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Volkswagen Blues Twenty-Five Years Later: Revisiting Poulin's Pitsémine

Heather Macfarlane

The year 2009 marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of Governor General's Award-winner Jacques Poulin's popular novel *Volkswagen Blues*. The novel, dubbed "roman culte" by *Le Soleil* and "one of the best novels of the 1980s" by *Le Devoir*, was written in 1984 and translated into English by Sheila Fishman in 1988, after winning the Prix Québec-Belgique. Poulin later won the prestigious Prix Athanase-David for his contribution to Quebec literature, and *Volkswagen Blues*, further described by *Devoir* columnist François Hébert as "Un grand, un très beau livre," continues to hold a prominent position not only in Québécois but also in Canadian literary histories. The novel tells the story of a writer, Jack Waterman (a reference to Jack Kerouac and to Poulin himself), who takes to the road in an effort to find his wandering brother Théo and to overcome his writer's block. On the road, he picks up Pitsémine, nicknamed la Grande Sauterelle, who turns out to be half Québécois and half Innu and suffering from an identity crisis related to her mixed ancestry; she accompanies him on his odyssey from Gaspé to San Francisco via the Oregon Trail. Both the narrator and Pitsémine personify an uneasy and changing Quebec, and their search for Théo leads them to retrace historical migrations that parallel their quest for roots in the American landscape. Simon Harel's article "L'Amérique ossuaire" examines the pair's search for answers and for direction, revealing their disillusionment with an America that is empty and founded on violence. Their quest involves a nostalgic search for traces of the colonial French presence in North America, but it reveals nothing concrete. Harel sees this as an escapist search for the absolute that ultimately reconfirms the new reality of the hybrid nature of Quebec (165).

Profoundly influenced by the period in which it was written — four years after the 1980 referendum that determined Quebec's continued presence within Canada — the novel explores the possibility of a movement away from a "pure-laine," homogeneous, French-Canadian Quebec toward

a nation characterized by hybridity in its attempts to deal with its ever-increasing immigrant population.[1] With postmodernism at its peak in Canada, the tools of the postmodern movement and its attempt to break down master narratives were the cornerstone of the political and artistic ideologies of the time, and it is, therefore, no surprise that Poulin chose to address Quebec's ambiguous position within the nation in the terms posited by the movement. Max Dorsinville, in his 1990 *ECW* review of the English translation, calls the book "an imaginative revisitation of the continent uniquely suited to postmodernism" (40). Brent Ledger also comments on the novel's postmodern elements in *Quill & Quire*, calling it "A nimble, witty performance, blending travelogue, conventional narrative, and odd bits of revisionist history to form a seamless, dazzling whole" (26). Hébert too comments on the intertexts that give the novel its depth: "Ce que vous lisez est la partie visible de l'iceberg, la façade de la maison; il y a toujours beaucoup plus, en dessous, derrière, dedans" (25). Largely characterized by its revisionist approach to North American history, *Volkswagen Blues* is an attempt to break down the master narrative of a superior pure laine culture via the character of Pitsémine, who is intent on reconciling the two halves of her mixed identity. In order to promote a move toward a more tolerant and diverse society, Poulin embraces the hybrid as an alternative for Quebec. Postmodernism, like postcolonialism, favours discussions of hybridity and ambiguity, and it is through the character of Pitsémine that Poulin promotes the hybrid as the only viable option for ensuring Quebec's future.

The promotion of tolerance through the breaking down of limiting master narratives is an important undertaking, and Poulin's use of revisionist history to question the so-called heroism of the colonizer no doubt explains why *Volkswagen Blues* continues to garner such significant support. The novel does, after all, acknowledge the violence and genocide that permitted the colonization and settlement of the Americas. It is important to acknowledge, however, that while this approach certainly has its value, it also has its limitations. Poulin's use of the mixed-blood or Metis identity as a vehicle to promote hybridity, while it appears to promote inclusion, arguably leads to erasure of Indigenous cultures and nations. By portraying Native culture as dying or dead and presenting hybrid culture as the only viable solution for Quebec, Poulin threatens to eliminate the Native, replacing it instead with a new, generic hybrid. This, however, has obvious dangers; as Cherokee scholar Jace Weaver states,

"To press everyone into a hybrid or mixed-blood mold is to consummate finally the as yet uncompleted enterprise of colonialism" (29).

