subservient to hunting and fishing necessities: "A significant homology exists between the Indians' representation of the hydrographic network and their general apprehension of space. This homology reveals the primacy of dots over lines" (Désveaux 26). The Algonquin nations do not rely on mapped roads but instead, picture dots that they can connect according to their traveling needs. Every dot is thus reinvested, generation after generation, by each visitor who adds the memory of a miraculous catch, an unsatisfactory hunting, an unexpected storm, or desperately thin ice even at the core of winter. Indeed, Algonquin geography consists, first of all, of a lived and fully experienced geography, in places time and time again strode upon, and indeed not the Western fantasy of a *terra incognita* that the white settlers developed when entering the Canadian bush.

Emmanuel Désveaux adds: "From a certain point of view, this perpetual rediscovery of the territory, though not quite being one, amounts to its reappropriation" (Désveaux 43). Paralleling Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms* initiatory journey on water for which three women rely on the older one's youth memories to find their way back to the ancestors' land⁵, Boyden's protagonists comply with this Native figuration of a lived geography where

places are cyclically re-engaged with each new experience and each new memory, and where imagination links the meaningful spots according to the traveling needs. Will flies his hydroplane from Moosonee to Atimiski island, where he hides. He then flies to Fort Albany on the Ghost river and back to Moosonee. Likewise, Annie leaves Moosonee to settle momentarily in three cities of water; in other words, cities situated on a river or a lake and comprising an island in their territory. She goes to Toronto on Lake Superior, then Montreal on the St Lawrence, and lastly to New York City on the Hudson River. Her many travels along the equilateral triangle thus formed are never narrated, for only the adventures experienced on those three points that define the triangle, mirror images of the initial city, prove relevant. "This city like Montreal times ten, like Moose Factory times a million, the island of Manhattan surrounded by rivers. I can't escape the rivers. I'm not meant to escape islands, either, apparently" (Boyden 2010 224).

At the beginning of her journey in Toronto, as she is looking for her sister, Annie is led to homeless Indians who have settled by the river. She is told to "Head toward the water" (Boyden 2010 78) to reach them. Their chief, a trickster figure who drinks Perrier out of bottles wrapped in brown paper bags, assigns her a protector in the person of Gordon, a mute urban Ojibway who cannot put into words the trauma he has suffered. Old Man then commands her to comply with her mission. A double water, both surface of displacement and depth of experience, thus compels Annie to achieve a quest from which she cannot withdraw as she clearly phrases it: "All I want is to go home, but something in me believes him when he tells me I don't have a home anymore till I travel further" (Boyden 2010 102). Each and every city that Annie explores belongs to the long-lost Algonquin territory. Each and every one of them reflects the deceitful image of another possible version of her life as she steps into her sister's shoes and becomes a model.

In "Native American Novels: Homing-In," William Bevis, having studied the Native American Renaissance novels, posited a recurrent literary trope in which damaged Indian characters needed to regain reserve ground in order to heal. In his article, Bevis opposed this *Homing-In* paradigm to the *Bildungsroman* structure in which the Western hero leaves home for faraway places in search of personal accomplishments⁶. However, most recent Native fictions sustain a more complicated and ambivalent relation to home. In Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*, the protagonists already live on the reserve, and they remain on it with the notable exception of Fleur leaving for the city by the end of the last chapter. In her other novel *Shadow Tag*, the characters stay in the city from the beginning to the end. In David Treuer's novels, also an Ojibway writer, either the characters do not leave the reserve and evolve in this closed world (*Little*), or the anti-hero departs to the city without regret at the

beginning of the story and will not set foot on reserve ground again (*The Translation of Dr. Apelles*), or still one of the main characters, Simon, intends to perform some sort of *Homing-In* in order to put himself back together, but fails and has no other solution than going back to the city (*The Hiawatha*). Scholar Pdraig Kirwan has compared Treuer's different narrative structures. He observes:

Simon's dislocation, although reflecting many similarities to the difficulties experienced by Tayo [in *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko] and Abel [in *House Made of Dawn* by Scott Momaday], is a very different narrative arc to those found earlier in Native American novels. For him [...] the archetypal association between traditional home and the recovered self is far too insufficient to carry the family story or bring [him] "respite." (Kirwan 11)

In her book, *Native American Literature: Towards a Spatialized Reading*, critic Helen May Dennis thus quotes Native novelist Louis Owens: "Today [...] Euroamerica remains involved in an unceasing ideological struggle to confine Native Americans within an essentialized territory defined by the authoritative utterance 'Indian.' Native Americans, however, continue to resist this ideology of containment and to insist upon the freedom to reimagine themselves within a fluid, always shifting frontier space" (Owens 27). Later on, Helen May Dennis underlines the active process of imaginative synthesis that hustles narratives by decentering the archetype of *Home*.

