

Time Structures and the Healing Aesthetic of Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*

Neta Gordon

Volume 33, numéro 1, 2008

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/scl33_1art06

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0380-6995 (imprimé)

1718-7850 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Gordon, N. (2008). Time Structures and the Healing Aesthetic of Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*. *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne*, 33(1), 118–135.

Time Structures and the Healing Aesthetic of Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*

NETA GORDON

MORE THAN THREE-QUARTERS of the way through *Three Day Road*, a novel portraying the fictional experiences of two Cree men fighting for Canada during the Great War, the historical figure Francis Pegahmagabow, an Ojibwe soldier known for his success as a World War One sniper, finally makes an appearance. Rumours of Pegahmagabow's feats have reached Boyden's protagonist, Xavier Bird, and his best friend, Elijah Whiskeyjack; Elijah in particular is keen to compare exploits with "Peggy," especially to weigh his own kills against those of the infamous "Indian," rumoured to be "the best hunter of us all" (187).¹ An important objective of this encounter between fictional and historical figures is to emphasize an extratextual function of *Three Day Road*, which Boyden explicitly delineates in his acknowledgements: "I wish to honour the Native soldiers who fought in the Great War, and in all wars in which they so overwhelmingly volunteered. Your bravery and skill do not go unnoticed" (353). Boyden's use here of a helping verb phrase of negation — "do not" — draws special attention to the main part of the predicate "go unnoticed," and thus reveals the irony of his claim; the scene featuring Peggy proposes that Aboriginal soldiers were not at all "honoured" for their service in the Great War, and that this service in fact went quite aggressively "unnoticed." As Boyden himself admits in a recent interview with Herb Wyile, "I think my acknowledgements were more wishful thinking than anything" (222). Peggy frankly asserts, "You know that the *wemistikoshiw* [the white men] do not care to believe us when they hear about our kills in the field. . . . We do the nasty work for them and if we return home we will be treated liked pieces of shit once more" (265). Xavier and Elijah are repeatedly treated as second-class citizens: before they enlist for service they are, for example, made to sit in a separate train

car for "Indians" (149); on the field of battle, their superiors are at once dismissive of traditional Cree beliefs and practices and pettily resentful of how bush hunting skills translate into military success. Boyden's representation of such treatment itself serves "notice," proposing the novel's case for retroactive "honouring." The term "honour" is usefully flexible so as to suggest both the act of conferring high public regard and the act of acknowledging and paying a debt. Thus, the novel's acknowledgements raise questions about if and how Boyden's "wish to honour" operates as a demand for commemoration and/or redress.

The terms "commemoration" and "redress" require definition, especially as theoretical terms to be employed within the context of analyzing historical fiction. In his introduction to *Sounding the Iceberg*, one of the first sustained critical attempts to survey the field of Canadian historical fiction, Dennis Duffy contends that, as the historical novel developed in Canada, writers put the crucial criterion of the past's "remoteness" (iv) to various uses: to offer a distant yet highly constructed space in which to put forward a utopian ideal, often having to do with the forging of nation; to delineate with quotidian detail an ostensibly "neutral" background for moral testing, especially as such testing relates to questions of social reform or entrenchment; or, to initiate an inquiry into our ideologically complicated relationship to the established historical record. In their introduction to a special issue on historical fiction entitled "Past Matters/Choses du passé," the editors of *Studies in Canadian Literature* point out that, particularly in the twentieth (and now the twenty-first) century, Canadian writers of historical fiction have ever more explored "the darker corners of Canadian history[,] . . . draw[ing] attention to the mechanics of historical representation" (6). Wylie further notes that much contemporary Canadian historical fiction entails a shift toward different political goals from those emphasized in nineteenth-century historical literature; Canadian writers increasingly work to recover "previously neglected or marginalized histories, underlining that what is historically significant has been narrowly defined and ideologically overdetermined," and that "rather than serving to reinforce nationalist myths, . . . [such work] has been inclined to deconstruct those myths, revealing their excluding effects" (*Speculative* 6). Thus, an increasing self-consciousness of the past's "remoteness," of its "darker corners," has tended to provoke texts expressing anxiety as to what we are supposed to *do* with our past, especially if deconstructing the traditional histor-

ical record results in our inability to make the past meaningful. While *Three Day Road* certainly engages in the procedures of deconstructing national myth, such efforts do not necessarily amount to commemoration or redress, both of which generally occur within a publicly recognized material sphere. Despite the imprecision of referring to *Three Day Road* as a commemorative novel or novel of redress, however, these terms operate theoretically as part of Boyden's interrogation of the goals Wyile identifies, in that Boyden's efforts to recover marginalized histories and deconstruct the established historical record are complicated by his wish to "honour." As I will demonstrate, Boyden confronts the way the Aboriginal is written in (or out of) history by constructing a dialectic of time structures in his novel that renders visible the interactions between historical recovery and mythmaking, but that also questions the ethical value of deconstruction that is not also constructive.