Volkswagen Blues is valuable for its historical revisionism and its acknowledgement of a violent and genocidal past. Where it breaks down, however, is in its portrayal of Indigeneity. Poulin, like countless other writers in Canada and Quebec, and in spite of ostensibly good intentions, falls into the trap of using the figure of the Native to further his own ends—in this case, the promotion of a hybrid society. In doing so, he not only perpetuates stereotypes and the myth of the dead and dying Indian but also threatens to eliminate Native cultures altogether. Cherokee scholar and writer Daniel Heath Justice writes, "Indigenous peoples are read primarily as colourful contributors to the great Canadian socio-cultural mosaic. While this reading is generally intended by scholars and teachers to affirm the human dignity of Aboriginal peoples, it ironically erases one of the most fundamental aspects of Indigenous survival: the status of nationhood" (150). Continuing to celebrate the novel as *L'Actualité* did in December 2005, as "un des 20 livres pour comprendre le Québec d'aujourd'hui," consequently poses a risk to the survival of Indigenous cultures in Quebec. This essay seeks to re-examine Poulin's treatment of Indigeneity and its implications for Native populations rather than its function as a vehicle through which to promote the interests of the author. The value of both postmodern and postcolonial approaches to literature is undeniable, but, as with any movement, there are limits to what they can accomplish. Twenty-five years after its publication, it is important to look at *Volkswagen Blues* in a new light; the novel is a product of its time and should be examined as such.

Marie Vautier examines *Volkswagen Blues* in an essay on the figure of the "Amerindian" in the works of Francois Barcelo, George Bowering, and Jacques Poulin and makes the following statement: "Although the historical colonization of the Amerindian and Inuit peoples by the British and French is openly signalled in these contemporary texts, they sometimes use the figure of the Amerindian and/or the Metis to further the postcolonial arguments of the non-native cultural majorities of their traditions" (18). These books, she goes on to explain, "exploit stereotypes to subvert Eurocentric attitudes" (24). This is certainly the case in *Volkswagen Blues* since it is Pitsémine should this be "whom"? Poulin presents as a model of the new Quebecker. When

Pitsémine states sadly that she is "ni une Indienne ni une Blanche," concluding that "finalement, elle n'était rien du tout," (224), Jack tells her she's "quelque chose de neuf, quelque chose qui commence. Vous êtes quelque chose qui ne s'est encore jamais vu" (224). Metis cultures are hardly new nor is Indigeneity, yet it seems that Pitsémine has no option but to become "something new" — the hybrid that will characterize the new Quebec. It is interesting to note that while the figure of Pitsémine is reportedly suffering from an identity crisis and is something "entirely new," Poulin uses all the stereotypes of Native identity in order to describe her, giving her a distinctly Native character. At times these characteristics are so exaggerated that it seems his intent is humour; however, there is a contradiction here: Poulin gives her Native attributes but prevents her from living as a Native woman, thus engaging in what Vautier describes above as the "[exploitation of] stereotypes to subvert Eurocentric attitudes."

Poulin ensures, on the very first page of the novel, that we recognize Pitsémine's Indigeneity by describing the apparition that Jack sees from the window of his minivan: "il vit une grande fille maigre qui était vêtue d'une robe de nuit blanche et marchait pieds nus dans l'herbe en dépit du froid; un petit chat noir courait derrière elle. . . . Les cheveux de la fille étaient noirs comme du charbon et nattés en une longue tresse qui lui descendait au milieu du dos" (9). One page later, when he picks her up on the side of the road, she is still barefoot and will not enter the van until the cat explores it and ensures that it is safe. There is nothing ambiguous about Pitsémine's identity.[2] She goes barefoot, even in the cold early spring; she has an Innu name and a nickname that plays on her Native identity; she wears her long black hair tied in a braid and carries a hunting knife. She also has a mysterious connection to nature and, as Jack points out, "un sens de l'orientation infaillible" (53). She is portrayed stereotypically as the perpetual nomad wandering freely and aimlessly; she explains to Jack, "'je ne sais jamais à l'avance ce que je vais faire'" (37). As in the parable of the grasshopper and the ant, Pitsémine, nicknamed "la Grande Sauterelle," plays the role of the carefree grasshopper while Jack is the industrious, domestic ant. In an apparent gender reversal[3] and a stereotyped image of the strong, stoic Indian at one with nature, Pitsémine stands by, barefoot, as Jack shivers under a blanket on the ferry to Quebec City: "Jack avait une couverture de laine autour des épaules. La fille, nu-pieds comme d'habitude, disait qu'elle n'avait pas froid" (31).

