

“Mystory” in Allison Muri’s *the hystery of the broken fether*

Iv told my story, what I ment to tel, the histry of Sams ranch is in here somewheres, and I told about the mystory of his death. Which wasn’t so mystrious after al. —*the hystery of the broken fether*, 95

In Allison Muri’s first novel, *the hystery of the broken fether*, 94-year-old narrator Indigo de Plume recalls the murder mystery of horse wrangler Samuel Coldridge through complex coding strategies while revealing her own secret history in a fictive autobiographical narrative. Far from a conventional mystery or detective story, *the hystery of the broken fether* eludes genre definition and invokes myriad intertexts in a challenging yet playful autobiographical “hystery/mystory.” *the hystery of the broken fether* is written as Indigo de Plume’s journal, to be handed down to her grandchildren and great-grandchildren; in it Indigo reveals, among memories and digressions, that she is the murderer of Sam Coldridge.

Upon first glance, the novel is an editorial nightmare: abominations of spelling, grammar and syntax litter the text, rendering it almost incomprehensible for an impatient reader. This form of writing, termed “illiterature” by one critic (Jones 29), enables Muri to capture the rhythms and errors of the writing style of a barely literate woman while creating intriguing and intelligent word play that can direct the reader to clues in solving the murder mystery. Reviewers have criticized Muri’s work harshly, commenting that “some experiments shouldn’t be let out of the laboratory and this is one of them” (Van Luven 29). Although some critics maintain that “the misspelling is distracting” (Broughton), or “has the effect of demeaning the narrator by drawing attention to, and even mocking, her ignorance” (Jones 30), Muri succeeds by making her words perform doubly. Muri does not use spelling errors to mock the intelligence of an uneducated Prairie woman or simply to mimic the sounds of dialect; the “errors” enable Muri to work the language harder, to demand doubleness from her text, and to provoke active

detective work in her readers if they are to solve the spiraling mysteries. Rigorous reading leads not only to the detection of Sam Coldridge's murderer in *the hysteria of the broken fether*, but to a re-evaluation of the limits of traditional genres and orthography for the writing of oral storytelling.

In her circular autobiographical storytelling, Muri resists traditional narrative structures. She self-consciously and irreverently re-negotiates conventions through a parody of genres and intertexts. Linear time lines are discarded in favour of an intricately helical narrative in which Muri appropriates stories from Greek mythology, the Old Testament, and elements from literary theories, all the while borrowing from native storytelling. The detective genre, in particular, is examined; Muri invites her readers to *detect* various guises, connections, and paralinguistic codes that elaborate women's experiences and the traditional boundaries of the genre. Contrary to the pattern of most detective stories, the discovery of the killer is not the penultimate moment in this novel; instead culminating in a single climax, the everyday life of the protagonist and her adult life after the murder unfold as if circling several peaks.

The most significant mystery in the novel lies in the relation between the narrator, Indigo de Plume, and young Iphigenea Plumay, who was raped by Sam Coldridge. The connection between the two women is concealed in the misspelled recollections of Indigo's journal, but one may uncover it through careful reading. Indigo describes the life of Iphigenea Plumay in the third person, but she also suggests that her own life story can be broken up as the lives of three separate people: "So it was like I got three seprate lifes, three difrent storys. I was one person befor I got married, then I lost that person al that time I had a famely. Than I was an other one after they was gone, I was a new self, that's the one I am now" (24). A reader is left to wonder how many mysteries and histories are linked to the broken fether ranch where Sam Coldridge was killed. If we are instructed by Indigo to think about her stories "backwards and forwords" (32) and, and if stories unpeel in layers like onions (31–2), what connection does the narrator have to Iphigenea in the story? How was Indigo de Plume present to witness the details of Iphigenea's rape and the murder of Sam Coldridge? I almost shut the back cover after my first reading before I thought, what *iph* rather, what if, Indigo and Iphigenea are actually the same person?

When a reader begins to suspect that Iphigenea Plumay has adopted the "nom de plume" Indigo de Plume, it becomes even more satisfying to search for clues linking one woman to the other than to solve the murder mystery. Muri generates suspense by indefinitely deferring the "a-ha!" moment where a reader can point to Indigo's connection to Iphigenea. No

definitive truth exists, but hints and clues about their single identity abound. One of the clearest hints that Iphiginea and Indigo are one and the same person is Indigo's declaration, even though most of the story focuses on Iphiginea: "seems almost like you got to say once and foral, This is my story, Im the main one in it, its all about me" (49). Here, the narrator reveals tacitly that she is the main character in each of the narratives: she is the girl who was raped, the harried mother, and the elderly woman. Indigo separates the different phases of her life so she can leave behind the girl who was raped by Sam Coldridge.¹ Indigo distances herself from her deepest trauma as she obscurely confesses to murder. Muri's ambiguous language requires the reader actively to piece together the mystery of the narrator's identity. Indigo's detached perspective demonstrates how severely rape and violence have fractured the character's sense of a cohesive or unitary subjectivity.