Boyden creates what Laura Groening might call a "healing aesthetic," in which attention to "remote" cultural myths and the historical record transforms into a narrative that also looks forward, that is constructive. As Boyden asserts in his interview, "There's no question this is a war novel, but just as importantly this is a novel about the healing power and love of family and how that can save you" (238). Groening points out that, in defiance of cultural critics, especially non-Aboriginal critics, who expect fiction by Aboriginal writers to wallow in bitterness or primarily engage in "social and political analysis" (145), writers such as Daniel David Moses and Basil Johnston have endorsed the writing of healing texts that transcend portrayals of Aboriginals as victims (146), and that depict "a culture alive and well" (151). Boyden's text seeks to recover a marginalized history, but not simply to point out the need to redress an iniquitous historical record, or the fact that, as Peggy asserts, "We do the nasty work for them and if we return home we will be treated liked pieces of shit once more" (265). *Three Day Road* is, paradoxically, a celebratory novel, whereby Aboriginal contribution to Canada's World War One effort is commemorated and given constructive meaning as part of a living community's narrative. I will argue that this healing aesthetic informs the novel's dialectical application of differing time structures, as *Three Day Road* confirms the opposition of historical time and sacred time, while also demonstrating a reconciliation of those oppositional terms in its emphasis on genealogical time. I will show that Boyden's defamiliarizing of tropes associated with World

War One and assaults on Aboriginal culture operate in the context of his insistence on a genealogical plot that suggests familial continuity beyond the historical frame of the novel. Thus, his historical fiction is established on an ethic of constructive deconstruction, and a forward-looking inclination toward healing and hope.

In his discussion with Wyile, Boyden explains that his first draft of the novel had a strictly chronological structure, and that only after discussion with his French publisher and wife did he realize "I needed to tell the story in a circular way" (235-36). The dialectic of time structures Boyden constructs involves negotiating historical time, sacred time, and genealogical time, the distinctions among which can be clarified by referring back to the concepts of commemoration and redress and the way such concepts operate as a theoretical framework for the analysis of historical fiction. The commemorative function of historical fiction appears to defy the deconstructing impetus, as commemoration depends on a reification of the historical record, even as that historical record "diversifies" to recover previously marginalized histories (Wyile, *Speculative* 7). For historical fiction to be theoretically commemorative, it must remain attuned to the touchstone of a stable historical record. Thus, Boyden's wish to honour Aboriginal soldiers who served in World War One is predicated on his commitment to the mythical value of Canada's World War One effort. The concept of redress appears to conflict less with the deconstructing imperative, as it suggests an attitude towards time that is simultaneously active and retroactive, in that all current political activity is defined by dealing with the past. Wyile's notion of the "speculative" historical fiction and how novels "remain submerged in the present while training a periscope on the past" (215) resembles the way theoretical redress might manifest, and also indicates how the time structure of the redress function resembles sacred time. Both produce a sense of simultaneity between past and present that seeks to exceed the historical record. In this way, Boyden's desire to create a narrative of theoretical redress rejects a sense of obligation to the value of the historical record, as the Aboriginal experience is portrayed as radically other — as working through a set of experiences that are out of time and cannot be subsumed into the extant historical record.

Boyden confronts the limits of commemorative and/or redress frameworks, as they may circumscribe his attempt to honour by means of the dialectical negotiation between historical and sacred time struc-

tures that culminates in an exploration of a healing genealogical time. I have previously argued that contemporary Canadian genealogical novels “represent an evolution of the identity novel in which the significance of context is emphasized . . . [and] that comprehends identity as it is situated within a continuous familial system” (Gordon 165). Assessing how *Three Day Road* operates according to the principles of genealogical time is appropriate particularly because Boyden has composed his historical fiction with a family narrative at its core, and has imagined the continuation of that family’s narrative beyond the boundaries of the text.² What I refer to as the “negotiation” between “conservative” and “radical” (166) familial systems enacted within the contemporary genealogical narrative manifests in Boyden’s objective of honouring both the conservative historical record mandated by the desire to commemorate and the more radical and potentially disruptive approach to history entailed by an act of attempted redress. Via his genealogical plot, Boyden scrutinizes the deconstructive impulse of contemporary Canadian historical fiction in order to demonstrate the way an Aboriginal community can productively deal with the past and “address . . . the issues of colonialism under the term ‘healing’” (Groening 157).