Pitsémine also disappears and reappears mysteriously and has a sort of sixth sense — it seems she can read Jack's mind. "Vous êtes capable de dire ce qui se passe dans ma tête," he tells her. She is always in some kind of reverie, and even her dreams are "Native"— she tells Jack, "Je rêvais aux grands canots d'écorce" (55). Pitsémine also conforms to the stereotype of a sexually free and open Native woman, answering, "Oui. Evidemment," to Jack's question, "Et les Indiens avaient des mœurs sexuelles plus libres que les Blancs, n'est-ce pas?" (76) It is also she who initiates a sexual encounter between the two characters on the continental divide, stripping by the road on the Oregon Trail. Terry Goldie, in his 1988 review of the novel's English translation in *Books in Canada*, writes, "La Grande Sauterelle is partly faithful Metis guide, partly the sexually attractive Indian maiden, temptress of the North American wilderness. She is also . . . the spiritual teacher" (29). Significantly, like a guide, it is she who acts as a vehicle to help Jack awaken from stagnation; similarly, she acts as the tool with which Poulin constructs his proposal for a new Quebec. Ledger signals Pitsémine's broader function: "Her mini-lectures on the French voyageurs and extinct Indian tribes give the trip its larger social and historical dimension, turning Waterman's quest for Théo into French Canada's search for its place in North America" (26).

Poulin's use of the Native figure as a vehicle to promote change is not in itself damaging. What makes it destructive to Aboriginal culture is the misrepresentation of Native people through the reinforcement of stereotypes and myths concerning Indigenous populations. Poulin's use of Pitsémine is indicative of non-Native use of Native characters to further their own goals; in this case, the undermining of a pure, racist Quebec. Poulin describes a Quebec, in fact, that seems to identify with Native peoples, giving Quebec an air of authenticity and a sense of entitlement denied to Canada outside Quebec or the United States. It is interesting that *Volkswagen Blues*, celebrated for its questioning of history and undercutting of explorer Etienne Brulé, claims very little responsibility for colonization by the French, though they too are colonizers. The novel suggests that the French have a deep and respectful bond with Native peoples — arguably brought about by a shared sense of marginalization from the mainstream anglophone culture. There is no doubt that the Québécois have suffered from the dangers of assimilation and marginalization from

the anglophone majority. However, the tendency to underline the working relationships between the coureurs de bois and Indigenous people as proof of shared solidarity denies the colonial role of the original French settlers and suggests that there was nothing exploitative about the voyageurs' relationship with their Native guides and lovers. Pitsémine highlights this exploitation, identifying herself as Native, and saying, "Moi, je n'ai rien en commun avec les gens qui sont venus chercher de l'or et des épices et un passage vers l'Orient. Je suis du côté de ceux qui se sont fait voler leur terres et leur façon de vivre" (28). Later, however, she contradicts herself, which demonstrates the extent to which she is a vehicle for the author. Reading a book, she explains an explorer's choice of a francophone guide and says to Jack, "On a choisi un francophone pour qu'il soit capable de s'entendre avec les Indiens" (177). Indigenous peoples who continue to suffer the effects of poverty and marginalization might say otherwise, but many Québécois claim to identify with Native peoples and often feature in their works Native characters that conform to their romantic ideals.[4] Such stereotypes, when employed in discussions of sovereignty, are highly problematic. Quebec is happy to promote Native peoples as a colourful part of its culture in order to further its own interests, providing those Native people co-operate and do not get in the way of the province's goals. (The same, of course, applies in Canada outside Quebec.) As Justice points out, this is highly hypocritical. "Although Quebec sovereigntists are quite articulate about their own desire for sovereignty," he writes, "their dismissal of similar Indigenous assertions — which has a much longer genealogy that significantly predates that of Quebec — amounts to an ultimately indefensible hypocrisy" (157). This is not to say, however, that there are no examples of potential change. During the government's landmark 2008 apology for the residential schools that sought to destroy Native cultures, the leader of the Bloc Québécois, Gilles Duceppe, made a commitment to engage with Native peoples in Quebec on a "nation to nation" basis. To date, this has not been the case; it remains to be seen whether or not he will honour this commitment.