In Boyden's novels, the characters' motion adopts the dynamics of an upward spiral that allows readers to rediscover Moosonee with each new generation. They are born and bred on the ancestors' land; they leave this cherished territory for faraway places that reveal, through an array of similarities, the magical value of the original landscape; then, they come back home to narrate their journey and, through this storytelling, they symbolically regenerate their sense of place. Water connects their personal memories and projects the protagonists into a movement of self-reinvention: "Though water expresses a great spectrum of meanings, the most prominent one associates it with individual memory, tribal memory and home" (Rigal-Cellard 1998 166). This element contains the first memories and adds to them the successive memories of new events lived on the initial territory as well on the analogous territories. It operates through the many moments of contemplation of surfaces that act as many meditative pauses which absorb the recollection of the many experienced ordeals. Moreover, thanks to its inherent plasticity, water, pervading the narratives in all its phases, enables displacement and evolution, hence reenchanting familiar landscapes by casting a new light on them as when, after a three-day storm, Will can eventually open his door:

When I emerged, the world was a different place [...] This town, my world, was frozen so still it looked like a photograph, the photograph of what this town wished it could be [...] Roofs of houses overhung with wind-carved drifts, the ratty yards, the litter of broken bicycles and dolls and children's missing running shoes, all under dazzling white. The once dusty road, pothole ridden and washboarded, was now a glittering diamond of ice stretching into the sun. (Boyden 2010 345)

Snow has embossed a new geography. By subsuming the city into the immaculate bush, it offers Will a last motionless journey through which he discovers a symbiosis of both environments that synthesizes every landscape he has experimented with during his getaway.

Pure Water: Ablutions and Transformations

Through displacement and territory reappropriation, the characters acknowledge the spiritual capital of a landscape infused with myth. While proceeding to mental cartography, the members of the Ojibway tribe studied by Emmanuel Désveaux do not merely figure landmarks on a commodity territory. They endorse the existence of an ambivalent reality: each creek, each part of the river is relevant to their imagination because they are both real and magical, both a means of subsistence ruled by seasons and a mythical place where one can interact with ancestors. In *Through Black Spruce*, Will and Annie are given access to a parallel reality. Guided by water and confronted with an array of visions and supranatural apparitions that challenge their perception of reality, they are granted the opportunity to re-establish an ancestral link to mythical times.

In Montreal, where she quenches her tremendous thirst with bottled water, Annie enters a trance of hybrid nature mixing both traditional rituals and western drugs. Lost in a hype night-club, her senses, awakened by Ecstasy, are captured by the haunting rhythm of synthesized Indian chanting. A “fulgurance” then strikes her: so far from home, she has reached the Great Primeval Ocean, the breeding ground of humankind: “People flow around me, the sweat of their arms the salt of the ocean. Oh my god! That makes perfect sense. We once came from the ocean, and we are mostly water. I am in an ocean of people” (Boyden 2010 147). A few pages later, she reaffirms this common origin (“We crawled out of the ocean millions of years ago. Humans are mostly water” Boyden 2010 150) and concludes: “This is why I live by a river.” Everything brings her back to a liquid universal home. She then starts to deconstruct her identity, playing with common stereotypes and alternately adopting distinctive status referring to her plural origins: a French woman, an Indian princess, and the fake naivety of a bush girl. By doing so, she gradually

recovers her Native language. She makes use of it to mock her discussion partners: “I begin speaking Cree in earnest now, the words at first awkward and chosen poorly, telling Soleil that her hair is green, she has small tits, that she is too skinny and needs to eat more moose meat. Oohs and aahs come from Soleil, and then from the ones around her” (Boyden 2010 262). Thus, the Great Primeval Ocean also echoes the flood of the Algonquin myth of origins and its ambivalent water, both destructive and re-creative. According to the legend, a terrible flood submerged the first version of the world and left the animals previously created afloat. Willing to reconstruct what had been lost, they begged Sky Woman to come and live with them. Big Turtle lent its back to welcome the goddess and her future babies. Muskrat dived into deep waters to retrieve a handful of dirt. Sky Woman then breathed life on the dirt, and the universe was created anew on Turtle Island, the Americas⁷: a world on fragile balance, floating on an endless ocean.