After giving his assessment of *wemistikoshiw* prejudice, Peggy instructs Elijah, who doggedly seeks both official recognition for his many kills as well as legendary status among the men, to “‘Think of me as your conscience. . . . And you can be mine’” (266). Elijah admits, at the end of this chapter, to have contemplated murdering Peggy during their late night encounter, demonstrating his reluctance to be guided by conscience. Earlier in the chapter, Elijah points out to Xavier that the circumstances of war afford them a “freedom . . . [that] will not present itself again[:] . . . this freedom to kill” (262). Xavier’s choice to disavow Elijah’s idea of freedom, even while fulfilling his duty as a soldier, indicates that the term conscience denotes the double consciousness necessary to maintain the ethical framework of the bush in a world almost entirely suffused with detached violence, as well as the negotiation between “yours” and “mine” that an ethics of conscience demands. Conscience further describes the ethical prerogative Boyden’s historical fictionalizing follows, in that his freedom as the author of contemporary historical fiction to emphasize the retroactive claims of redress and “kill” the established record is circumscribed by his duty

to the symbolic meaning of the Great War that has been negotiated by Canadians, and by his desire to commemorate that meaning.

Three Day Road is filled with structural and figurative doublings that reiterate the complex idea of conscience. At some points, the doublings in the novel gesture toward a redress function, whereby World War One's status as a war of attrition becomes a rich site of oppositional comparison for a narrative of cultural genocide. The doubling of the term "medicine," for example, is clearly meant to set the dangerously addictive effects of morphine against the power of the traditional *matatosowin*, or sweating tent; whereas morphine merely numbs its user to physical pain and fear, the *matatosowin* encourages the natural excretion of bodily toxins and, more importantly, offers the opportunity to confront and move beyond barriers that impede psychic healing. Boyden's depiction of the healing *matatosowin* is charged, signalling the novel's partial objective to deconstruct cultural myth; Xavier and his aunt Niska's ceremonial measures do not result in a neo-romantic revelation of self customary in non-Aboriginal representations of Aboriginal spiritual rites, in which Aboriginal culture "is simply a stereotype against [which] the white man can assert the values of his own culture" (Monkman 161). Rather, Xavier's lengthy and painful sweat coincides with an agonizing course of detoxification; the ceremony is more a physical necessity than it is a subject-oriented choice, as is demonstrated by its focalization by Niska rather than Xavier. Further, the climactic realization Xavier and Niska experience in the *matatosowin* is of Elijah's presence, as Boyden notably shifts the scene's emphasis from Xavier's healing to include the complicated mourning of his childhood friend, who he still "cannot forgive" (349), but whose death he must confront.

An even more convoluted deconstructing double emerges in Boyden's descriptions of hunting, on the one hand for game in the bush and, on the other hand, for the enemy on the field of battle. During the war, Elijah constructs a "rabbit run," in which he snares a single German soldier by the neck with a piece of thin wire stretched across a trench opening, in part simply to be amused by the sight of the confusion produced by the "floating," dead soldier among his comrades (250). This scene is a perverse doubling of the prologue's description of the snaring of a marten for its meat and fur (1-2). Elijah is convinced that both incidents show him to be a "great hunter" (2), though, as the war continues, Elijah's hunting ability and his procedure of scalping his vic-

tims are shown to indicate a sort of blood lust reminiscent of that of the *windigo*, the Aboriginal whose consumption of human flesh triggered a descent into bloodthirsty madness. When Niska meditates on the tragedy of the Aboriginal-turned-*windigo*, her conclusions are equally pertinent to the novel's representation of Elijah as a soldier gripped by the violence that surrounds him: "To know . . . that you have done something so damning out of a greed for life that you have been exiled from your people forever is a hard meal to swallow" (242). While this doubled representation of blood lust appears at first glance to confirm the opposition of bush and battlefield, it jars against the reputed commemorative function of the novel. At the very point in the novel when mounting evidence indicating that Elijah has simply turned *windigo* seems conclusive, Boyden disrupts such a reductive response to his character by having Elijah himself lucidly assess the commonplace paradox of military heroism: "I'm not crazy. . . . What's mad is them putting us in trenches to begin with. The madness is to tell us to kill and to award those of us who do it well" (322). Elijah's success as a killer is, in fact, officially recognized: he is awarded a Military Medal. Significantly, Francis Pegahmagabow is known as the most decorated Aboriginal soldier, having been awarded two Military Medals.