Poulin's use of the Indigenous female figure, well-meaning though it may be, is troubling since it perpetuates myths of the dead and dying Indian and ultimately reinforces misconceptions of Native peoples created by non-Natives. The reinforcement of stereotypes is a problem dis-

cussed during the appropriation-of-voice debates in the 1980s and early 1990s.[5] Even the best intentions, as we have seen, can reinforce stereotypes, since writers are basing their characters on attitudes informed by Western ideals and myths of Native people. These myths are often tied to nationhood since Indigeneity is frequently used by Canadian anglophones and francophones alike in order to create unique national identities that will distinguish them from Europeans, as well as Americans, and ultimately give them a greater sense of entitlement to the land. This results not only in misrepresentation but also in exploitation. Pitsémine, portrayed so consistently as Native, ultimately lacks agency, and it is this that is problematic. Without exception, the myth of the dead and dying Indian is alive and well in *Volkswagen Blues*; the novel ultimately relegates Indigeneity to the past and leaves Pitsémine no choice but to choose hybridity over her Innu identity. Throughout the novel, in fact, La Grand Sauterelle encounters numerous hybrid authors who serve as examples of what she can be. Pierre L'Hérault points out intertexts that highlight writers of mixed ancestry, including Kerouac (Québécois-American) and Saul Bellow (Jewish-Canadian-American-Québécois) (38). Significantly, neither of these examples has Aboriginal origins.

The myth of the vanishing Indian has long been used to marginalize Native peoples; it relegates them to museums and anthropological studies as artifacts. It is, of course, a very convenient conception since a dead or dying people does not need any consideration or rights. This perception also allows Euro-Canadians to feel a guilty nostalgia about the past and about the disappearance of Indigenous peoples rather than dealing with the effects of colonization in the present.[6] In *Volkswagen Blues*, though Pitsémine is travelling through Quebec and the United States ostensibly searching for her identity, she never encounters any living Native people. The only other Native person we see is her mother, who is herself portrayed as a kind of artifact since she works in a museum. In fact, the only Native figures that seem to offer any sense of community are themselves dead. Leaving Toronto, Pitsémine tells Jack that she wants to visit the Mohawk chief Joseph Brant's grave in order to give herself some kind of peace; presumably, she hopes to draw strength from a Native hero: "Se réconcilier avec elle-meme. Voilà ce que la Grande Sauterelle voulait faire et il fallait pour cela qu'elle dorme dans le cimetière à coté de la tombe du vieux chef Thayendanegea" (81). Though Brant is male, Mohawk, colonized by the British, and dead,

Pitsémine — female, Innu, colonized by the French, and living — feels that she can "find herself" with his help: "d'une façon ou d'une autre, le vieux chef pouvait l'aider à se connaitre elle-meme" (82). It is hardly surprising when this plan fails — sleeping with dead Indians does not do much for her sense of self: "'Il ne s'est rien passé du tout,' dit-elle un peu tristement. 'Je veux dire; je me sens exactement comme je me sentais avant'" (86).