This powerful mythical water resurfaces in the numerous ablution scenes of the novel as a transformative water that reveals inner personalities through an anamorphosis process. Throughout the novel, water, associated with mirrors, and its metaphorical extensions, disrupts the protagonists' perception of selves. More than once, Annie splashes her face, and the image sent back by the mirror shows Suzanne's face: “[I] am startled by Suzanne's face staring at me from the mirror, water dripping off the sharp cheekbones” (Boyden 2010 37). This scene is the first transformation narrated in the novel and, in the meantime, the last to occur according to chronology. In contrast, at the beginning of her journey, when in Toronto, and while feeling lonely and irrelevant, Annie does not recognize her sister's face in a magazine ad: “[...] a woman with black hair tied back, splashing water across her face that shimmers in tiny droplets” (Boyden 2010 83). The magazine's glossy pages represent a figurative mirror surface that blurs limits and alters reality, thus revealing the instability of the characters' essences.

In Montreal, before immersing herself in her sister's life, Annie takes a hot shower to wash away her bush girl identity. Lost in the steam, she catches glimpses of her reflection in the mirror, but the situation proves reversed: her reflection looks at her and judges her through her “devil eye.” Her attention remains polarized by this other self, and she keeps addressing the mirror while talking to Gordon: “I see Gordon staring up at me in the mirror. “I'm going out.” I say to my reflection” (Boyden 2010 124). Progressively, mirror reflections become more real to Annie than the world surrounding her. Meanwhile, she undergoes an actual physical transformation: she loses weight, wears elaborate make-up, is dressed in trendy clothes, and learns to walk on the catwalk. At first, fascinated by the image of her evolving appearance, she is seized by vertigo, after taking drugs, at the exact middle of the novel.

Suzanne was here. She slept in this bed, and wore this shirt that I now wear, high across my bust.

“I recognize you!” Violet says. She doesn't seem to care that I feel like I'm going to drown now [...] She leads me to the mirror and hovers right behind.

I take a breath and open my eyes. I can't quite believe what stares back. I see the long black hair first, then the tall, thin body. The high cheekbones. Then I see the bright eyes. What has happened?

I can see you, sister. I see you, Suzanne. (Boyden 2010 204)

Having first engaged in self-effacement, then endorsed an alien, and yet, so close identity, Annie finally accepts to move on and is reborn to herself. At the end of this painful journey, feeling at peace, she contemplates the Hudson River and feels ready to go back to Moosonee: “It's been a long way to New York City, and I'm ready to head home, paddle with the current for a while” (Boyden 2010 328).

This process is made possible by the intrinsic virtues of magical transformative water, for it possesses “an active and substantial purity,” to borrow Gaston Bachelard's terms. In that regard, it is analogous to baptismal water: “Water is truly a transient element, the essential ontological metamorphosis between fire and earth. Beings committed to water are trapped in vertigo. They die every minute, for a part of their substance flows steadily away” (Bachelard 164). Indeed, whereas Annie experiences this metamorphosis vertigo by becoming her sister, Will is eager to immerse in the *Fountain of Youth* to retrieve a previous version of himself: “If I ever came back, I would come back reborn” (Boyden 2010, 181). At the beginning of his narrative, he admits to having become a mere shadow of his former self. He lost his wife and sons to a fire and turned to alcohol: “I've always been the bush man in this town. I've been the hunter, the trapper, the feeder of mouths. A thing passed on from father to son, and I was the one in possession of it. But it was slipping from me” (Boyden 2010 61). His physical and social decline then mirrors his community's, for Moosonee is subjected to domination by a gang of drug dealers. One day, Will retaliates, shooting one of them. He subsequently initiates a twofold self-reconstruction process by walking into his father's footsteps: first through action (he shoots a man, he hides in the bush, and survives thanks to traditional hunting and trapping), second in the flesh (like his father who lost a leg, Will suffers physically as well: his left leg is injured, he becomes emaciated and grows his hair).