Boyden's concurrent representation of Elijah as both a cruel, morphine-addled killer and a brave and honoured tribute to his people indicates a desire to construct structural and figurative doubles that are not merely oppositional, privileging bush over battlefield, but rather dialectical, whereby doubled terms must be reconciled within an ethical paradigm, a framework of healing and conscience that makes constructive meaning out of the Aboriginal experience in history. Further, his interest in exploring the differences between Elijah and Xavier, as well as their violent struggle, undermines any sense of a simplistic binary narrative that seeks solely to add to what Wyile calls the "proliferation of revisionist historical fiction" (*Speculative* 6). Boyden's desire to honour manifests not simply as a form of commemoration or even a call for redress, but rather as a provocative expression of cultural recuperation. World War One operates as a highly mythologized set of events popularly associated with the "birth" of Canadian nationhood; in his recent study, *Clio's Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars*, Tim Cook describes how the nationalist myth that Canada was "forged during the Great War" has been reaffirmed by military

historians “who produced nationalistic histories that focused on the operational success and well-earned reputation of the Canadian Corps” (253), and in popular narrative (209). By exploring Aboriginal participation in this mythologized narrative of national birth, Boyden interrupts what Groening refers to as “the most dangerous trope in Canadian literature: the Indian as the member of a dead and dying people” (21). The double paradox of Elijah’s death is that because it occurs on a French battlefield, it accrues the public currency of progress via noble sacrifice, as opposed to the taint of assimilation. On the other hand, because the death occurs at the hands of a tribal fellow, it does not constitute a sign of cultural subjugation. Here and elsewhere, via structural and figurative doubles, Boyden makes visible the mythmaking process that romanticizes both Canada’s participation in World War One and stereotypical representations of Aboriginals.

As one side of the novel’s oppositional representation of time’s movement, historical time is clearly meant to operate as a negative term. Though the structure of the novel deviates wildly from a chronological ordering of story events, Boyden identifies by name each battle that Xavier and Elijah’s company, the fictional Southern Ontario Rifles, participate in so that their military experience might be followed in sequence. The battle scenes are portrayed as Xavier’s memories, recalled in a morphine haze over the course of his three-day canoe trek back into the bush with Niska, whose own memories from even further in the past are retold to Xavier as a healing story; the two sets of memories are juxtaposed in a double, echoing narrative. However, Boyden’s use of time and location identifiers for the battle scenes, such as “We spend our first months in and near Saint-Eloi” (28); “Now that the spring fighting along and around Saint-Eloi has died down, the men talk of being shipped to another place where a great summer battle is building” (59); “Late in June our battalion is moved near a place called White Horse Cellars [near Ypres]” (88), and so on, as well as his inclusion of such well known World War One occurrences as the use of chlorine gas (59) and flame throwers (259) by the German army, ultimately mark the progression of the war as a crucial structuring principle of the novel. Significantly, Boyden draws attention to well-documented instances of specifically Canadian military strategy, fiasco, and success in the war: for example the invention of the “creeping barrage” at Flers-Courcelette in the Somme (166) and the apparent waste of subsequent months of

attritional fighting (182), as well as the major victory at Vimy Ridge (213-21). In the chapter following the description of the taking of the Ridge, Xavier assesses the implications of this success and, in doing so, parrots conventional mythology about Canada's birth in the trenches of the war: "We've taken the place where hundreds of thousands of Frenchmen and Englishmen died in their attempt to do the same these last years. We are an army to be reckoned with suddenly, no longer the colonials, as the Englishmen call us" (222). Boyden, however, ironically undercuts the myth by following Xavier's almost publicly voiced assessment of Canadian heroics with a description of an injury sustained by a Canadian soldier referred to as Fat, which is either self-inflicted or simply the result of his own clumsiness.

Even more so than it confronts national mythology, the historically informed, ostensibly progressive time structure of *Three Day Road* ironically traces a series of regressions. Juxtaposed with chapters that describe a succession of battles are the retroversions that describe the deterioration of Niska and Xavier's community. First Niska's father and then her sister, Xavier's mother, fall victim to *wemistikoshiw* encroachment and law, and Niska's way of life in the bush becomes increasingly unsustainable. The historical battle scenes are the context for the decimation of Elijah and Xavier's original unit, as well as the background for Elijah's personal degeneration and Xavier's loss of faith in his friendships and himself. By the time Xavier awakens in an English hospital to find that the war is over and that his leg has been amputated, he has even lost his name, as the identity tags he pulls from Elijah during their final encounter are taken to be his. Xavier fails to rectify the mistake, thinking "there is something calming in the idea that I am Elijah. There is something appealing in being the hero, the one who always does the right thing, says the funny thing" (343). Xavier's willingness to assume the identity of the decorated Aboriginal soldier, a model of historical progress, reveals Boyden's suspicions about this time structure, as the model is a sham, a product only of guilt and apathy, of a lack of conscience.