Similarly, on their travels along the Oregon Trail, the only stories we are told about Native peoples are those of their death and destruction. Pitsémine describes the disappearance of the Illinois and talks about the extermination of the bison population that led to the destruction of the Plains peoples. She describes the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864 and that at Wounded Knee in 1890. With no chance of building community in the present, la Grande Sauterelle suffers from a sort of nostalgic melancholia and spends a great deal of time looking off into the horizon: "Elle regardait dehors et son regard était perdu dans la nuit" (33), dreaming of "canots d'écorce" (55) and her mother's Native past (87). In spite of the existence of thriving Native populations in both Canada and the United States, Pitsémine encounters nothing but death on the trip; ultimately, she has no opportunity to live or identify herself as a Native woman. Bowing to the Indians who once occupied the island of Alcatraz, she resigns herself to the myth of the vanishing Indian: "Son geste semblait dire que les Indiens perdaient toujours, qu'ils avaient perdu cette fois encore et qu'il n'y avait rien à faire. C'était le destin ou quelque chose du genre" (257). This reaction is particularly significant since the occupation of Alcatraz is such a powerful symbol of resistance and so significant an event in Aboriginal claims for justice and sovereignty. Between November 1969 and June 1971, over 5,600 Native Americans from 20 different tribes occupied the island of Alcatraz, which had been left unused after its prison was closed in 1963. They were demanding rights for Native Americans and wanted the island to be returned to Indigenous peoples. The occupation was a turning point in Native claims for human rights; although the island was never returned, the occupation forced Americans to recognize and take the claims of Native peoples seriously. The fact that Pitsémine accepts defeat in bowing to the *memory* of Aboriginal peoples rather than celebrating Alcatraz as a symbol of resistance perpetuates the idea that there is no hope for Indigenous survival.

The myth of the vanishing Indian necessarily dictates nostalgia for things past. There is no room for thriving, evolving Native populations, and Pitsémine is therefore unable to find a place to exist. Indigeneity in *Volkswagen Blues* seems to exist only in pre-contact times, and it seems that it is impossible for Aboriginal peoples to embrace both a pre-contact and contemporary world. A pristine world untouched by Europeans is continually romanticized, and, seemingly unable to survive as a modern Indian, Pitsémine breaks down in tears. She is conflicted, once again, between the artificial binaries of the pre-modern Indian and the modern white man: "'Je trouve que la nature est plus belle quand il n'y a rien, je veux dire quand elle est restée comme elle était au début, mais j'aime aussi les lumières. Je suis partagée entre les deux et je sais que ca va durer toujours' . . . sa voix se brisa" (57). Indigeneity is essentialized here to represent the opposite of the civilized and modern European; Native peoples seem incapable of adapting; they are portrayed as capable of thriving only in nature — without modern conveniences such as electricity. As Weaver points out, however, "Natives showed themselves adept at adopting and adapting anything that seemed to be useful or to have power . . . each new item, tool, or technology was used to strengthen, not weaken, their people"(29).[7] This essentialism is also reflected in a 1999 essay on the novel by Roger Hyman, published in the *Journal of Canadian Studies*. Like *Volkswagen Blues*, Hyman seems to lament the disappearance of Native culture. In the novel, Poulin reveals La Grande Sauterelle's Innu name; he writes, "Pitsémine était le nom de la Grande Sauterelle en langue Innue" (42). Hyman states, however, that "though she is Metis, neither of her names, 'La Grande Sauterelle,' because of her long legs, or 'Pitsémine,' suggests her Innu background" (2). He seems reluctant to recognize adaptive and contemporary Indigenous societies, and further comments that "she has lost 2 of the key signs of her tribal inheritance, oral transmission of knowledge and her language" (3). In fact, Pitsémine does seem to have knowledge of native languages, and Jack comments on her capable pronunciation: "'Michillimakinac!' . . . Elle le prononçait en faisant sonner toutes les voyelles et en faisant claquer la dernière syllabe comme un coup d'aviron à plat dans l'eau" (56). Hyman is quite right to signal the fact that the loss of Aboriginal languages has had a huge and negative impact on Native communities, but he does not acknowledge the fact that Indigenous cultures continue to survive and adapt in spite of this. Among many others, Cree scholar

Emma LaRocque believes that English has become a Native language, since it has been used by Indigenous peoples for centuries and has been modified to suit their needs (xxvi). The same can be said of French for Native peoples in Quebec. I would also argue that Pitsémine's extensive knowledge of Indigenous culture, as well as her voracious appetite for literature and storytelling, demonstrate that, far from losing her oral culture, she is eager to keep it alive. The portrayal of print culture as foreign or not a part of Native cultures is an essentialization of Indigenous experience. Creek-Cherokee scholar Craig Womack writes, "One might even argue that some Native people versed in orality might be predisposed to novel writing or the reading of them rather than alienated by them. This seems to be the case, at the very least, for a number of American Indian authors" (119). It also seems to be the case for Pitsémine, who is constantly visiting libraries and bookstores, reading, and telling stories. A romanticized notion of what is authentic, Womack adds, "locks Native Studies [and Native people, too,] into a system that does not allow the discipline [or the people themselves] to evolve; it is the way in which we have inherited the vanishing mentality" (145).

