

## Dialogue with Raven: Bakhtinian Theory and Lee Maracle's *Ravensong*

Bruce Dadey

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Article abstract

Bakhtinian theory, with its emphasis on dialogism, has been a particularly productive tool for analyzing and understanding literatures that draw on oral traditions. Lee Maracle's *Ravensong* raises the question of how, in a colonial context, cultural dialogue is possible on two different levels: within the story of the novel (diegetically) as it depicts the struggles of Stacey, a young Salish woman, and outside the story of the novel (extradiegetically) in the discursive strategies used to tell the story. The idea of dialogue is therefore both effected and interrogated; the work accommodates and yet resists Bakhtin's ideas as it reveals the complex dynamics of dialogue when interlocutors are separated by a cultural, social, and economic divide.

# Dialogue with Raven: Bakhtinian Theory and Lee Maracle's *Ravensong*

BRUCE DADEY

We humanize theory by fusing humanity's need for common direction — theory — with story. (Maracle, "Oratory" 237)

The novel always includes in itself the activity of coming to know another's word, a coming to knowledge whose process is represented in the novel. (Bakhtin, "Discourse" 353)

THE OBJECTIVE OF THIS PAPER is twofold: to examine cultural dialogue in Lee Maracle's *Ravensong* using Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of language and the novel, and to examine Bakhtinian dialogism in light of Native literary theory as it is manifested in the novel and in the works of other Aboriginal critics. I aim, in other words, not only to examine dialogue, but to enact it. I undertake to do this mindful of Kimberly Blaeser's warning:

The insistence on reading Native literature by way of Western literary theory clearly violates its integrity and performs a new act of colonization and conquest. ... The literature is approached with an already established theory, and the implication is that the worth of the literature is essentially validated by its demonstrated adherence to a respected literary mode, dynamic or style. (55-56)

By allowing non-Native literary theory and Native work to interrogate each other, I hope to avoid the recolonizing that Blaeser identifies and to create a constructive, mutual interaction between them. Bakhtinian theory, with its emphasis on dialogism, has been a particularly productive tool for analyzing and understanding literatures that draw on oral traditions. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a survey of Bakhtin's influence on modern literary and cultural criticism, his ideas have played a role in many seminal studies, including Louis Owens's *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel*, Henry Louis

Gates, Jr.'s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, and Ramón Saldívar's *Chicano Narrative: The Dialectics of Difference*. However, Craig S. Womack suggests that the indiscriminate application of Bakhtin's ideas has also been instrumental in creating a generic category of "ethnic literature" that effaces or trivializes differences between the literatures of different cultural communities, "reducing literary studies to little more than an English department version of the melting pot" (8). Womack's observations suggest that, unless Bakhtinian theory is applied in a self-critical fashion — one that takes into account the culturally-specific ways in which various literatures are produced and received, as well as the potential effects of inequality between participants in a dialogic interaction — it can elide social or cultural tensions both within a work and between authors and readers. Part of the interest in applying Bakhtin to Maracle's novel is that *Ravensong* both effects and interrogates the idea of dialogue; the work accommodates and yet resists Bakhtin's ideas as it reveals the complex dynamics of dialogue when interlocutors are separated by a cultural, social, and economic divide.

Bakhtin identifies two types of dialogic relationships in language: "the dialogic relationship toward an alien word within the object and the relationship toward an alien word in the anticipated answer of the listener" ("Discourse" 283). The relationship between words and things is dialogic because any object is "already enveloped in an obscuring mist — or, on the contrary, by the 'light' of alien words that have already been spoken about it" (276). A word is like a ray of white light trained on an object, but the words and discourse already surrounding the object effect a "spectral dispersion" that fractures the unified ray; the ray-word, interacting with the words that already envelop the object, becomes multi-hued, reflecting particular facets of the object in a contingent, dialogic manner rather than fixing it in a monologic beam (277). The relationship between speaker and listener (expressed most schematically in information theory as a linear process of encoding, transmission, and decoding) is also dialogic because "every word is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates" (280). In dialogue, speaker and listener, encoding and decoding, interpenetrate each other: encoding contains traces of the anticipated decoding, and decoding is performed in anticipation of encoding a response. Whereas monological language is authoritative and non-relational, dialogic language is "relativized, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions for the same things" (Emerson and Holquist 427). In place of a communication model that is unidirectional or oscillatory, dialogue of-

fers one that is iterative and cyclical.<sup>1</sup> While the former sense of dialogue between word and object accords with the observations of some Aboriginal critics and writers (see Leslie Marmon Silko's comment that "when one is telling a story and one is using words to tell the story, each word that one is speaking has a story of its own, too" [50]), it is the latter sense of dialogue on which this paper focusses.

Bakhtin's description of the dialogic relationship between speaker and listener parallels many ideas about Aboriginal story and language that are expressed in the work of Native critics. Silko states that among the Pueblo people, "a great deal of the story is believed to be inside the listeners; the storyteller's role is to draw the story out of the listeners" (50). A story is not a text transmitted by a speaker to an audience, but a web spun by the storyteller that interweaves different threads — speaker, audience, and cultural and narrative traditions — that exist within the storytelling context. Each thread contributes its own dynamic tension to the web, and the resulting story is the dialogic sum of all the threads. In a similar vein, Louis Owens suggests that in oral Aboriginal narrative "context and text are one thing" (13) — the audience does not need to apply an independent interpretive framework to a story because the story itself is an instantiation of the cultural knowledge shared by both storyteller and audience. As Paula Gunn Allen states, the unity of the oral tradition lies not in formal structures but in "the coherence of common understanding derived from the ritual tradition that members of a tribal unit share" (6). These critics all assert that a story is not a text that exists outside of a speaker and listener; rather, the story embodies or actuates the relationship between the speaker, the listener, and their shared context. These writers' efforts to link story with a holistic context are similar to Bakhtin's efforts to define the basic unit of communication not as an abstract structural unit removed from actual language use (phoneme, word, sentence), but as the utterance, a statement whose completion is marked by "*the possibility of responding to it* or, more precisely and broadly, of assuming a responsive attitude toward it" ("Speech Genres" 76). An utterance can be composed of any variety or number of grammatical or syntactical units. It can be embodied as a statement, a question, a speech, or a novel, although the particular way in which the elements of a given utterance are arranged is almost always governed by generic conventions that reflect the social sphere in which it exists, so that it is not a completely free individual construction; the only common defining trait of all utterances is the intention to evoke a response, however complex.