In confronting and toying with the nationalist myth of Canada's special role in World War One, especially as it is associated with a progressive historical time structure that involves the decimation/assimilation of a cultural group, Boyden participates in the widespread contemporary course of deconstructing the concept of an objective history, as "hist-

ory [is conceived] as the product, rather than the object, of discourse" (Wyile, *Speculative* 12). His deconstruction, however, must necessarily proceed with a difference if it is to distinctively function within the framework of commemorative honouring. Boyden's project of illuminating Aboriginal contribution to significant national events necessitates that his writing of historical progression, though structurally convoluted, is not wholly destabilizing. Yet *Three Day Road* does insist on a challenge to an absolute reliance on a progressive time structure that can only explicate an inevitable regression of Aboriginal culture. While the project of protest necessitates the marking of historically grounded instances of cultural devastation, the project of cultural commemoration and recuperation forces Boyden to remain wary of simply participating in a progressive (regressive) unfolding of the "dying people" trope.

Thus, Xavier's provisional adopting of Elijah's name is a culmination of the novel's thematizing of the way names are associated with a sacred time structure, a structure that opposes the problematic paradigms associated with historical time, and that operates as a gesture towards theoretical redress. Xavier and Elijah are introduced as such in the prologue, and are referred to by these names by Niska in the opening chapter, though this scene of Niska's meeting with her nephew at the train station upon his return from the English hospital initiates the mystery of how and why the two young men's identities have criss-crossed. Niska assumes that she will be meeting Elijah, having heard official word that Xavier was killed in action; Xavier too is surprised, having had word from a family friend that his aunt was dead. This initial scene of resurrection, occasioned by a series of miscommunications, sets the stage for several scenes that deal with the process of sacred renewal, and how that process depends on the assuming of one's true name. The various names assumed by or assigned to Xavier and Elijah signify to what extent their identities are able to transcend or fall victim to categories imposed by the progressions marked by historical time.

Elijah, perhaps because of his relative comfort and success with *wemistkoshiw* language and culture, has forgotten that the name assigned to him, Elijah Whiskeyjack, is a mispronunciation of his Cree name Weesageechak (143). He begins to inhabit an assigned identity, misconstruing in the process the appropriate path for his own sacred renewal. Weesageechak, Xavier's narration reports, "is the trickster, the one who takes different forms at will" (143), and Elijah as the Weesageechak is

indeed seemingly able to transcend the burden of historical progression, as well as its twin, cultural regression. He adapts well to trench life, using an English accent to mark his protective transformation and, as becomes clear quite late in the novel, has with humour and charm tried to distance himself from the sexual abuse he sustained as a child at the hands of a nun in a residential school (314). When Elijah jokes to Xavier about eating the flesh of a German, the narrative draws attention to “the gleam of the trickster [that] is in his eyes” (287), as the Weesageechak here makes fun of Xavier’s great fear of turning *windigo* and mocks his friend’s attempts to make sense of seeming madness. But even the powerful trickster cannot experience a sacred renewal once he begins to behave in keeping with the name assigned to him within the context of historical progression. Elijah Whiskeyjack starts to believe that he is a type of bird, a chattering whiskeyjack jay bird, who is talkative, bold and, most importantly, meant to fly. Elijah’s fervent wish to fly in an airplane “like a bird” (27) proves a costly embracing of an assigned identity, as he realizes after his one flight that he “lost something up there” (322). More significantly, his addiction to morphine is represented in terms of his wanting “to leave my body and see what [is] around me” (118). The use of morphine makes Elijah Whiskeyjack the perfect soldier, fearless and deadly, but his dependence on it to give him an “osprey’s vision to spot the enemy” (195) undermines his opportunity to experience sacred renewal. Elijah’s imposed identity — as the Whiskeyjack bird — operates as a version of the non-Aboriginal who superficially exploits Aboriginal myth to his own cultural ends. Over the course of his battlefield experiences, Elijah increasingly revels in the idea, expressed by his military comrades, superiors, and allies, that it is his “Indianness” that gives him “the charm” for military activity (73); that, as even the despised Lieutenant Breech asserts, Elijah’s success is a consequence of “our Indian blood, that our blood is closer to that of an animal than that of a man” (92). Elijah Whiskeyjack, in spite of (or perhaps because of) his success on the battlefield, is the non-Aboriginal’s Aboriginal.

The distinction between sacred and assigned names is even more evident in Xavier’s name story, which is plotted by Boyden in such a way as to highlight a true name’s sacred function. The name Xavier, used in the prologue and the first chapter, is promptly supplemented by the name “Nephew,” which Niska begins to use once the first resur-

rection has been enacted, once her relative is again “home” (6). The significance of this is clarified several chapters later during a scene in which Niska recalls Elijah questioning his friend about her use of the name “Nephew”:

“Why does she call you Nephew and not your real name?” he asked.
 “Nephew is my real name,” you answered. “I am her nephew.”
 “Does she ever call you by your Christian name?” he asked.
 You shook your head, looked at me nervously. “My name is Nephew.”
 “Your name is Xavier,” your friend answered. (248)

The juxtaposition of Niska’s notion of a name with Elijah’s reveals Boyden’s contention that names do shift according to perspective and that the bearer of those shifting names must carefully negotiate between ones that offer the opportunity for sacred renewal, as does the name “Nephew” in its capacity of marking a loving familial connection, and ones that produce an externally motivated, potentially exploitable sense of identity.