With no access to living Native culture, Pitsémine, in spite of her desire to keep her culture alive, has no choice but to view herself as a hybrid. This is why she chooses to stay in the melting pot that is San Francisco instead of returning home: "Elle voulait rester un certain temps à San Francisco: elle pensait que cette ville, où les races semblaient vivre en harmonie, était un bon endroit pour essayer de faire l'unité et de se réconcilier avec elle-même" (287). In San Francisco, Pitsémine is no longer looked upon as Indigenous; she is ultimately identified as just another hybrid — a part of just another ethnic group. Immigrant and ethnic groups are certainly deserving of recognition, but their situation is altogether different from that of Aboriginal peoples. Pitsémine is likened, near the end of the novel, to a Chinese-Mexican-American clerk in a bookstore: "La bibliothécaire était une fille grande et maigre avec de longs cheveux noirs. Elle ressemblait curieusement à la Grande Sauterelle, sauf que ses traits étaient à demi chinois et à demi mexicains" (259). This woman is somehow moving for Jack and Pitsémine — presumably because she, like la Grande Sauterelle, represents the face of the future. There is one significant difference between the two that Poulin fails to signal, however. Pitsémine, far from being just another member

of a hybrid, multicultural mosaic, undeniably identifies herself as Native; and Poulin, describing her black hair in braids, bare feet, and hunting knife, clearly presents her as such. In spite of ostensibly good intentions — and a discussion of the devastating effects of colonialism — the author's portrayal of Pitsémine as representative of a generic hybridity denies recognition of Aboriginal nationhood and promotes, instead, a model of assimilation. This move is demonstrated by the author's decision to leave Pitsémine in San Francisco. The author's portrayal of Pitsémine is, as we have seen, contradictory. He uses all the stereotypes of aboriginality to describe her; thus, he foregrounds her Native identity only to erase it later on; he removes her agency by leaving her in San Francisco with all the other hybrids. The categorization of Native people as one of the country's many "ethnic groups" is extremely damaging, since their situation and political status as first inhabitants of the land are altogether different from those of new immigrant groups. As Justice writes, "Indigenousness is *not* ethnic difference; it is both cultural and political distinctiveness, defined by land-based genealogical connections and obligations to human and nonhuman bonds of kinship" (146). Denying Native communities First Peoples status suggests that they have no claim to their lands, history, memory, cultural continuity, or to their rights as original inhabitants of the land.

It is, therefore, essential to signal just to what extent *Volkwagen Blues* is a vehicle for the author rather than a representation of Native people. While it is true that this story is written from the perspective of a white Quebecker — and is therefore representative of a non-Native perspective — the representation of Aboriginal peoples by a non-Native author can, as we have seen, perpetuate damaging stereotypes. It is important to problematize the continuing domination of portrayals of Indigeneity by non-Aboriginals and to read such portrayals critically in order to deconstruct representations of Native experience that don't accurately reflect Indigenous world views. In *Volkswagen Blues*, contrary to many narratives authored by both full and mixed-blood Native peoples, Poulin's work takes Pitsémine *away* from home rather than toward it; there is, in fact, no other option for her since there is never any allusion made to a Native community she might return to. There is a long and very significant Aboriginal literary tradition of Indigenous peoples returning home with the goal of rebuilding community, however difficult this proves to be.[8]