Indigo de Plume takes her new name from the indigo crow who flies so freely (48). She comments that the young Iphiginea took a long time before "she becum like her crow" (50). The crow and the colour indigo resonate within a larger context of symbolic and storytelling Native traditions that appear in the novel. The crow is recognized within many Native cultures in North America as an incarnation of the Trickster or Transformer figure who, as Penny Petrone explains in *Native Literature in Canada*, uses guises, deceptions, and guidance to lead people to moments of greater clarity and insight about their lives.² The colour indigo, particularly in Canadian First Nations and Australian Aboriginal cultures, is the sixth colour of the rainbow and is often associated with the ability to read cultural and spiritual messages from the Spirit World.³ Indigo represents the night-time sky, spiritual "seeing," and the skills to interpret the dream time with clarity.⁴ When Iphiginea re-names herself Indigo, she finds a clarity about her own life that took years to achieve. As a young woman, Indigo learns about her totem animal, the crow, from her Métis husband Michel and through Michel's grandmother's parables. Indigo finds peace and guidance from a variety of stories about the crow which pose questions rather than supply answers. In *How Should I Read This?* Helen Hoy studies some ways in which native writers including Jeanette Armstrong and Lee Maracle use oratory and storytelling. Armstrong and Maracle suggest that any number of perspectives can be drawn out by the listener and no fixed meaning is designed specifically to be taken from the story (Hoy 196). Armstrong describes her own use of this storytelling mode as "raising questions to make things clearer" (qtd. in Hoy 196 and "What" 16). In her novel, *Ravensong*, Maracle suggests that patient and intuitive readers and listeners of Native storytelling will "get the answer when it [is] time" (qtd. in Hoy 196; Maracle 16, 49).⁵ Muri positions Indigo

both within and outside native culture; Indigo is not native by birth but she finds a way to belong to a culture that grants her some solace and provides her with the structures to heal. As readers of the novels from a variety of backgrounds, we are encouraged severally to involve ourselves in similar acts of interpretation and engagement with the story, with aspects of native cultures, and with the ways in which we listen and learn. At age 94, Indigo gathers the various strands of her story and aspects of her identity in order to tell her grandchildren a fuller version of her “hystery” and “mystory.” As Indigo adopts the last name “de Plume,” translated as both “pen” and “feather,” she takes on a name which announces her blended heritage. Indigo de Plume releases herself from the connection to the “broken fether ranch” by placing a whole, unbroken feather in her name.

Feminist Coding Strategies

Indigo uses feminist coding strategies in her journal so that she may pass on her life experience to her grandchildren and great-grandchildren without an incriminating confession. In “The Feminist Voice: Strategies of Coding in Folklore and Literature,” Joan Radner and Susan S. Lanser define coding in literature as “the adoption of a system of signals that protect the creator from the dangerous consequences of directly stating particular messages” (414). Typically the writing of women and other oppressed groups, argue Radner and Lanser, includes “covert expressions of ideas, beliefs, experiences, feelings and attitudes that the dominant culture—and perhaps even the oppressed group itself—would find disturbing or threatening if expressed in more overt forms” (414). *the hystery of the broken fether* can be seen among a multitude of novels that incorporate feminist strategies of narrative coding. Radner and Lanser examine six primary strategies of coding found in texts written by women: appropriation, juxtaposition, distraction, indirection, trivialization, and claims of incompetence (412). Each of Radner’s and Lanser’s strategies of coding can be deciphered in Muri’s novel and each leads to the reader’s discovery of Indigo’s secret “hystery.”

The first strategy of coding—appropriation—involves the use and adaptation of dominant forms or genres normally associated with male culture. By appropriating various intertexts, such as detective novels, stories from Greek mythology, and the Bible, Muri recasts traditionally patriarchal narratives, links herself with the traditional authority of her intertexts, and thus reinstates her narrator, Indigo, as the questioning authoritarian. Muri’s appropriation of intertexts undermines, rather than supports, notions of the author’s absolute knowledge and authority over the story. Indigo constantly questions her own capabilities as a storyteller. Juxtaposition is the second

coding strategy described by Radner and Lanser. Sometimes context or form can affect how an insight will be interpreted. In *the hysteria of the broken fether*, Muri has Indigo, who is without formal education and barely capable of spelling, express playfully perceptive insights on patriarchy in literature. Indigo recalls her children and grandchildren studying the “littery cannon” (39). She writes, “I don’t know what that is exacly but al it means is they studyd grate riters like first Shakedspere and Milting. then they also studyd what was Geek clasics. . . . And of corse they lernt the Old Testesment” (39). In her misspellings, Indigo strips authority from the literary canon by introducing phallic metaphors such as a cannon, a spear, Biblical Testes, and by referring to the heroes of mythology as geeks. The integration of classic literary knowledge in a misspelled journal encourages readers to examine their prejudices about the limited intelligence of uneducated writers and to consider the class-based borders that run between formally trained and self-taught scholars.