Because the listener's response is central to the utterance's nature, it

is inherently dialogic rather than monologic, and this dialogism is reflected not only in how the utterance functions in communication between speech subjects, but in the very structure of the utterance itself. The utterance is not an isolated statement (if it is treated as one, it becomes mere text), but exists only relationally — it requires the entire communicative context in order to function as an utterance because, in order to evoke its response, a given utterance includes as an integral part of its makeup the other utterances that preceded it and those that are anticipated to follow it: “Utterances are not indifferent to one another, and are not self-sufficient; they are aware of and mutually reflect one another. . . . Each utterance is filled with echoes and reverberations of other utterances to which it is related by the communality of the sphere of speech communication” (“Speech Genres” 91). This interconnectedness between utterances is reminiscent of Silko’s statement that Pueblo stories as a whole form a kind of web, so that the Aboriginal perspective on narrative is one of “story within story, the idea that one story is only the beginning of many stories and the sense that stories never truly end” (50). Like Aboriginal narrative as described by Silko, the utterance is not only a participant in an external dialogue, but is internally dialogic; it not only participates in a communicative process that involves different voices, but itself contains different voices — it is doubly heteroglot: “The authentic environment of an utterance, the environment in which it lives and takes shape, is dialogized heteroglossia” (“Discourse” 272). In speaking an utterance, the speaker must in effect become the listener, responding to previous utterances and anticipating future ones. And, in listening to an utterance, “Any understanding is imbued with response and necessarily elicits it in one form or another: the listener becomes the speaker” (“Speech Genres” 68), although the listener’s response may be delayed rather than immediate, and may be one of disagreement rather than agreement.

The concept of story as dialogic utterance seems consonant with Lee Maracle’s assertion that, although the Aboriginal oral tradition contains many of the same elements as the European storytelling tradition, “The difference is that the reader is as much a part of the story as the teller. . . . [T]he reader must remain central to the working out of the drama of life represented. As listener/reader, you become the trickster, the architect of great social transformation at whatever level you choose” (“Preface” 11, 13). Maracle’s statement positions story as utterance, a response invoking a response. But her statement is both an invitation and a warning. As Susie O’Brien points out, “by inviting the reader to become Trickster, she [Maracle] points to the necessary failure of all attempts to consolidate a

comfortable theoretical position” (83), and this indeterminacy is also integral to the utterance (particularly, as we shall see, as it occurs in the novel), since the different voices external to and immanent in the utterance engage in a complex process of mutual reflection. The voices do not merely agree with or contradict each other; rather, each voice is presented in terms of the other, and each voice qualifies the other:

Languages of heteroglossia, like mirrors that face each other, each reflecting in its own way a piece, a tiny corner of the world, force us to guess at and grasp for a world behind their mutually reflecting aspects that is broader, more multi-leveled, containing more and varied horizons than would be available to a single language or a single mirror. (Bakhtin, “Discourse” 414-15)

This dialogic destabilization is more than an echo of the deconstructive *mise en abyme* because the utterance is not isolated within language, as are the signifier and its alienated signified. Instead, the utterance operates on the social or cultural plane, and so the result is not a retreat into a disembodied language, but a renewed transformation of speaker into listener, listener into speaker as the sociocultural dialogue continues. There are two levels on which *Ravensong* raises the question of how, in a colonial context, this cultural dialogue is possible, or under what conditions it might occur: within the story of the novel (in narrative terms, diegetically), as it depicts the struggles of Stacey, a young Salish woman, to define her place within her Native community and to understand the relationship between her village and white town, the non-Native community across the river where she goes to school; and outside the story of the novel (extradiegetically), in the discursive strategies that are used to tell the story. This paper will therefore examine both how dialogic utterances function within the novel, and how the novel itself functions as an utterance.

Gerald Vizenor writes, “The trickster is a comic discourse, a collection of ‘utterances’ in oral traditions; the opposite of a comic discourse is a monologue, an utterance in isolation, which comes closer to the tragic mode in literature and not a comic tribal world view” (“Holotrope” 191). The isolated utterance is tragic because it is an evocation of response which, removed from its communicative context, is reified as mere text. Dialogism, Vizenor argues, is comic because it “summons agonistic imagination in a narrative, a language game” (188); dialogue frames utterances in terms of each other, so that claims to absoluteness are qualified and seem absurd. Vizenor, quoting Bakhtin, identifies social science in particular as operating in the tragic mode:

“Discourse lives, as it were, beyond itself, in a living impulse toward the object,” which in this instance is the trickster; “if we detach ourselves completely from this impulse,” as social science has done in the translations of oral narratives and the comic trickster, “all we have left is the naked corpse of the word, from which we can learn nothing at all about the social situation or fate of a given word in life.” (191)

The anthropological gaze, because it studies utterances apart from their contexts and refuses to enter into dialogue with those it observes (the observer and the observed relate as subject and object, rather than as interlocutors), paradoxically increases its distance from those it studies even as it increases its knowledge of them.