The name “Xavier Bird,” in fact, functions as a reconciliation of this character’s most false and most sacred names and, in another ironic doubling, each of these names is assigned during the celebration that follows a display of individual prowess. The almost ceremonial assigning of what will constitute Xavier Bird’s most false name occurs following a marksmanship contest that takes place during combat training in Toronto: Xavier is the only soldier able to light a match placed twenty paces away with a shot from his rifle. The Sergeant in charge of Xavier’s winning company pronounces: “From now on you will no longer be called Xavier. You have a new name now. Your new name is simply X” (100). Although this name is meant to function not only as a well-meant honour but also as a marker of Xavier’s absorption into a new community (a community he will, as the war progresses, come to think of in familial terms), it also constitutes a radical effacement, one that the narrative ironically makes note of. Xavier reflects in the moment that his new name ensures that “None of these who are here today can call me a useless bush Indian ever again. They might not say it out loud, but they know now that I have something special” (100). The ensuing narrative, however, proves his assessment problematic on two counts: first, his status as a bush Indian is repeatedly deemed a hindrance by commanding Lieutenant Breech and, second, his more sacred and special bush identity, gestured toward in the surname Bird, is obliterated by the

newly found eagerness to inhabit the name “X.” Much later in the novel, in the chapter immediately preceding the description of the identity tag swap, Niska recalls the ceremony during which her nephew received his sacred bush name, “Little Bird Dancer,” given to celebrate Xavier’s first solo hunt, as well as his witnessing of the rarely seen circle dance of the grouse. That this scene, redolent with life and laughter, occurs so late in the narrative demonstrates that the sacred name functions to invoke a circular sense of time as well as a viable sense of identity; Niska’s retrospective account is a critical though painful part of sacred healing, and the near-death state her nephew falls into after hearing the account marks the resumption of the sacred name as prerequisite to renewal. Niska’s insistence on detailing Xavier’s sacred name story also becomes a version of theoretical redress, as the account of the sacred embodies that which stands apart from the historical record but which must be honoured in order to ensure survival.

What is potentially problematic, however, about a wholesale privileging of sacred time over historical time is the way such a paradigm appears to dispense with the systemic cultural recuperation that must occur in “real” time. Ultimately, what Boyden fashions may be likened to what Groening refers to as a “healing aesthetic” (144), an aesthetic that neither exclusively calls attention to stories of “victimhood” (Groening 147), nor provides comfortingly symbolic applications of “the red man’s myths [as] important to all Canadians in search of ‘home’” (Monkman 127). Boyden does not, therefore, allow portrayals of historical time and sacred time to culminate in opposition, but offers a genealogical sense of time as the scheme via which healing may occur. Contemporary recourse to tracing genealogy in literature often depend on locating a sense of familial continuity even when strict linear succession has been disrupted (Gordon 167). The contemporary genealogical plot is thus both “radical” and “recuperative” (Gordon 166); even while it may “present a challenge to both the terms of genealogical injunction and the arbitrary preference given to discretely ‘whole’ and succeeding family units, the confidence in familial continuity and its unusually tenacious energy is maintained” (Gordon 171). In *Three Day Road*, Boyden engages the contemporary sense of genealogical time in several significant ways, all of which operate, in the first place, to trouble the progressive-regressive time structure that links national progression with the dying Aboriginal and, in the second place, to indicate how sacred

renewal is not a spiritually discrete process that occurs "out of time" but is associated with tangible cultural recuperation.