Distraction—the third strategy of coding—is defined by Radner and Lanser as drowning out or drawing attention away from the subversive power of a feminist message (417). One of Muri’s recurring strategies of distraction is to allow significant passages to masquerade as digressions. Whenever Indigo submits a self-deprecating comment, or re-directs her focus—“It seems I got myself realy all muddled up now, I dont no what the conection of that is to my story that Im teling you now” (52)—it is a clue for the reader to pay close attention to the preceding “digression,” which carries information integral to the mystery. Other strategies of distraction include overt distinctions between Iphigeneia and Indigo (when the two women are actually the same person), and Indigo’s insistence that the murder of Sam Coldridge is the primary subject of the novel.

Strategies of indirection and trivialization operate in the novel through Indigo’s writing style and voice. Indirection—telling the truth in a circuitous fashion—can involve hedging, which Radner and Lanser define as the use of ellipses, litotes, passive constructions and qualifiers, techniques sometimes identified with “women’s language” (418).⁶ Great potential lies in lulling the reader into expecting the content of a passage to match the innocuous, hesitant writing style of its author. Muri has Indigo trail off distractedly in order to deflect the possibility that the weary and harmless storyteller could possibly be a murder suspect. These recollections are far less threatening than would be the memories of a confident, youthful, and more focused narrator.⁷ Trivialization—the use of a form that is considered by the dominant culture to be unimportant—can be viewed as a tactical feminist coding strategy; when a particular form is considered unthreatening, the message it carries, even if it might be threatening in another context, is

likely to be discounted or over-looked (420). One does not expect a murder confession to lurk within the notebook of an old woman in a nursing home; nonetheless, Indigo's testimony stubbornly and subtly weaves its way through her journal.

Muri also uses claims of incompetence as a feminist coding strategy for her narrator. Within a discourse of inability, apologetic, deferential claims of incompetence are not signs of inadequacy, but rather modesty topoi in classical rhetoric engineered to win the sympathy of the reader. Indigo's topos of inability, the way she separates her incompetence from that of other authors, does more to convince the reader of her rhetorical skill, than to illustrate her ignorance of narrative technique. In a single paragraph rife with self-conscious insecurities, Indigo contrasts her own circular story-telling methods with the linear trajectories of literature, specifically and subtly evoking King Arthur and the directness of his quests:

I don't know how al those Arthors tel a story from start to finish, just like that. . . .
 Probaly its just me, I don't understand the cumplex naycheer of the riten word. I gess maybe being just a mother and a house wife for al those many yrs makes it so you cant think in a strait line, you no how you have to stop rite in the middel of darnning socks at the table to stop the potatos from boiling over and then go back to get the baby whos woke up again for the third time and put it back to sleep, then aswer the dor and say no thanks, not intersted, and go back to put the peas on (32)

Indigo works diligently at convincing her reader that she is an incompetent narrator as she simultaneously produces cunning writing that critiques linear, patriarchal conventions of structure. Like the classic Renaissance rhetoricians who feigned modesty and conventionally began speeches with proclamations of their own inadequacy in order to arouse pathos in their audiences, Muri has Indigo display her ability as a writer as she disparages her ability to write.

Muri's use of feminist coding strategies directs the reader to other more subtle and restrictive codes in literature. She looks at how conventional spelling and grammar act as barriers to those without education. Through inconsistent spelling and unusual grammar, Muri challenges the apparent "neutrality" of conventional language, choosing, instead, to view it as a constructed and exclusive system based upon linear, elitist and patriarchal structures. Muri avoids using standard spelling, proper grammar, and the use of "I" as a unified subject throughout the narrative in order to point out and reverse the code; she does not require Indigo to conform to conventional standards; rather the reader must adapt, and, in a sense, decode the unconventional orthography of the novel. An ironic and celebratory liberty infuses the spelling "errors;" double entendres and puns contribute to the

story in a way that would be impossible if standard English spelling and grammar were used exclusively.

The more ambiguous or complex a code, the higher the risk becomes for potential misinterpretation. Because codes are ambiguous by definition, there is always the risk that any instance of coding will reinforce the very ideology it is designed to critique (Radner and Lanser 423). How is it possible for an author to ensure that various codes are covert enough to obscure messages that challenge the dominant order, yet accessible enough to be deciphered by readers who may be enlightened by the messages? Muri's novel can be problematic for readers who are unaccustomed to doing such detective work; one reader may excavate layerings of mysteries and intertexts, while another reader might miss the codes entirely and interpret the novel at the level of plot. Assuming that a coded text may permit a variety of interpretations within various target audiences, Muri risks the certitude of a definitive reading in exchange for increased responsibility on the part of the reader, who may uncover an indefinite number of interpretations.