In *Ravensong*, all the people of the village are isolated from the people of white town, but Stacey, who has the benefit of her education, is isolated in a different way. Speaking about German Judy, a non-Native lesbian living in the village with her Salish partner, Rena, Stacey’s mother says, “She’s white and so she don’t count” (123), and later she categorically dismisses all the people of white town, stating, “They aren’t human” (193). Stacey is forced to ponder the validity of those profoundly monologic statements, and finds that her thoughts are inhabited by conflicting, dialogic voices that qualify each other: “What did she mean by the white one does not count? How could Stacey know that the white one did not count? How could she not know? came back at her. It was not an answer she could accept” (127). Although Stacey cannot completely accept this summary dismissal of the people in white town, she engages in a different mode of distancing that reflects the anthropological gaze characteristic of non-Native society back on itself. When Carol Snowden, Stacey’s only non-Native friend, loses her grandmother, Stacey removes herself from Carol’s loss and begins a process of objectifying analysis: “They didn’t grieve in quite the same way. The funeral she had attended was that of her only school chum’s grandmother. Carol cried. She cried plain and simple, without much depth, no horror” (15). When she visits Carol’s home, she analyses Mrs. Snowden’s greeting, a simple “Hi girls”: “For some reason Stacey could not help consigning these people’s behaviour into some weird purgatory of helpless callousness. She read sinister motives into their every ordinary movement lately. This greeting seemed both false and fitting, almost characteristic of their world” (33). Stacey’s mode of anthropological analysis is a product of her exposure to the culture and language of white town. Within the context of her own culture, it would be impossible to even conceive of the differences between the two com-

munities in the way that she does: “She let her mind drift around the habits of white town, their strange customs. It made better sense in English than in her own language. The lack of connectedness between white folks was difficult to express in her language” (17).

This reversal of the objectifying gaze removes non-Native readers from their accustomed hegemonic position, placing Native consciousness at the centre of the novel, with non-Native characters and readers at the margins. The question of whether white people count is transposed from the level of the story to the level of the narration. Non-Native readers are citizens of white town, and they are prompted to consider the same question: do we count as addressees for this story? As Helen Hoy observes,

Giving whites the accent, so to speak, the dialect, against the norm of Native speech, giving whites a non-transparent culture, is itself transformative, a political act. It repositions both white and Native reader, so that, within the discursive framework of *Ravensong* at least, the Native reader is the one with full citizenship, an epistemological shift with the potential to produce material sociopolitical change. (135)

Bakhtin writes, “every literary work *faces outward away from itself*, toward the listener-reader, and to a certain extent thus anticipates possible reactions to itself” (“Chronotope” 257), but in *Ravensong* non-Native readers see the narrator only in profile, speaking to someone else.

However, the counter-hegemonic narrative structure is more than just a reversal of positions; it also serves to incite a dynamic dialogue. Bakhtin suggests that a character’s language in the novel is always an image of a language. That is, a character’s language, set within the heteroglot world of the novel, becomes alienated from itself, qualified, self-critical: “The author represents this language, carries on a conversation with it, and the conversation penetrates into the interior of this language-image and dialogizes it from within. And all essentially novelistic images share this quality: they are internally dialogized images — of the languages, styles, world views of another” (“Prehistory” 46). On the diegetic level, Stacey’s adoption of the anthropological gaze is monologic and isolating, but on the extradiegetic level, it is profoundly dialogic, especially for non-Native readers. In Stacey’s comments non-Native readers hear the objectifying language of white town — the colonizing society’s way of framing the alien Native Other — applied to white town itself, of which they are implicitly citizens. Non-Native readers are in turn moved to engage in a dialogue with their own language, to question not only the validity of Stacey’s conclusions but the



validity of her approach, so the objectivity that is asserted by the anthropological gaze and the security of their own hegemonic status outside the world of the novel are undermined. The novel is an utterance to non-Native readers that includes their own hegemonic words, and non-Native readers, in their response to the novel, also include their own words, but differently framed (they refuse Stacey's words, which are also their words). But this dialogue does not neutralize the diegetic monologism of Stacey's statements — instead, it only complexifies it. Non-Native readers may want assurances from within the novel that Stacey's pronouncements are “wrong,” and that the refusal to accept her words is “right,” but the interplay and mutual reflection of the many voices in the novel, all of which are from an Aboriginal perspective, give no such easy guidance. The refusal is in turn echoed by the novel, but framed within the context of the many other voices that exist within it; in Bakhtin's terms, “The language of the novel is a *system* of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other. It is impossible to describe and analyze it as a single unitary language” (“Prehistory” 47). Stacey's language (which, in its anthropologizing, is also the non-Native reader's) is qualified, but, as we shall see, so is any other language, such as Raven's, that would refute it. As Trickster-readers, we are forced to continue this dialogic play, this process of mutual reflection, without the benefit of a transcendent language that would seal the last utterance. We are not allowed to escape from our role as creators of the story.