Then, at the exact middle of the novel, he too experiences an epiphany: he drinks alcohol and enters a trance that makes him realize his metamorphosis: “I lay down on my blanket, stared down at my long body and really admired it for the first time. My gut was all but gone [...] [My arms] were as roped with muscle as when I was twenty-one [...] I felt something I'd not in a long time. I felt young and useful again. I felt powerful” (Boyden 2010, 212). Exhilarated, he undresses and immerses himself in the lake, confronting death: “The water pulled me, and I didn't fight it. My lungs ached and my chest began to pulse and spasm, wanting to suck in air. But if I opened my mouth now, I would fill with water and drown” (Boyden 2010 212). As he receives the vision of Suzanne's face, he finds the strength to get out of the water. Like Annie, he has experienced a mock death by drowning and is subsequently reborn thanks to Suzanne's apparition. He then enters a process of symbolic return to the earth: he covers himself with mud to become, according to his own terms, “invisible” and follows a stream leading to the skeleton of a beached whale. He enters this open-air cathedral and lies down, finally at peace. After this mystical experience, Will prepares for his return to civilization.

Totemic Water and Self-Reconciliation

The combination of the different waters appearing in the novel leads to the materialization of a porous frontier zone between different realities (the familiar territory transposed into other places), different times (the various stages of life), and between the world of the missing (whether dead or just absent) and the living. Lakes and islands seen from above become eyes witnessing Will and Annie's life path, whereas Will, staring at the lake's surface, catches a glimpse of his deceased wife. In her thesis directed by David Treuer, academic Jennifer Miller thus defined the purpose of such water frontier zones as found in many Native American novels: “The boundaries that appear in these texts serve as physical representations of interstitial spaces, thus functioning not as barriers or sites of separation, but as spaces of movement and coming together that facilitate the entry of the fantastic into the text” (Miller 16). This liminal space, allowing an area of negotiation between the contradictory elements of self and other, is characteristic of totemic water intervening as a catalyst providing energy for change. In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Victor Turner analyzes liminality as the transient phase taking place in rites of passage, a “betwixt and between” state in which neophytes experiment with the coexistence of antagonist identities:

The attributes of liminality or liminal *personae* (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate

states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arranged by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. (Turner 95).

Water's substantial plasticity allows for this ontological ambiguity to take shape. It represents a fluid space of exchanges between realities that enables the protagonists to make complex alliances with totemic powers.

In *Through Black Spruce*, Will is under the influence of a deadly totem, the Mauser his father acquired during the war and whose voice convinces him to retaliate against his assailants. In the meantime, he develops a special relationship with an old bear, the incarnation of a benevolent tutelary spirit. Nonetheless, both influences on Will cannot be reduced merely to a conflicting binary opposition of good to evil, for the combined energy of this triangular relation replaces, at its core, necessary violence. Indeed, sometimes after the whale cathedral episode, a polar bear, the combinatorial variant of the familiar old bear, attacks Will's camp, and the latter's survival is only insured by his use of the Mauser on the beast. Later on, to achieve his rite of passage, Will attains the Ghost River, a place haunted by the memory of a fur-trading post thus peopled by the ghosts of Indians as well as of the first white settlers: "The abandoned settlement lay just the hill and in a grown-over clearing. Fort Albany Cree called it *chipayak e ishi ihtacik*, whispered it was full of ghosts, and they are the ones, I guess, who gave this river its name." (Boyden 2010 295). There, reality is reversed. A supranatural storm makes the river run sideways. Seen through a pane of glass Will dug out of the ruins, the world seems distorted: his hand suddenly looks like a claw, branches turn into black serpents, and the river becomes a lava flow. Unnerved by the permeating ambivalence thus revealed, Will breaks the glass and finally feels ready to go back to Moosonee after completing his rite of passage.

Many other contemporary Native fictions, among which are Louise Erdrich and David Treuer's novels, make use of this hybrid totemism to challenge the characters' certitudes and bring them to redefine their identity. In each of these novels, deep and furious water, whether an untamed river or a bottomless lake, asserts itself as an interface to mythical times, performing as the only substance where totems can be born and, in turn, annihilated. Indeed, all literary representations of totemic water retain, in their nature, a part of the primal totemic water as portrayed in the Ojibway myth of the first totems. According to this myth, six supranatural and anthropomorphic beings were born out of the ocean. They decided to go and live with humans to teach them essential knowledge. However, due to their magical origin, they had to control their incommensurable power; otherwise, their sacredness could kill mortals. One of them, in particular, needed to keep a blindfold and was

forbidden to lay eyes on humans. Unfortunately, he disobeyed, and his glance struck a man who died instantly. The other five beings condemned him to dive back into the ocean, the only substance potent enough to contain sacred powers. The five remaining beings became the first five totems of the Ojibway clans: crane, catfish, loon, bear, and marten⁸. Thanks to its fundamental ability to shapeshift from solid to liquid, from liquid to gas, and back again, water materializes an open door to the invisible realm. In *Through Black Spruce*, it pervades the characters' reality using all its possible physical states and re-infuses totemic magic in their environment.