Detecting Intertexts⁸

One of Muri's most interesting coding strategies is the literary intertexts in Indigo's tale. What may appear to be an excessive tribute to patriarchal forefathers can be read as renegotiating genre boundaries and calling for feminist revision. Deliberately drawing on intertexts associated with male heroes, Muri destabilizes them within new contexts and opens them to innovative interpretations. As Bakhtin suggests, a negotiation occurs between the authoritative text and its resignification in the new text:

When we borrow another's words, and traditional phrases and stories are not only another's words but are the words of the anonymous and sometimes authoritative, traditional 'other,' we negotiate between the world the authority describes and the world we describe (342–343).

Muri allows Indigo to co-opt the authority of the literary greats and challenge their inviolate status. Before studying the oral traditions from which Muri draws, I will explore four types of literary intertexts—the detective genre, Greek myths, the Old Testament, and literary theories—in order to identify the connections and codes Muri has created.

The predominant literary intertext in *the hystery of the broken fether* is the detective genre, which traditionally has been associated with male or patriarchal narratives and ideologies (despite the increasing number of female detectives and female writers in the genre). To understand why Muri appropriates elements from the detective genre, let us briefly examine the stereotypes within classic, metaphysical and hard-boiled detective fiction and new

directions of feminist and post-modern metaphysical detective stories.

Muri parodies the “classic” detective genre—typified by Edgar Allen Poe’s literary stories, Arthur Conan Doyle’s adventurous plots, and Agatha Christie’s Golden Age “puzzle” mysteries—by working from within a metaphysical and feminist framework. Instead of focusing attention on “who-dunnit” and rewarding the reader with the answer, Muri mocks the conventions of the “classic” detective genre and uses techniques from the metaphysical detective genre to pose questions, not only about the mystery itself, but about the possibility of discovering anything finite or definitive about the “truth” of the crime. Kathleen Gregory Klein describes “the course of the Classic detective” as one that “follows undeniably through a series of red herrings to the unitary, unchallenged explanation of the crime and conclusive identification of the murderer” (183). Muri obligingly provides readers with a dead body on the second page of the novel, an ineffective male detective named “Arthor Conan Hitchdcock,” and a slew of potential suspects. The narrator comments ironically on the use of formulaic conventions after Sam Coldridge’s body is discovered: “Well there you have it then. Seems like every story needs a body now don’t it.” (8). Readers may note that the novel’s detective, Arthur Conan Hitchdcock, does not solve the mystery in the novel; he only acknowledges that, indeed, a murder has occurred. Muri leaves the role of the detective almost entirely to the reader and provides sufficient clues for the reader to begin investigative work.¹⁰

A metaphysical detective story, as defined by Sweeney and Merivale in *Detecting Texts*, “parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions—such as narrative closure” in order to pose “questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot” (2). Metaphysical detective stories are marked by their own self-reflexivity (2) and speculations about the workings of language (7). Muri invokes the metaphysical detective genre and adds a feminist sensibility. Although the detective in metaphysical detective stories is “almost invariably male” (Sweeney and Merivale 2), Muri assigns the role of the detective to the reader of her novel and further stretches the boundaries of the sub-genre.

Muri’s post-modern disruptions and digressions culminate in her defiant resistance to secure closure. Muri urges readers to see beyond the linear trajectories of “classic” detective stories to recognize that time is circular and stories travel in multiple directions, “backwards and forwords” (32). Muri begins the last paragraph of the novel with Indigo’s anti-conclusion: “So now Im in trouble again, Im not realy sure how to draw al the meanings together, I dont realy no how to make al those conections come to gether to make the happy ending” (95).¹¹ By the end of the novel readers have likely

figured out the identity of Sam Coldridge's murderer, yet that discovery only initiates a series of connecting mysteries and narratives composing the author's fractured identity.

Muri's novel acknowledges some of the concerns that writers of feminist detective stories have explored in responding to the patriarchy in the "hard-boiled" tradition. According to Coward and Semple, "hard-boiled" detective fiction "usually starts with a disruption of the status quo and proceeds to a discovery (and eradication) of the perpetrator of the disruption" (44). In early hard-boiled detective stories, such as those by Dashiell Hammet and Raymond Chandler, forensic details and police procedures predominate while the "establishment"—the police, coroners, judiciary, and detectives—specialize in handling disruptions and restoring traditional hierarchies to power. Maggie Humm suggests that contemporary feminist detective writers gravitate to the hard-boiled tradition in order to "explore ways in which women can have power in male environments by exploiting, not necessarily having to discount, the feminine" (237).