Nor does Maracle's novel allow Native readers to easily occupy a hegemonic position by identifying with Stacey. Stacey's objectifying words, after all, are those of non-Native society, and the congruence of Stacey's way of seeing and that of non-Native society is further manifested when Stacey turns her gaze on Madeline, a Saulteaux woman who is not originally from the village. Stacey distances Madeline in the same way that she does the citizens of white town, calling her a “nameless woman without family, without beginning or end” (157), an isolated figure who is an Other: “While the woman was not one of them, the children were” (159). But at the same time, Stacey is aligned with white town in how she constructs Madeline, framing her in terms of romantic, idealistic images of Aboriginals: “Stacey realized one morning over tea that Madeline looked like the Indian she had once seen on a postcard in the store in town. . . . It dawned on her that Madeline's people must be the ones white people kept calling ‘exotic’” (166). Stacey also views Madeline as an exotic specimen, “watching Madeline, turning over and over in her mind how she was different,” and dwells on Madeline's sensuality, her “wild abandon and ill-

discipline" (173). Stacey only comes to a partial realization of the objectifying nature of her gaze after she carelessly interrogates Madeline, asking her about her abusive husband: "So how come you bothered with the old snake?" (166). The pain this question causes Madeline makes Stacey realize that her question was not an invitation to dialogue, not a true utterance, because it did not actually include in it Madeline's function as respondent: "Words are sacred, once spoken they cannot be retrieved. Sometimes they fall out of the mouth in moments of thoughtlessness when the speaker focuses on images which don't include the one spoken to, and burn holes in the lives of the listener" (167). Stacey's monologic question arises from her objectification of Madeline, but a "dark patch" stops her from exploring the meaning of her question. Stacey's appropriation of the anthropological gaze from white town and her use of it on Madeline are in fact forms of self-alienation. They lead her to experience her own aboriginality as an outsider would, and as a result, she becomes for a time isolated not only from white town but also from her own family and community; Celia notices that "a wall of soundlessness cocooned her sister, making the distance between them huge" (168).

Stacey's treatment of Madeline and the consequences that arise from it show that the appropriation of others' words is a potentially dangerous activity. Stacey, who is leaving the village for university in order to "collect the magic words of white town and bring them home" (192), has to discover how she will frame those words in her own speech so that they will become tools of cultural regeneration rather than tools of assimilation. But in the act of doing so, she will inevitably enter into a dialogue with those that the village monologically labels as Others, since the "magic words" do not exist in a neutral place that can be accessed without sacrificing isolation; rather, they must be snatched from the mouths of others through ideological struggle. Speaking of N. Scott Momaday, Owens writes, "the task before him was not simply to learn the lost language of his tribe but rather to appropriate, to tear free of its restricting authority, another language — English — and to make that language accessible to an Indian discourse" (13). This act of appropriation is, for Bakhtin, one of the central features of ideological development:

Language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior

to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not, after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own. ... Language is not a neutral medium that passes freely and easily into the private property of the speaker's intentions; it is populated — overpopulated — with the intentions of others. Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one's own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process. (“Discourse” 293-94)

Emma LaRocque points out the problematic relationship of Aboriginal people to non-Aboriginal languages, and particularly writing, when she states, “Native writers have a dialectical relationship to the English (or French) language. Not only do we have to learn English, we must then deal with its ideology. ... What is at work is the power struggle between the oral and the written, between the Native in us and the English” (xx). But Stacey's potential to appropriate successfully the English language for her community is shown in how she teaches the alphabet, framing the very medium of isolated text in a dialogic manner: “She concocted a story about a family namd [*sic*] Alphabet, gave them names and work to do. She even threw in trickster behaviour for those moments when none of the Alphabets would do the right work” (175). Stacey's teaching places the English language and written text within the framework of a distinctly Aboriginal utterance, and the ability of the women to read in English while still maintaining their own cultural perspective is shown when they read about the wars of the Chinese dynasties: “They laughed at some of the attitudes it took to go to war in the first place, marvelling at the lack of heart of whoever had written this stuff who heroized the killers” (177). Momma and Madeline have a critical awareness not only of the content of their text but of the discourse used to communicate it; they demonstrate that it is possible to use the colonizer's language without being colonized. Reading also teaches Momma that words are not a neutral medium, that their meaning depends on social context. When Stacey says that children don't read complex stories because “they don't know as many words and the words they know don't hold the same meaning,” Momma changes the context of difference from one of age to one of social status and culture: “I guess not. The 'flu means illness to them. For us it means terror” (178). Their realization of this potential gap in meaning reinforces for them the importance of not taking the words as they find them, but of making them their own: “Con-

consciousness finds itself inevitably facing the necessity of *having to choose a language*. With each literary-verbal performance, consciousness must actively orient itself amidst heteroglossia, it must move in and occupy a position for itself within it” (Bakhtin, “Discourse” 295).

But if one only uses language as it exists in the mouths of others, there is no ideological awareness, only an unthinking conformity that supports a hegemonic view of the world — an option congenial to those who already belong to the dominant group. Steve is the class intellectual, but he cannot engage in genuine dialogue with Stacey because he is unable to incorporate her separate reality into his utterances; Stacey asks, “Where do you begin telling someone their world is not the only one?” (72). When Steve and Stacey first meet, he “casually fell in beside her, as though to walk her home — much to Stacey’s annoyance. Since he hadn’t asked to join her, there was nothing to say no to. What sort of authority is that, she wondered?” (72). Steve’s authority, like white town’s, comes from the assumption that silence equals assent to a particular social or political arrangement, that the non-Native paradigm is the default from which any departure must be marked. Hegemony hangs on a presumed meaning for any word or silence, and where there is no knowledge or acknowledgement of difference, there can be no dialogue, only a monologic assumption of power — monologic in its lack of concern with the Other’s response, and monologic in its assumption of and reinforcement of a unified language. Although Stacey’s own thought is intensely heteroglot, comprising Steve’s voice, her own, and a third voice that frames them in terms of each other, Steve’s assumption of power means that she cannot form an utterance that would enable her to express her disinterest in him. His initial silence has in turn silenced her:

A crazy argument began inside. She wanted to laugh at herself. She could just tell him, “Look, I am not interested.” White boys always have a response which is designed to save their pride by assaulting yours. Something like “Who said I was interested?” would likely fall from his mouth, bringing up shame to hers. She could hear him say that he just wanted to talk. She would then feel ashamed of misreading his intentions. (74)