Early on in her narrative, Niska declares that she is "the second to last in a long line of *windigo* killers. There is still one more" (44). As a structuring principle, the focus on lineage instigates a narrative that includes necessary recurrence. In a conservative genealogical plot, serial repetition is sustained in order to maintain a sense of familial and cultural stability; disruptions to such repetition operate as potential threats to an inclusive genealogical and social continuity, and must be contained. In its more contemporary rendering of genealogy, however, *Three Day Road* emphasizes differences among serial events and the main purveyors of those events, doing so in order to emphasize continuity that is achieved via often painful adaptation to external circumstances and that does not necessarily rely on direct or repetitively imagined familial succession. Niska's father is a *windigo* killer arrested by white lawmakers for his killing of a Cree woman and child who have thrice broken with the community: first, in wasting a piece of meat from a sacred bear feast (36); second, in leaving the starving tribe along with the husband of the woman to search for their own sustenance (37); and, third, having failed to find game, feeding on the man's corpse and developing an incurable taste for human flesh (40). The role of *windigo* killer is thus represented by Boyden as a custodian of tribal values and collectivity, as opposed to the purveyor of a particular bloodline or consecration, and it is acknowledged that the expression of such values, as well as the circumstances defining collectivity, will change over time. The role of *windigo* killer is taken on because it fulfills a community necessity and, in the case of both Niska and her nephew, Xavier, it is taken on rather inadvertently and somewhat reluctantly. Niska's explanation to Xavier that "Sometimes one must be sacrificed if we all are to survive" (245) seems to refer to both the *windigo* and his or her killer, as first Niska's father, then Niska, and finally Xavier are removed from the physical and psychic borders of their community in order to fulfill the task of protecting the tribe from the "sadness . . . at the heart of the *windigo*" (242); from the place, as Xavier tells Elijah, where "There is no coming back" (340). Though Niska's original sense only refers to herself and "one more" *windigo* killer, the adaptability of this unfortunate role holds promise for the difficult yet necessarily ongoing process of guarding the developing community.

Boyden further relies on the more open and adaptable sense of familial continuity that is in keeping with the contemporary genealogical plot in his decision not to render birth scenes, which might invigorate a sense of bloodline importance and discrete succession, and in his rendering of the brotherhood that exists between Xavier and Elijah, who are not actually related by blood, as well Niska's adopting of her nephew and his friend as her own. In the final chapter of the novel, which depicts the painful process of Xavier's physical and psychic detoxification in the *matatosowin*, Boyden offers a culminating scene that suggests cultural continuity not dependant on discrete familial succession, and in which the dialectic of historical time and sacred time is resolved. The final vision that Niska receives in the *matatosowin* is, as she asserts, a "good vision":

Children. . . . They are two boys, naked, their brown backs to me as they throw little stones into the water. Their hair is long in the old way and is braided with strips of red cloth. But this isn't the past. It is what's still to come. They look to be brothers. Someone else besides me watches them. I sense that he watches to keep them from danger. (350)

Though Niska deduces that this vision depicts her great-nephews, Xavier's sons, its many allusions to the past relationship between Xavier and Elijah implicates a genealogical future that moves beyond the limiting time structures of commemoration and redress. The boys look forward to the circular patterns emerging from stones dropped into water, even as their naked "backs" come into focus; the braiding of hair with red cloth not only implies a return to tradition, but suggests the way the colour red, signifying earlier blood and loss, interweaves with what "is still to come"; the boys "look to be brothers," demonstrating that bonds forged out of a sense of community, continuity, and conscience make sacred renewal possible. The custodian figure, who "watches to keep them from danger," is also there, signalling that the requirement of a *windigo* killer may yet resurface, and that an eye to the often painful process of cultural recuperation and growth remains. Niska's good vision of genealogical continuity ensures the health of her relation: his ability to make peace with his anguished past, to progress through what remains of his as-yet-uncharted history, and to enact a sacred return to his name, his role, his home.

In his introduction to *All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary*

Canadian Native Fiction, Thomas King notes his surprise that, while the majority of non-Aboriginal accounts of Aboriginals are set in the historical past, “most of us [Aboriginal writers] have consciously set our literature in the present, a period that . . . allows us the opportunity to create for ourselves and our respective cultures both a present and a future” (xii). While it is true that various Aboriginal writers have already written important works of historical literature, including Jeanette Armstrong (*Slash*), Lee Maracle (*Ravensong*), and Monique Mohica (*Princess Pocohontas and the Blue Spots*), much of the canon of Canadian Aboriginal fiction is comprised of autobiographical works such as Basil Johnston’s *Indian Days* and Maria Campbell’s *Halfbreed*, or of portrayals of current or recent Aboriginal experience, as in the work of Richard Van Kamp, Eden Robinson, Ruby Slipperjack, and King himself. Thus, it is interesting to consider King’s perception, echoed by Boyden in his interview with Wyile, that Aboriginal writers are somehow reluctant to try their hand at historical fiction. Establishing the grounds for such perceived reluctance is difficult: perhaps Aboriginal focus on the present is related to what Anita Heiss argues is a conventional feature of writing that evolves out of an oral story telling culture, whereby “There is a different sense of time for Aboriginal people,” and “meaning is not linear” (217); perhaps because, as Emma LaRocque has stated, “In Canada, as elsewhere, much of Native writing, whether blunt or subtle, is protest literature” (qtd. in Damm 23), creating fiction filled with the colourful details of a time gone by seemed too leisurely an activity; perhaps the conventions of historical fiction were thought to be inextricably embedded in Eurocentric traditions of order and progress and, as King asserted, “we will begin to write historical novels once we discover ways to make history our own”(xii). In adopting the historical fiction to his own recuperative ends, Boyden succeeds in rendering an Aboriginal past that is not bounded by what Groening refers to as the “field of opposition that consistently renders those once savage people as dead and dying, a thing of the past” (156). Though the Cree community *Three Day Road* depicts is often under physical and psychic attack by encroaching *wemistkoshiw* culture, the violence included in this narrative is not strictly oppositional and, more importantly, is not depicted in the elegiac terms of a “last stand.” Further, Boyden’s novel compels attention to the literary, his dialectical approach to time structuring offering a challenge to the ethics of contemporary historical fiction. In