Recently, feminist detective novels use "fluid boundaries" over traditional linear progression; they emphasize the *process* of discovery, psychological detail and intimate relationships between women (Humm 244). Humm observes the trend to challenge gender norms in contemporary feminist detective fiction written by Rebecca O'Rourke, Sara Paretsky, Gillian Slovo, Barbara Wilson and Mary Wings. Female detectives—heterosexual and lesbian—explore the way women move "through public spaces and patriarchal time" (239) and more importantly, unsettle the balance of power in male environments while solving mysteries. Humm observes that differing ways of organizing time in detective fiction are related to gender. In comparing male-centered, linear time with Julia Kristeva's idea of female *jouissance*, a type of psychic temporality, Humm notes that feminist detectives are generally synchronic in their approach, rather than diachronic: they read clues in fields, from any point to any other point, rather than in a hierarchic sequence (245).¹²

Muri aligns herself with contemporary feminist detective writers in appropriating aspects from the hard-boiled (Chandleresque) form, which generally describes a "criminal milieu" and does not view a single crime as an isolated occurrence, over the "classic" form, which focuses on a single mystery or case (Tomc 52). Choosing a highly participatory genre that from the beginning puts the reader on guard for deceptions, guises, linked mysteries and surprising connections, Muri finds the detective genre a fertile context for drawing together feminist and metaphysical storytelling.¹³

From the theatre and mythology of Ancient Greece, Muri appropriates a second significant intertext. Iphigeneia is directly linked to the title character

in Euripides' paired plays, *Iphigenia at Aulis* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*. Muri appropriates three significant elements from Euripides' tragedies: the idea that marriage is a sacrifice, the imagery of sacrificial animals, and Iphigenia's escape to a land of savage natives. As *Iphigenia at Aulis* begins, Iphigenia is about to be sacrificed by her father, Agamemnon, to the goddess, Artemis, so the men of Argos can sail forth and recapture Helen of Troy. Agamemnon tricks Iphigenia into thinking she is going to the marriage altar instead of to the sacrificial altar. At the last minute, Artemis saves Iphigenia and takes her to the land of the savage Taurians. Muri likens Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia to Abe's arranged marriage for his daughter, Iphigeneia, in order to contemporize the Greek tragedy and to explore a father's choice to sacrifice his daughter's happiness for his own purposes.

In the novel, when Abe discovers that Iphigeneia is pregnant, he immediately sets off to Ernfold to arrange a marriage for his daughter with Mr. Ramseys, an old widower, crying out, "Some times you got to make a Sacofice" (74). After being presented with the dismal option of being married to Mr. Ramseys, Iphigeneia leaves her family and marries Michel, her Métis friend. Muri's Iphigeneia is given an independence that the ancient heroine was not afforded; in essence, Iphigeneia becomes her own *deus ex machina*. Instead of being whisked up and saved by a goddess, Iphigeneia takes her own leap, leaves her family and flies toward a new life as Indigo de Plume. Muri does not, however, suggest that Iphigeneia's life with Michel is without sacrifices.

Muri appropriates sacrificial imagery from Euripides' plays to describe how her narrator, as a young mother, feels trapped with her infant children pulling at her breasts. In *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Iphigenia is compared to a sacrificial animal on the altar, and says of her executioners: "They handled me like a calf, Greeks handled me, for sacrifice" (134). In Muri's novel, the heroine refers to her own children, not her adversaries, who make her feel like a sacrificial cow:

and you dont no why but when you sit by your self in the rocker in the dark with your teat hanging out and your baby bunting at you like a calf at a cow, tuing and sucking, choking and raging then latching on again and staring at you with no expresion but just watching, and your held down there in the chair by those eyes, you just weep. (76)

Muri complicates the imagery of sacrifice by suggesting that it is not always an enemy who requires one to sacrifice oneself. Muri's portrayal of Michel as a thoughtful, hard-working Métis from Saskatchewan critiques the xenophobic assumptions in Euripides' description of the "evil savages" in *Tauris*. Abe's racism toward Michel is countered through Indigo's perspective. She does not see Michel as a savage (or a noble savage, for that matter) but

rather as a decent husband with whom she has a balanced marriage of love and sacrifice. By integrating the intertext of Euripides into her novel, Muri offers a pragmatic representation of sacrifice in the world, where a woman's sacrifices of herself are made continuously—not once in a life-time—for her children and her spouse.

Muri selects a second intertext from the Greeks in her use of *métis*, which has at least two mythological meanings: it connotes the power of transformation or the ability “to imitate the shape of your enemy and defeat him at his own game,” and it is the name of the goddess Metis, mother of Athena, who designed various transformations and tricks to achieve her desires (Bergren 73). Muri links Indigo, her puns and double entendres, with women from early Greek mythology who were sources of ambiguous truth-telling. Muri integrates *métis* in the novel not only in her unorthodox use of language, but also in the character of Michel, who is *Métis*, and in the strategy of imitating and transforming conventional literary structures for her own purposes.