Only the outsider is aware of the need for dialogue; the insider remains unconscious of the Other. As Maracle points out, “The people at the bottom see more clearly what’s happening than the people at the top seeing down” (“Conversation” 83). Stacey wonders, “Is it prejudice or a gulf of difference too deep to cross? Steve was self-absorbed. He had no

idea of the gulf between them or the end of the road for her should their relationship fail” (90). The final conversation between Stacey and Steve begins with the idea of economic appropriation but soon moves into questions of cultural hegemony. Steve explains how the folding chairs he brought for Ella were invented in Indonesia but subsequently patented and sold by white men, and he launches into a discussion about “other ideas someone had scooped and patented and gotten rich from” (184). For Steve, who is part of the dominant culture, the chair is simply an example of how the economic system works, but for Stacey, it is a product of colonialism: “Stacey wondered how they managed to shamelessly steal the thinking of so many different people whom they called inferior” (184). When she mentions this to Steve, it once more becomes apparent to her that although Steve possesses a vocabulary that implies awareness, he is not ideologically aware — his approval of economic appropriation betrays an unquestioning acceptance of the word as it is spoken by his culture and an unwillingness to imagine what other meanings are possible:

“I don’t know,” he answered, curious. “I never thought about it before.” This surprised Stacey. It made her wonder what else he did not have to think about. How much of the information he owned inspired thoughts in him, how much just gets filed in his mind without him ever thinking about it again? (184)

Steve’s inability to move outside of his own perspective is further illustrated in his questioning of why Stacey does not accept his advances. He asks, “Is it because I am white?” — a question that focusses attention on his status rather than Stacey’s — and Stacey replies, “No . . . it’s because you aren’t Indian” (185), in a vain attempt to shift his awareness to her. Stacey ultimately believes that Steve is not going to choose the meanings of his own words, that he will continue to use words as they exist in the mouths of the others in his culture: “Steve’s future was pre-cut from some cloth she did not want to wear” (188).

But, although Stacey does not in the end accept Steve, she may have sown in him the seed of a potential future dialogue between the village and white town. Stacey states that she and Steve have no context for a relationship: “until you have experienced the horror of an epidemic, a fire, drought and the absolute threat these things pose to the whole village’s survival — and care about it, care desperately — you will be without a relevant context.” Steve replies, “I can’t conjure that up in my side of town” (186). His use of the word “conjure” implies that all the events Stacey has

described are caused ahistorically, as if by a kind of sorcery. But Stacey introduces the historical through the personal:

“How did it feel to watch us die, Steve?” she asked. It was mean. She didn’t care much that it was mean. Steve blushed. His father was one of the white doctors who could not possibly be expected to cross the river to treat “those” people. . . . “Shame, Steve. You are now feeling shame,” she said without any emotion whatsoever. (186)

Stacey’s remark implicates Steve in the events that he had imagined were conjured; it identifies him as a part of the village’s context, but as a part that is responsible only for death. It also removes him from the safety of his liberalism, the easy assumption that he is like all people and that all people are like him, and places him in the sphere of group politics where, in order to negotiate multiple languages and realities, he will have to engage in a genuine dialogue that qualifies his own hegemonic language.

Stacey and Steve evoke reciprocal feelings in each other that are representative of their disparate cultures: Stacey evokes shame in Steve, and Steve, in turn, evokes guilt in Stacey. Bakhtin distinguishes between two types of discourse that are present when the assimilation of another’s words is not only for “information, directions, rules, models and so forth — but strives rather to determine the very bases of our ideological inter-relations with the world, the very basis of our behaviour” (“Discourse” 342): internally persuasive discourse and authoritative discourse. Although Steve does not respond verbally to Stacey, his feeling of shame shows that he has finally engaged dialogically with her. Stacey does not have the social or cultural authority to assign guilt to Steve but, to the extent that he has engaged in a dialogical relation with her, Steve is unable to avoid constructing himself at least partly through her language. His shame constitutes a response to her utterance that is potentially productive because it is internally persuasive:

Internally persuasive discourse — as opposed to one that is externally authoritative — is, as it is affirmed through assimilation, tightly interwoven with “one’s own word.” In the everyday rounds of our consciousness, the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else’s. Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organizes masses of our words from within, and does not remain in an isolated and static condition. . . . The semantic structure of an internally persua

sive discourse is not *finite*, it is *open*; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever newer *ways to mean*. (Bakhtin, "Discourse" 345-46)

Steve's shame, because it is dialogically developed and resolved (it is a word half-his and half-Stacey's), is dynamic rather than static, potentially promoting new ways of speaking and acting.<sup>2</sup> But Steve's reaction to his shame provokes in Stacey a feeling of guilt, a method of control which is monologic and characteristic of his culture. In contrast to shame, which can be internally persuasive, guilt is an exclusively authoritative discourse:

The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it. ... It is not a free appropriation and assimilation of the word itself that authoritative discourse seeks to elicit from us; rather, it demands our unconditional allegiance. Therefore authoritative discourse permits no play with the context framing it, no play with its borders. ... It enters our verbal consciousness as a compact and indivisible mass; one must either totally affirm it, or totally reject it. It is indissolubly fused with its authority — with political power, an institution, a person — and it stands and falls together with that authority. (Bakhtin, "Discourse" 342-43)

Therefore, in order to reject the guilt that Steve imposes on her, Stacey must also reject Steve:

Steve's bent shoulders culled a twinge of guilt inside Stacey. She tried to shake it off. The gulf between them widened. It grew until it became an ugly maw. A maw filled with a powerful raging wind that whirled everything into its centre. Stacey hung fast to the fragile thread of herself. This maw could swallow her, given the opportunity. She resisted the pull of the wind. (186-87)

Steve's counter-utterance of guilt stands in contrast to that of the Snake, who felt deep shame when he was banished for abusing Madeline and his daughters but left the village with dignity "to assure the people he had no quarrel with their decision. He had not wished to add the coercive force of guilt on top of his crime against womanhood onto the shoulders of the community" (186). While Steve's reaction prevents him from engaging in further conversation with Stacey, his shame decentres the hegemonic voice of his own culture, leaving him with the potential to engage in dialogues with other languages and other voices.