her opening address at the “For the Love of Words: Aboriginal Writers of Canada” Conference, held in 2004, LaRocque stressed the importance of viewing the work of Aboriginal writers in aesthetic terms, and not simply within the context of “cultural studies,” which relies on “often unstated ethnographic assumption[s]” (12) that have “tended to submerge literary concerns” (13). Boyden’s attempt to “make history our own” has resulted in a text that cannot be viewed exclusively in terms of political objectives, as the healing aesthetic of his complex and strikingly rendered genealogical plot extends beyond the limits of theoretical commemoration and redress, honouring the Aboriginal in history via an imagined journey that is not principally revisionary, but rather that has “good vision.”

NOTES

¹ The military and post-war experiences of Francis Pegahmagabow have recently been written about in detail by historian-journalist Adrian Hayes in *Pegahmagabow: Legendary Warrior, Forgotten Hero* (2003); Hayes notes that Pegahmagabow “remains the most decorated native soldier in Canadian history” (8), while also documenting his numerous post-war clashes with the Canadian government, who repeatedly refused loan applications made under the Soldier Settlement Act of 1919 (8-9). Boyden does not cite Hayes’s book, but his representation of Pegahmagabow’s cynicism demonstrates that his research into Pegahmagabow’s life, like Hayes’s, extends beyond accounts that “tell only the story of the young, idealistic soldier and nothing of the bitter veteran” (Hayes 9).

² Interestingly, as he explains to Wyile, Boyden has conceived of this novel as part of a triptych “dealing with these families. . . . The second one is the one I’m working on now, which is very contemporary, though with grandchildren of characters in the first novel. For the third one I want to return to where the first one leaves off and look at the life of Xavier and Niska upon his return to the Canadian north” (228).

WORKS CITED

- Boyden, Joseph. *Three Day Road*. Toronto: Viking Canada, 2005.
- Cook, Tim. *Clio’s Warriors: Canadian Historians and the Writing of the World Wars*. Vancouver: UBC P, 2006.
- Damm, Kateri. “Says Who: Colonialism, Identity and Defining Indigenous Literature.” *Looking at the Words of our People*. Ed. Jeanette Armstrong. Penticton: Theytus, 1993. 9-26.
- Duffy, Denis. Introduction *Sounding the Iceberg: An Essay on Canadian Historical Novels*. Toronto: ECW, 1986. i-vii.

- Gordon, Neta. "Charted Territory: Canadian Literature by Women, the Genealogical Plot, and SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*." *Narrative* 14.2 (2006): 163-79.
- Groening, Laura Smyth. *Listening to Old Woman Speak: Natives and alterNatives in Canadian Literature*. Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 2004.
- Hayes, Adrian. *Pegahmagabow: Legendary Warrior, Forgotten Hero*. Huntsville: Fox Meadow Creations, 2003.
- Heiss, Anita. "Aboriginal Identity and Its Effects on Writing." (*Ad*)*ressing Our Words: Aboriginal Perspectives on Aboriginal Literature*. Ed. Armand Garnet Ruffo. Penticton: Theytus, 2001. 205-32.
- King, Thomas. Introduction. *All My Relations: An Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Native Fiction*. Ed. King. Toronto: McClelland, 1990. ix-xvi.
- LaRocque, Emma. "Opening Address." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 31.1 (2006): 11-18.
- Monkman, Leslie. *A Native Heritage: Images of the Indian in English-Canadian Literature*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1981.
- Wyile, Herb, Andrews, Jennifer, and Robert Viau. "Introduction: Past Matters/Choses du passé." *Studies in Canadian Literature* 27.1 (2002): 5-14.
- Wyile, Herb. "Pushing Out the Poison." Interview with Joseph Boyden. *Speaking in the Past Tense: Canadian Novelists on Writing Historical Fiction*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2007. 219-40.
- . *Speculative Fictions: Contemporary Canadian Novelists and the Writing of History*. Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 2002.