In “Language and the Female in Early Greek Thought,” Ann Bergren explores the concept of *métis* as a predominantly feminine activity—comparable, in its semiotic character, to weaving—and presents a long line of women storytellers in early Greek thought who wove together the ambivalent modes of truth and trickery. Bergren observes, in recalling the false and true nature of the Muses,¹⁴ the riddling Sphinx, and Gaia who devised plots based on her prophetic knowledge, that most women in Greek mythology were capable of ambivalent modes of double speaking. Bergren describes how the strategy of *métis* was used by Greek goddesses in order to avoid the male appropriation of reproduction. Before Rhea gave birth to her son Zeus, she asked Gaia and Ouranus for a plan to elude her husband, Cronus, who had swallowed all of her other children. Rhea was given a stone wrapped in blankets. Only Rhea knew the true son from the false son and her baby survived. Bergren observes that the “(re-) production of social legitimacy and true meaning are in the hands of the female” and so is the “power of *métis*, the power of substitution, the power, therefore, of the *tropos* or ‘turning’ that will later become the foundation of rhetoric” (74). Years later, when Zeus had his own offspring, he improved upon his father Cronus’ attempt to control reproduction and swallowed not just his children but their mother, Metis, to ensure that he alone would possess the knowledge and power she represented (74). Bergren then concludes that if, on the divine level, the power of language attributed to the female is appropriated by the male, it follows that the human male is, in the perspective of early Greek thought, “forever plagued by his vulnerability to the woman as the ambiguous source of truth and falsehood” (75).

In addition to Greek literature and mythology, Muri appropriates from the Bible and translates the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Moses into female-centered interpretations. Muri draws a parallel between the Biblical character of Abraham, who nearly sacrifices his son, Isaac, and her character Abe, who comes close to sacrificing Iphigeneia, not in order to prove his faith in God, as was done in the Bible, but rather to avoid the shame and stigma of having an unmarried, pregnant daughter. Muri's narrator recognizes and comments upon the number of sacrifices she makes in life, not of, but rather, for her children.

With a critically feminist perspective, Muri's narrator improves upon the story of Moses, who wandered in the desert for 40 years before arriving at the Promised Land, by commenting on the deficiency of linear structures that focus on the teleological goal rather than on the journey. After raising five children and a grandson over a period of 40 years, Indigo looks back on the years of wandering *as* her life, rather than a means to finding it: "You no, it seemt some times I was wøandering all the time I was a wif with children for them 40 yrs, but that was my life and I made the best of what it was" (24). The Moses intertext also functions as a significant link in connecting Iphigeneia and Indigo as a single character, as Moses is Iphigeneia's middle name, and a character with whom Indigo identified throughout her 40 years of wandering as a wife and mother.

Muri challenges the Moses narrative for its strains of colonialism. Indigo realizes that Moses and the Children of Israel possessed advantages and riches before they ever arrived at the Promised Land. She questions, "Wasnt God feeding them and watching over them. Whyd they need to take that land" (24–5). Holding Moses responsible for his colonization of Israel, Indigo makes an analogy to Canada as a "pormiss land, a Garden of Eden" (25). She writes, "evry body left off living their lifes to go in serch of that virgin land that they coud turn into there own welth. It seems like its greed, just that pure and simpl" (25). In contemporizing the story of Moses, Indigo comments on the greed and racism of Canadian settlers, who ousted native people from their land, stripped away land titles and rights, set up reservations, and proclaimed Canada a "free country" that had to then be purchased as property.¹⁵

Like Moses in the Bible, Indigo demonstrates a painful self-consciousness in her articulation, although Indigo's difficulties are in writing whereas Moses' dilemma is in speaking. While Moses needs his brother Aaron to be his mouthpiece, Indigo endeavors to speak for herself, although she exposes her hesitations by including the crossed-out words that she deems inappropriate for the novel. Indigo criticizes Moses for not having the courage to be

a hero, then crosses it out: “~~He probably just didn't have the balls~~” (40). The cross-outs draw attention to the process of writing and the presence of the narrative voice. The strategy of crossing out words, introduced by Derrida as “*sous rature*” or “under erasure” serves to de-naturalize language and forces readers to confront assumptions about the author’s presence (Spivak, xiv–xvi). In effect, the cross-outs or the practice of writing “*sous rature*” code the text as if it is a manuscript and work towards questioning the convention of valuing a formal literary product over a document which reveals its process.

Another central intertext with a theoretical dimension is the writing of Harold Bloom. A manifestation of Bloom appears in the novel as *Harry Bloom*, the folk historian who instructs Indigo and the other residents of the retirement home how to write journals. Muri illustrates how Indigo, a woman possessing very little formal education, unwittingly enacts Harold Bloom’s theory of poetic influence after listening to and rejecting some of the advice from the volunteer Harry Bloom. As Indigo learns to write a memoir, she is dissatisfied with the conventional structures provided by Harry Bloom, so she creates, adapts and responds to the influences of her predecessors. Ironically, Indigo’s response encapsulates Bloom’s basic theory of poetic influence and the anxiety of influence. Indigo’s ability to enact Bloom’s theory subverts prejudiced notions that a formal education equals intelligence and experiential education equals ignorance.