Boyden's novel begins with Will's description of the *Dreamworld*, a world made entirely of water in all its forms, which has enveloped him completely since he fell into a coma: "The snow's deep here, nieces. I'm tired, but I have to keep walking. I'm so tired, but I've got to get up or I'll freeze to death. Talking to you, it keeps me warm" (Boyden 2010 5). If cold water (snow and ice) predominates, another warm water, a river stream of voices, pushes him onward. He feels attracted to it but fears its power and dreads drowning in its strong current. At the end of the novel, as he stands dangerously at the edge of the liminal zone, Will grows bolder: "Now that I am beside this river, I finally understand how I've gotten here. I can put it into words. Just under the current, I hear the babbling of voices. They are the voices of my family and of my friends. They are excited. They are happy. I'm warm again here, even if the right side of my face stills feels frozen. The river's sound is pleasant, and the sun through the spruce makes me sleepy" (Boyden 2010 382).

The novel makes use of the duality of totemic water: on the one hand, real water soaking the territory with its magic, and on the other hand, the figurative flow of water that carries both protagonists' narratives. It forms waves of emotions that are said to "wash over" the characters. It also manifests through the liberated speeches that make sense of past ordeals, "heal with words" and consequently restore cosmogony. When she returns, Annie states: "The world really did shift on its axis during my time down south" (Boyden 2010 367). Back in town, Will notices that the world has finally become "complete," that Moosonee has turned into "the perfect place." Thanks to the stream of language, the protagonists achieve the reconciliation of the fragments of a shattered identity. The novel ends with the happy picture of a reconstituted clan comprising family members (Will, his sister Lisette and his nieces Annie and Suzanne), white and Indian friends (Gregor and Joe), new lovers (Gordon and Dorothy), and the departed: "A cool wind blows off the bay, and waves splash against my canoe. The sun shines on the salt water all around me. My lost one, my two lost ones, walk closer" (Boyden 2010 404). Their gathering on Xavier's winter hunting camp on the Bay James shore, near the mouth of the Moose River, then mirrors the many family reunions Will and

Annie had participated to on that very spot when Xavier was still alive. The novel concludes on a note of hope, Will asserting: “I’ll be fine” (Boyden 2010 404) as every member of the reconstituted clan reaches out to help him stand on the beach. His use of the modal *will* leaves no doubt as to the result of his personal rite of passage: although physically impaired, Will has reconquered an active sense of self. The dense and malleable material of totemic water thus enables Will and his relatives to reinvest a hybrid identity, reinvent the notion of the clan and operate the reappropriation of their vernacular territory by attaching a new shared memory to it.

Conclusion

Joseph Boyden's reenchantment of the land dwells on what Huggins calls a “literary water ecology” (Huggins 54). Boyden infuses this element with magic and symbolism to guide his characters toward closure. Resisting the Western stereotype of an untouched wilderness—the only one worth preserving according to mainstream thinking—the novelist urges us to reinvest in a lived and inhabited nature, an ever-changing land that forms part of the great circle of life, for, as Leslie Marmon Silko so rightly explained: “Those who claim to love and protect the Mother Earth have to love all of her, even the places that are no longer pristine” (Silko 1991 95).

I would like to conclude this chapter by quoting Bernadette Rigal-Cellard again “The protagonists [of Native American novels] must learn to decipher the signs that surround them and engage into a semiology of day-to-day life, for it duplicates the semiology of the spiritual world that governs and controls us” (Rigal-Cellard 2004 254). Indeed, the many waters of *Through Black Spruce* form a complex network of connections between the visible and invisible realms. Reversing polarities and upsetting the perception of reality, they act as a hall of mirrors, eventually unveiling the underlying magic of the landscape. While deciphering those many signs, the characters sustain a reciprocal relationship with their environment: their renewed glance over familiar grounds re-enchants the territory, which, in turn, sustains their initiatory journeys. Because they willfully enter this dynamic process, Annie and Will, and through them their whole clan, redefine a new way of being in the world, making it the sum of a multiplicity of complementary potentialities and overcoming exclusive propositional logic: being Indian or white, being defeated or victorious, maintaining a traditional way of life or integrating mainstream society. As Joni Adamson so accurately notices in *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place*, when she analyzes the actions of Louise Erdrich's boundary crosser character, Nanapush: “Struggling for alternative visions of the world then requires a knowledge not only of the vernacular landscape but of the official one as well.