If Steve serves initially to show Stacey the hegemony and monologism of white town, then Polly challenges Stacey's own desire for cultural isolation, which is also a form of monologism. When Herb's sexually explicit note to Polly is read out in class and the students laugh (a devastating example of how the meaning of an utterance is dependent on speaker and audience, rather than being fixed in the text), Stacey immediately feels an identification with Polly: "Stacey cringed at the laughter. Every time she heard someone being laughed at, the derisive laughter aimed at her during her school years revisited her" (28). Stacey knows that she and Polly are both marginalized, but this shared status complicates her simple image of two distinct communities — village and white town — and so she tries to negate her feelings: "Polly is one of theirs, she told herself: 'Nothing to do with me'" (29).

Although she despises white town for its monologism, Stacey also bases her identity on a concept of cultural purity, and therefore on a purity of language (not national language, but language in the Bakhtinian sense, as a marker of social grouping or stratification). She does not want cultural boundaries blurred by the application of other boundaries which may cross cultural lines, since as soon as she starts complexifying the situation all the different ways of positioning herself will begin to qualify one another, and all the different languages associated with those different ways of positioning will begin to comment on one another. The risk of acknowledging polyglossia is that inevitably one's own language is decentred ("in place of a single, unitary sealed-off Ptolemaic world of language, there appeared the open Galilean world of many languages, mutually animating each other" [Bakhtin, "Prehistory" 65]), and so Stacey tries to protect her boundary and her monologism: "In the dark her analytic thoughts unfolded in shallow logic. Stacey took care to leave her heart out of her final examination of Polly's death. Polly had perished under the dome of arrogant insecurity her people had erected for her" (63-64). But each time she arrives at the bridge that leads from white town to her village, the place where the two cultures can potentially cross over and meet each other, the polyglossia Stacey so desperately wants to repress comes out:

Killed herself over lust. Stacey leaned against the fence in the middle of the bridge, grappling with her insides, trying hard to root herself to the water's playful voice. [...] Killed herself over lust ... splash, which ... killed ... She fought to amplify the articulation of river's rush to sea in order to deaden the script set off inside by Polly's passing. Killed herself over lust. Splash ... killed herself over ... which ...



killed herself. Water crashed against stone, ripping it from the embankment, growing louder until finally the internal quarrel was reduced to a repetitious whisper. She forced the last utterance from her mind. Finally the voice tormenting her fell flat and the river's chatter came up, filtered through what seemed to be a long tunnel. [...] Stacey told herself that she couldn't afford to get this whacked-out over some white girl. (40)

Stacey washes away the second voice that calls her to identify with Polly — she refuses to engage in a dialogue with it.

Although Stacey tries to suppress it, the image of Polly returns, especially when Stacey is near to the bridge, and often in association with other members of the village — with Momma, who like Polly is a sexual being (106); with Nora, for reasons Stacey cannot understand but which may relate to Nora's alienated status in the village (127); and with Stacey herself, when she is relieved to find out that not many people know Ned is her true father: "She blushed at her relief: getting caught was worse than the act itself, ran through her mind. She felt like Polly" (102). These pairings, rising unbidden in Stacey's mind, might have suggested to her that the membrane she has created between white town and the village is more porous than she imagines, that Polly's voice has a place among the voices of the villagers. But Stacey's final pairing of Polly is with Steve as he crosses the bridge back to white town: "His back reminded her of Polly. It no longer mattered why she killed herself" (188). Because the novel ends with Stacey's alienation from Carol, Steve, and Polly — all the people who were significant to her in white town — the reader might conclude that the final position of the novel on the possibility of cross-cultural dialogue echoes Stacey's. But there is one other voice in this polyglot novel that qualifies Stacey's own utterances: Raven.

Raven is a character who advocates and embodies dialogue. Her song in the opening passage of the novel is an utterance that contains within itself echoes of the earth and is repeated and amplified by other natural entities: "The song echoed the rolling motion of earth's centre, filtering itself through the last layer to reach outward to earth's shoreline above the deep. Wind changed direction, blowing the song toward cedar. Cedar picked up the tune, repeated the refrain, each lacey branch bending to echo ravensong" (9). Ravensong is a response that evokes response, and the interweaving of different elements within nature into a unified whole is a dialogic process that needs to be mimicked by the people who live on the land if they are also to live in a way that is aligned with nature.