In “A Meditation upon Priority” Bloom comments on poetic influence and intrapoetic relationships; he explains how one form of poetry can inform another through a series of distortions. Bloom does not believe that one writer is merely influenced by an earlier writer, but argues that poets misread one another “so as to clear imaginative space for themselves” (705). A poet’s attitude to his predecessor is akin to the Oedipal relation of son to father, rife with admiration and envy (708). The anxiety of influence is the feeling of ambivalence toward the precursor and the anxiety about the fear of never creating anything original. Defensive or distortive readings result from the angst-fraught relationship of one poet to his/her earlier poetic influence. Bloom lists six distortive processes that operate in reading, or misreading, the work of a predecessor;¹⁶ these include “*clinamen*,” a poetic misreading where the poet swerves from the precursor; “*kenosis*,” a movement towards discontinuity with the precursor; and “*daemonization*,” a movement towards a personalized counter-sublime in reaction to the precursor’s sublime (709). Muri clearly engages in Bloom’s theory of distortive practices by swerving from the literary structures of her precursors, establishing discontinuity with the arbitrary teleologies of the classics, and creat-

ing her own woman-centered counter-sublime in reaction to the conventional sublime of literature. Indigo's counter-sublime, her fascination with her children's feces (78), demonstrates the author's irreverent response to Kant's definition of the sublime found in Romantic literature.¹⁷

Muri responds not only to some of the classic intertexts, but also to Harold Bloom's theory, with "distorted" readings. She "misreads" Bloom's theory just as Bloom says writers will misread their influences, and portrays in Indigo, not a fear of creating something original, but rather an anxiety over not being able to create a female structure which resonates with the rhythms of a woman's body. After having been taught the Aristotelian plot structure of a rising action, climax, denouement and closure by Harry Bloom, Indigo hints that the traditional structure is limited in promoting the rise and fall of a single narrative and seems "to be just that little bit indescent" in paralleling a man's sexual arousal and climax. Indigo posits a circular narrative structure that mirrors her own female sexuality with several climaxes of pleasure and arousal (14):¹⁸

But I dont no why that struckyour is like that, whys there only one peek why cant there be multipull peaks or may be not even peeks, theyr so sharp and pointy. may be insted there coud be circels widening out and out and out from the center like when you throw a stone in to a quiet pool. why is it so fast to the Closur. (15)

Indigo's poetic distortion of the Aristotelian structure is particularly fitting in the novel because it demonstrates how writers can deliberately "misread" and adapt intertexts for their own purposes. The thinly disguised persona of Harold Bloom functions as a signal to readers to welcome misreadings of central texts. Muri's integration of high literary theory couched in sentence fragments and spelling errors creates an ironic paradox; it is a model for an integration of theory and practice that challenges a reader to investigate beyond the apparently simplistic tone.

Muri connects the conventionally divisive camps of literature theory and oral expression by devising ways to write down oral traditions and stories while preserving aspects of oral performance. Indigo's journal is written, but in her intimate and vernacular mode of storytelling, she seems almost to be speaking aloud. Certain nuances of the writing may actually be detected best when read aloud by the reader.¹⁹ Greek drama and Biblical intertexts are both rooted in such oral traditions of performance and recitation. Muri's novel exhibits some paralinguistic qualities—nonce words used to describe sound effects (60), white spaces to indicate passages of time, capitalized words to imply urgency or volume—all which convey a performative tale. Muri's novel gestures toward an actual historical project developed in part by the oral historians of Saskatchewan. In 1981, oral historians

and folklorists launched a project that aimed to construct a living local history by gathering stories from those living in nursing homes in order to supplement the existing written records. One of the main initiatives of the project was to record the long-established history of the oral tradition of native elders in Saskatchewan.²⁰

Muri's novel values the knowledge and experiential wisdom of oral storytelling and the idea of passing a story on through the generations.²¹ Parables from Michel's grandmother and Iphigenea's great-grandmother about the history of the crow and how women ought to behave (50–52) are given central positions in the novel and function as significant clues to the reader to link Iphigenea to Indigo. As Michel relates his "Soo" story from his grandmother, he explains that "peples storys they can tell you whats the meanigul things in there lifes" (51). Although Iphigenea does not understand the point of Michel's stories right away, nor her great-grandmother's stories, Michel suggests that the meanings will continue to illuminate themselves to her as she is ready to receive them. In her journal, Indigo recalls Michel telling her, "I don't know exactly what it means but may be even if you dont no, may be it can still tell you some thing about some thing" (50). Muri's approach of allowing the stories to reveal themselves to readers over time introduces a teaching method rooted in a native tradition of storytelling—one which Lee Maracle calls "theory through story" (*Oratory* 14)—where a variety of meanings can be accessed and certain values of a culture can be heard and interpreted through its stories.