It is important that Poulin's work be read critically in this context since his description of Pitsémine's actions contradicts the portrayal of Indigenous experience by both Aboriginal and Metis authors. There is always the risk that books such as *Volkswagen Blues* — much more publicized and accessible than Native-authored works — might become the only portrayals of Aboriginal experience to which most non-Natives are exposed, leading to the perpetuation of the dangerous stereotypes and misconceptions we have seen. Speaking of her peoples' tendency to return to community, Abenaki scholar Lisa Brooks writes, "When calamity hits, families may disperse, but they never 'disappear.' Always, they end up gathering together when the storms clear" (229). This tendency in Native writing demonstrates an awareness on the part of the authors of the importance of community in the survival and continuing evolution of a people; it is a phenomenon recognized and referred to by both Native and non-Native critics of Aboriginal literature as a "homing narrative." William Bevis, in his essay, "Native American Novels: Homing In," uses the term "homing plot" to describe the traditional homeward movement of Native protagonists in narratives by Indigenous writers. Pitsémine's decision, in *Volkswagen Blues*, to remain in San Francisco rather than returning to her community can be misleading in this regard since it suggests that there is no community for her to return to and thus confirms the myth of the dead and dying Indian. There is also the implication, earlier in the book, that Pitsémine, because of her mixed blood, is rejected not only by the white community but also by her Native community. Poulin writes that "sa mere, en épousant un Blanc, avait perdu la maison qu'elle possédait sur la réserve de La Roumaine; elle avait été expulsée et elle avait perdu son statut d'Indienne. Mais les Blancs, de leur côté, la considéraient toujours comme une indienne et ils avaient refusé de louer ou de vendre une maison aux nouveaux mariés" (99). "De leur côté" here suggests that Native people were also hostile toward the couple when, in fact, it was the government's Indian Act that removed the status of any Native woman marrying a non-Native and was ultimately responsible for the mother's alienation. If anything, this government clause made Native women all the more determined to return to their communities, and many did return after it was reversed with Bill C-31.Aboriginal women themselves, along

with the Native Women's Association of Canada, were instrumental in the creation of the bill.

As was the case with the Indian Act, the label "hybrid" threatens to erase Native identity altogether, completing the process of colonization. Interestingly, Pitsémine signals this erasure directly when she tells Jack that she is nothing: "Son sourire, toutefois, s'évanouit presque aussitôt et elle recommenca à dire qu'elle n'était ni une Indienne ni une Blanche, qu'elle était quelque chose entre les deux et que, finalement, elle n'était rien du tout" (224). It is at this point, as we have seen, that Jack eliminates the Native completely by telling her that she is "something new" in an attempt to give her hope. Shortly after this, she gives in to the myth of the dead Indian, accepting elimination when she says, "C'était le destin ou quelque chose du genre" (257). Up to this point, it could be argued that these events are critical of hybridity — until La Grande Sauterelle announces how happy she is in San Francisco. "'Je me sens bien,'" she tells Jack. "'Ça fait longtemps que je ne me sens pas aussi bien'" (261). No longer an Aboriginal Metis but now a generic hybrid, Pitsémine is the archetype of the new Quebecker, signalling new hope for the province in a move away from a pure laine culture toward an open, progressive society where no one is marginalized and everyone is equal. As Pierre L'Hérault points out, division and conflict, represented at the beginning of the novel by two separate maps of Canada (one Native, the other non-Native), are in the past; the present unifies: "Du point de vue des rapports entre les personnages, on peut donc distinguer très clairement le passé qui les isole du présent qui les unit" (31). Where once Canada was divided into Native and non-Native maps of the country, now there is only one map in Jack and Pitsémine, the travelling pair. To say that this is unity, however, is false since, as we have seen, Indigeneity is ultimately removed. It would be a more accurate unity to promote a dialogue between two distinct individuals or nations, rather than combine them in one generic whole.

The discussion here is political for, as Justice argues, "to be a member of an Indigenous nation in a colonized country is a political act in itself, as the existence of such a collective is an embodied denial of the power of the State to claim either historical or moral inheritance of the land or its memories" (146). Replacing the Native with the hybrid amounts, therefore, to assimilation, and a failure to discuss these politics in *Volkswagen Blues* only perpetuates erasure. Saying we're all the