Jeannette Armstrong writes that, in the Okanagan tradition, “language was given to us by the land we live within” (175), and emphasizes that the incorporation of the land-language into her own utterances is dialogic: “Through my language I understand I am being spoken to, I’m not the one speaking. The words are coming from many tongues and mouths of Okanagan people and the land around them. I am a listener to the language’s stories, and when my words form I am merely retelling the same stories in different patterns” (181). From Raven’s perspective, the lack of dialogue between the villagers and the citizens of white town (not only in the sense of communication, but in the sense of mutually qualified cultural perception) endangers the earth itself, and the repeated epidemics the village suffers are her way of driving the villagers to white town and of birthing shame in non-Natives so that they will learn from the villagers how to live in a less destructive manner: “Both the earth and Raven knew all the people belonged to them. Raven could never again be understood outside the context of the others” (191). The villagers can no longer understand Raven monologically, in an isolated manner; they must enter the context of the others in order to understand her, so that an understanding of her is now implicitly dialogic. Each culture must see itself in terms of the other:

In the realm of culture, outsidership is a most powerful factor in understanding. It is only in the eyes of *another* culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly (but not maximally fully, because there will be cultures that see and understand even more). A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning; they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. . . . Such a dialogic encounter of two cultures does not result in merging or mixing. Each retains its own unity and *open* totality, but they are mutually enriched. (Bakhtin, “Response” 7)

Raven always seeks to undermine monologism by adding another qualifying voice, whether it is by directly projecting her voice into a character, as when she encourages Stacey’s identification with Polly: “Wander around Polly’s insides, feel your way through decades, generations of lostness. . . . Discover her spirit, bent, then broken. Re-invent Polly, re-imagine her” (39), or by offering commentary on a character, as when she qualifies Momma’s resentment of the Depression-era transients that

stopped by the village for food: “You could have taken the time to teach these men when first I brought them here. You stood silent. Why would they return without reason?” (54). The non-Native reader is constantly distanced in *Ravensong* by the exclusively Aboriginal point of view, but Raven also qualifies the statements of Stacey and Momma, so all perspectives within the novel are to some degree decentred. The novel offers images of many languages, but we lay claim to our own language only to find that we are estranged from it; we are continually invited into the novel and yet denied a position as *the* internal reader so that we are forced to engage dialogically with the other languages in the work: “what Raven does when she sings is tell us that it’s time, that the time is coming and to listen to what’s going on in a whole bunch of different ways” (Maracle, “Conversation” 86).

Brill de Ramírez suggests that, “In choosing *Ravensong* as the title of the novel, Maracle underscores the crucial importance of human interrelatedness with all of creation. This interrelatedness is specifically manifested in the person of Raven” (176). But even Raven does not possess the master voice within the novel. Her voice qualifies others, but is also denied absolute authority. Raven is, after all, a trickster, and as Vizenor states,

tricksters are not moral or functional. Tricksters are not artifacts. Tricksters never prove culture or the absence of culture. Tricksters do not prove the values that we live by, nor do they prove or demonstrate the responses to domination by colonial democracies. . . . Tricksters only exist in a comic sense between two people who take pleasure in a language game and imagination, a noetic liberation of the mind. (“Comic and Tragic” 70)

So the Trickster, even when she has the best intentions, is not a reliable, stable figure. Maracle points out that “Raven becomes the trickster who tries a plan that isn’t necessarily a pleasant plan, it doesn’t necessarily work, but that’s the nature of Raven. It doesn’t necessarily transform things in a good way, but Raven is the transformer, or the harbinger of transformation, I should say, in our culture” (“Conversation” 74). In fact, it is often when the Trickster *has* the best intentions that she overreaches and unintentionally includes herself in the destabilization she effects. At one point Stacey even identifies her tendency to judge white town with Raven: “She told herself to watch her own arrogance — it was the mother of Raven’s folly, this arrogance” (131), and throughout the novel, an unwillingness to defer to authority is attributed to having “too much Raven,” with results that may be positive, as when Momma

refuses to accept the degradations of residential school (107), negative, as when Stacey breaks a taboo on having an unchaperoned visit with Rena (125), or indeterminate, as when Stacey dismisses Steve (187). Raven submits the villagers to plague after plague, but her confidence in her plan seems to stem more from stubbornness than from transcendent knowledge. At the beginning of the novel “Raven was convinced that this catastrophe she planned to execute would finally wake the people up, drive them to white town to fix the mess over there. Cedar disagreed but had offered no alternative” (14). In the end, Cedar, whose serene voice almost always qualifies Raven’s, is actually right — the villagers remain aloof from white town, and even Stacey rejects Steve and Polly.

Perhaps, as Raven confidently asserts, “It was not until this last ‘flu epidemic that finally the seeds of shame were sewn [*sic*]” (191) through Stacey’s interaction with Steve, and perhaps the following epidemic of cultural loss will finally induce the villagers to work to effect change in non-Native culture, but the epilogue of the novel is ambiguous toward and perhaps even contradictory to Raven’s assertions. It is an account of Aboriginal cultural disintegration with no corresponding tale of a new non-Native awareness. The suicide of Celia’s son echoes Polly’s suicide, but that only links the two communities in tragedy rather than redemption. Stacey goes away to school to collect the words of white town, but when she returns, the village is not allowed to build a school, and nobody in white town will hire her. The ambiguous ending of the novel means that all voices, even Raven’s, must engage in the heteroglot dialogue of the novel. It also means that the reader too is prevented from regarding the novel as a closed text that ultimately supports one voice or another, and must engage dialogically with it:

The development of the novel is a function of the deepening of dialogic essence, its increased scope and greater precision. Fewer and fewer neutral, hard elements (“rock bottom truths”) remain that are not drawn into the dialogue. Dialogue moves into the deepest molecular and, ultimately, subatomic levels. (Bakhtin, “Discourse” 300)

Bakhtin’s dialogic theory echoes Maracle’s remarks about the relationship between reader and story in aboriginal storytelling:

Most of our stories don’t have orthodox “conclusions”; that is left to the listeners, who we trust will draw useful lessons from the story — not necessarily the lessons we wish them to draw, but all conclusions

are considered valid. The listeners are drawn into the dilemma and are expected at some point in their lives to actively work themselves out of it. ("Preface" 11-12)