Moving intelligently and cautiously between two landscapes, Nanapush opens both to the possibility of reinterpretation and re-signification, and finds tools to create new ceremonies and new knowledges in both places” (Adamson 2001 111). Like Angel, the main character in *Solar Storms*, who sheds her skin to discover a renewed version of herself, the protagonists in *Through Black Spruce*, Annie et Will, are ritually reborn after unmasking inner selves that were previously hidden under inadequate corporeal shells. Thanks to the water element, the novel gives the characters access to multifaceted landscapes where they feel embedded and regain confidence in their ability to make sense of any new context. In that regard, Boyden offers a remarkable illustration of Gerald Vizenor's *Survivance* concept: “Survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survival name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy and victimry” (Vizenor vii). Having developed a privileged bond with real and magical waters, Boyden's protagonists give a clear rebuttal to the *vanishing Indian* stereotype. Being neither victims, nor super-heroes, but only profoundly human, Boyden's Indians are in the place, still in the place, and clearly decided to endure.

Notes

¹ Joni Adamson's keynote address can be accessed in its entirety at <http://ecopoetics.perpignan.com/watch-videos-keynotes-writers-and-academics/>

² Joseph Boyden's claims are at the core of ongoing controversy as many people contest the veracity of his Native identity. The issue has divided the aboriginal community as Native writers, journalists, and artists have vigorously taken a side on the matter. For instance, Salish novelist Lee Maracle supports Boyden, pointing out a destabilization attempt. She argues that the proof-based colonial system—compelling individuals to show official documents assessing the tribal enrollment of their ancestors—is a doomed process that deprives Indian nations of valuable members. Other prominent figures, such as Nooksack journalist Robert Jago, have denounced the opportunistic maneuver of a “Wannabe” Indian who has falsified his identity. Despite the boiling debate over his ancestry, Boyden's writing still falls in the category of Native studies. Displaying a complex entanglement of culturally informed patterns and subtle work on narrative structures, his novels deserve to be analyzed within the specific framework of postcolonial studies.

³ By doing so, Joseph Boyden clearly adopts the narrative patterns used early on by Ojibway novelist Louise Erdrich. Throughout her 16 novels, she developed a complex web of interconnected families going back and forth between the epoch of first contacts and contemporary times. Often complementary and sometimes contradictory, the many personal narratives construed by the author offer access to a multifaceted reality of the 'Native American experience.'

⁴ In Cree cultures, the wake lasts for three days and three nights, during which friends and relatives take turns telling stories to the deceased. Crees believe that, during that wake, the soul of the deceased accomplishes a journey to the afterlife where he or she is welcome by the Ancestors. While articulating the main events occurring in the life of the loved one and recalling Creation stories, mourners ensure him or her a safe passage to the realm of the dead. Likewise, they heal their own sorrow.

⁵ In "Writing a Way Home: Magical Realism, Liminality, and the Building of a Biotic *Communitas* in Linda Hogan's *Solar Storm* and *People of the Whale*," Bénédicte Meillon appropriately labels this movement "a return to the *οἶκος* through ecopoetic, magical realist prose" (Meillon 207). To heal and eventually find closure, the three women need to connect to this "liminal geograph[y] in between land and water, providing contact zones in postcolonial situations" (Meillon 208). Immersing in this highly symbolic landscape enables Native characters to challenge assigned representations for the many metamorphoses of water contribute, as we shall see later on, to grant access to a renewed being in the world. Telling and retelling the water-driven journeys through the prism of the Ancestors' stories, assesses the place of the Native characters in the set of connections linking the human world and the nonhuman world: "Essentially, albeit ruled by mystery and spirituality, [Linda Hogan's] magical realist fiction in many ways proves coherent with an ecological understanding of the world" (Meillon 210). Joseph Boyden's novels comply with this narrative discourse.

⁶ In "Native American Novels: Homing-In," William Bevis compares the narrative structures of D'Arcy McNickle's *The Surrounded* (1936) and *Wind from an Enemy Sky* (1978), Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1966), Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974) and *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979). He is then able to determine a common pattern that brings the characters back to the land of their ancestors: "All six novels present a Western "self" seeking to transfer energy to a tribal context" (Bevis 1987 618).

⁷ Basil Johnston gives a more comprehensive account of this myth of origins in *The Manitou: The Spiritual World of the Ojibways* (xv).

⁸ The five initial totems evolve into a plurality of other totemic species. The full account of the myth and its development is found in W. W. Warren's *History of the Ojibways* (43).

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