same allows us to ignore imbalances of power — saying we're different allows us to address them. There is no doubt that cultures, particularly those that live side by side, influence each other profoundly, and this influence is even more pronounced in an age of globalization. The very persistence of Native cultures in such an era, however, is testament to their endurance. Hybridity, as Weaver explains, does not necessitate a loss of culture: "Native cultures have always been highly adaptive, and they continue to evolve constantly. To acknowledge the truth of hybridity, however, does not mean that we are globally merging into a single McCulture" (28). In *Volkswagen Blues*, however, the hybridity promoted for Pitsémine is a generic one since the Native side of her identity is ultimately lost in the melting pot of San Francisco; there she identifies more with a Chinese-Mexican-American bookstore clerk than with either the French-Canadian or Indigenous cultures she comes from. In order to survive, cultures must be able to adapt, and there is no reason not to acknowledge more than one cultural influence, or one influence in particular. This was arguably, after all, the goal of both the postmodern and postcolonial movements. Tired of being referred to as hybrids, many Native people have chosen to assert their Native status. Algonquin writer Bernard Assiniwi is just one example of this, and the force of his assertion of his Algonquin-Cree identity is evident from the title of his article, "Je suis ce que je dis que je suis."

Womack asks of the postmodern and postcolonial movements, "What happened to the promise, when we first started hearing all about hybridity, that this kind of theory was going to liberate us, free us from the dominance of master narratives? It seems like the freedom train pulled out of the station with no Indians on board" (168). Twenty-five years ago, Poulin undertook to demonstrate to what degree the continent was constructed on violence, and he produced a successful and popular work that continues to attract readers. A work so greatly admired clearly reaches many, and so to abandon its study is certainly not the answer — it is an artful assembly of postmodern intertexts and a telling portrait of the period it describes. What should be made clear, however, is the degree to which it is a product of its times and not a model for the future. Both the postmodern and postcolonial movements have served their purposes and have uncovered injustices and imbalances, but Indigenous cultures in Quebec and Canada are far from dying or dead, and concrete change is something

that requires expression in culture and in literature. The best approach might be precisely the one Duceppe suggested in his apology to residential school survivors: nation to nation dialogue, characterized by respect.

Notes

[1] For a discussion of the effects of changing demographics in Quebec, see Gérard Bouchard's "Pour une nation Québécoise."

[2] See Robert Berkhofer, Thomas King, Daniel Francis and Philip Deloria for descriptions of stereotypes of Native peoples perpetuated by non-Natives.

[3] See Janet Paterson's essay "Métissage et alterité" for an examination of gender in *Volkswagen Blues*.

[4] For more information on Quebec-Native relations, see *Autochtones et Québécois: la rencontre des nationalismes*, ed. Pierre Trudel.

[5] Appropriation of voice is a very complex and contentious issue in Canada and was the subject of considerable debate in the pages of Toronto's *Globe and Mail* newspaper in 1990. For an excellent examination of the issues involved, see Bruce Ziff and Pratima Rao's collection of essays, entitled *Borrowed Power*.

[6] Artist Joane Cardinal-Schubert cites the example of nameless Native artists whose works are displayed under the banner "Native Art" rather than under the artist or collective's names. She writes, "As art that is viewed as primitive, we are dead makers of a dead art. As such, we are vulnerable to appropriation and vast pillaging by the dominant culture" (128). The myth of the dead and dying Indian is well established and has been examined by many writers. See Philip Deloria's *Indians in Unexpected Places* and *Playing Indian*. See also Daniel Francis's *The Imaginary Indian*, Pearce's *Savagism and Civilisation*, Robert Berkhofer's *The White Man's Indian*, Ward Churchill's controversial *Fantasies of the Master Race*, Thomas King's *The Native in Literature,* and Chrystos's poetry collection *Not Vanishing*.

[7] Photographer Edward S. Curtis, famous for his portraits of Native peoples, actually removed all traces of modernity in his pictures. In his famous 1910 photogravure "Peigan Lodge," Curtis erased a clock from between the two men posing in order to portray them as "authentic."

[8] This is the case in such works as Jeannette Armstrong's *Slash*, Laure Bouvier's *Une Histoire de Métisses*, Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*, Lee Maracle's short story "Charlie," Armand Ruffo's "Homeward," N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, Sherman Alexie's *The Toughest Indian in the World*, Richard Van Camp's "Year of the Dog," Brian Maracle's *Back on the Rez: Finding the Way Home*, Tomson Highway's "The Rez Sisters," and Richard Wagamese's *Keeper 'n Me*, to name but a few.

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