Maracle's epilogue abruptly shifts the interpretive and diegetic context of the entire novel, recasting the story as Stacey's effort to explain to her son, Jacob, why his cousin committed suicide. The novel is shifted from the written to the oral mode, and we, as readers, are suddenly aware that we have unwittingly been part of an audience that includes the other characters of the novel, that we are members of a community that transcends diegetic levels. Stacey's story leads Jacob to ask a question: "Why did anyone pay attention to them [white town]?" (198). The question reflects a closed reading of Stacey's story, a reading that we might share; it implies that nothing in the present disposition of white town could justify the catastrophes visited upon the village and that Raven's plan is ultimately bankrupt. The grief into which the women are plunged indicates the power of that reading — "horrified by [the question's] innocent simplicity," the full toll of the epidemics suddenly weighs down on them, and only the singing of "their ancient grieving song" can relieve their anguish (198). But Stacey had told her story "to recapture the lost sense of community that lay wounded in the shape of Jimmy's suicide" (197), and when Rena echoes Jacob's question, Stacey, laughing, offers an oblique answer that suddenly opens up the story for Jacob, and for the readers of the novel: "Not enough Raven" (198). Given Raven's ambiguous status in the novel as both saviour of the Earth and a sender of plagues, Stacey's response is both affirmative and ironic, shifting the tone from the tragic to the comic (here we might recall Vizenor's remark about the open, comic nature of the utterance and the tragic nature of the monologic, isolated text); it spurs Jacob and the reader to realize that the tragic reading is incomplete, that the story is not a closed text describing the past but a response to a question which requires us to respond in turn, linking past with present. As in all dialogue, it is the unresolved heteroglossia of Maracle's novel that makes it an utterance to which the reader must in turn respond. Like Stacey's son Jacob, for whom the story is told, we are led to realize that, although the novel has ended, "the story was not over" (199).<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez, in her work *Contemporary American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition*, offers this critique of Bakhtinian dialogism:

[E]ven the greater inclusivity of diverse voices within a Bakhtinian interpretive framework is, nevertheless, based upon the oppositional linearity inherent to discursive structures. . . . [A] heteroglossia in which distinct voices assert their own subjectivities and presences alternately through dialogue is a substantially different reality than the conversive interweaving of voices and persons that co-create and transform their own stories and each other through their relational storytelling communication. (73)

Brill de Ramírez proposes that a conversive model emphasizing “relationality and connectedness” between author and reader, or author and scholar, is more representational of Aboriginal literature than dialogism, in particular because conversivity maintains the relational nature of story, while dialogic methods tend to reduce the story to text (6). This paper posits that Bakhtinian dialogism may be functionally closer to conversivity than Brill de Ramírez suggests, at least in terms of its contextualizing of narrative and the interpenetration of languages. As Bakhtin states, “There takes place within the novel an ideological translation of another’s language, and an overcoming of its otherness — an otherness that is only contingent, external, illusory” (“Discourse” 365). However, Brill de Ramírez’s work does suggest an essential difference between conversivity and dialogism — conversivity has an inherent moral dimension that dialogism lacks:

Within a conversively informed worldview, all elements of creation are recognized as fellow persons who function in the world (and in stories) through their relationships to each other. Everything is perceived as possessing its own intentionality and manifesting its own subjectivity and personhood after its own fashion and capacity. . . . [E]verything in creation is understood to have its own responsibilities in and of itself and in relation to the rest of creation. (115)

Although dialogism may not be, as Brill de Ramírez asserts, necessarily oppositional, it can, unlike conversivity, be manifested through logomachy as well as through more cooperative forms of linguistic interaction. And, whereas conversivity is informed by an ethics, epistemology, and ontology that Brill de Ramírez proposes is especially characteristic of Aboriginal cultures, dialogue is primarily, as Emerson and Holquist suggest, a set of verbal processes whose end result is a general relativization of words, languages, and cultures (427). Conversivity stems from and works toward a particular vision of the world, but dialogue destabilizes and deprivileges the language of all participants.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that shame is always *exclusively* a matter of internal persuasion rather than authoritative discourse, although it is so in Steve’s case. Bakhtin writes, “Both the authority of discourse and its internal persuasiveness may be united in a single word — one that is *simultaneously* authoritative and internally persuasive — despite the profound differences between these two categories of alien discourse” (“Discourse” 342). Shame, as opposed to guilt, is inherently dialogic; it always involves an element of internal persuasion even if the dialogized word is originally alien and authoritative. As Dee Horne points out, colonized populations feel shame when they internalize the perceptions the colonizing culture has of them — when the authoritative word of the Other becomes their own. Horne quotes Jean-Paul Sartre’s comment on shame: “Shame is by nature *recognition*. I recognize that I *am* as the Other sees me. . . . Thus shame is shame of *oneself before the Other*” (113).

I suggest in my first note that dialogue, unlike conversivity, is not necessarily moral, and therefore it is not without its risks in situations where a significant power imbalance exists between interlocutors. One possible reading of Maracle's novel which is qualified, though not absolutely denied, by the epilogue is that Raven, in compelling the village to dialogue with white town, is blind to the different effects of dialogic relativism on oppressed and dominant populations. She dashes the villagers against the stony indifference of white town, but each time white town remains unmoved and the villagers are scattered, struggling to retain their sense of identity and community. Because of the power imbalance, Raven's drive to dialogue eventually leads to a situation where the authoritative word of white town becomes internally persuasive for at least some of the villagers, such as Celia's son, who commits suicide. At the end of *Ravensong*, as Stacey is saying her goodbyes to the people in her village, she once more contemplates Momma's remark that white people don't count, and Nora appears in her imagination, saying, "Momma is neither wrong nor right. Of course they count, but not right now" (194). Nora's voice, while not definitive, does place the dialogic process in its historical and political context, differentiating proximal strategy from ultimate goals — something Raven, working from her extratemporal perspective, consistently fails to do.

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