The inscription of oral parables points to a contemporary oral/written challenge facing some native writers which Daniel David Moses addresses in the preface to *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature*. He explains how some elders believe the written dissemination of stories in English breaks too far from the traditional oral roots of storytelling. Moses notes that many native storytellers do not publish their stories and says that for some native people, "If the material is working orally within the community, that's enough" (xxvi). Maria Campbell takes a different position and urges younger native writers to find a way to write even if they do not have the support of the elders of their communities, or do not speak a native language.²² For the past decade, Campbell has experimented with writing in dialect to try to capture an oral essence that she feels is missing when she writes in academic English (qtd. in Lutz, 48). She does not write in Mitchif, her grandparents' language, because it is not taught and her readership would be limited. Instead, Campbell writes the way she speaks to her community:

I've been working with dialect for about ten years, and a lot of my writing now is in very broken English. I find that I can express myself better that way. . . . It's

very beautiful, but it took me a long time to realize that. Very lyrical, and I can express myself much better. I can also express my community better than I can in “good” English. It’s more like oral tradition, and I am able to work as a storyteller with that (qtd. in Lutz 48).

Thomas King uses the term “interfusalional” to describe the blending of orality into written literature in the writing of Okanagan writer, Harry Robinson (King 13).²³ In order to preserve the voice of the storyteller, Robinson uses a particularly oral syntax that coaxes the reader to read aloud, and transposes rhythms modeled on his native language into English (King 13). In a mode similar to Robinson, Muri creates a novel that pays critical attention to the difference between orality and literary texts. Her hybrid novel, validating oral expression and challenging literary traditions, resists classification.

Through an investigation into the linear and masculinist ideologies of traditional stories, Muri challenges the conventions of patriarchal intertexts, literary theories, and detective fiction. She draws on storytelling theories from native cultures to instruct readers to listen closely to multiple meanings. She does not provide a linear plot, with a rising action, climax, dénouement and conclusion, but rather, circular stories which spiral into connected narrations and resonate with the rhythms of her narrator’s body and memory. Throughout the novel, Muri engages in various feminist coding strategies which link her narrator to ambiguous female storytellers from diverse contexts including early Greek thought, native traditions and feminist metaphysical detective fiction. Muri’s *the hystery of the broken fether* resists classification in any one genre, as it calls for a highly participatory reader and a re-examination of the constructed elements and politics of genre. In “Gender and Genre,” Amy Schuman argues that the politics of genre classification is concerned with resistance: “the refusal to be named as a part of a particular category or the act of undermining authority or authenticity claims” (76). The politics of genre, Schuman states, is not simply the identification of new genres or intertextual genres. It involves an exploration into how authority is appropriated by the dominated and how conventional genres are put to nonstandard purposes (83). Muri’s appropriations enable her readers to explore the “coded” mysteries of traditional conventions through an expansion of genre boundaries in her hybrid “hystery/mystery/memoir.”

NOTES

- 1 Muri draws parallels between Sam Coldridge and Samuel Coleridge, the Romantic poet. She draws on images and lines from “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” In part 3.3 of the poem, Coleridge refers to a “water-sprite.” In Muri’s text, Sam asks Iphigeneia if she is “the water sprite of this here wel” (89) before he rapes her. In part 7.9, Coleridge describes the

- body of the ancient mariner “like one that hath been seven days drowned, / My body lay afloat.” In Muri’s novel, Iphigenia and her sisters are the first to find Sam Coldridge floating in the river, drowned, the day after she killed him. In the poem, the Mariner begins his confession of killing the bird out of agony and in telling the story, he frees himself (7.15.3–4). Perhaps Indigo rids herself of her own albatross by telling her “confessional” story.
- 2 See Penny Petrone’s *Native Literature in Canada* on animal totems and trickster/transformer/culture-hero figures (16). See also Jeannette Armstrong’s *Looking at the Words of Our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature*, and Hartmut Lutz’s *Contemporary Challenges: Conversations with Canadian Native Writers*.
 - 3 Ningwakwe Priscilla George developed the Rainbow /Holistic Approach to Aboriginal Literacy, published in the *Canadian Journal of Native Education*. In her Canadian literacy project, George describes the significance of each colour of the rainbow and how literacy learners can be nurtured by attending to the healing properties of each colour of the rainbow.
 - 4 Ningwakwe Priscilla George, 38.
 - 5 See Maracle’s *Oratory* for a more detailed exploration on theories of orality and storytelling.
 - 6 For discussions on “woman’s language,” see William O’Barr and Bowman K. Atkins, and Robin Lakoff.
 - 7 The genre of an elderly women looking back at her life—also referred to as the Memoirs of a Crone genre—has become popular in contemporary fiction; see Ian McEwen’s *Atonement* and Carol Shields’ *The Stone Diaries*.
 - 8 My sub-title echoes the title of Merivale’s and Sweeney’s study on metaphysical detective stories, *Detecting Texts*.
 - 9 Muri combines Alfred Hitchcock and Arthur Conan Doyle in her parody of a super-detective.
 - 10 Although Poe is customarily regarded as the originator of the “classic” detective genre with his Dupin stories, he is also credited with some of the earliest forms of metaphysical detective stories in the 1840s. G.K Chesterton is another early metaphysical detective story writer from beginning of the twentieth-century and combined crimes with mysteries outside of human nature (Sweeney and Merivale 4.) See Sweeney’s and Merivale’s *Detecting Texts* for a clear outline of the sub-genres of detective fiction with an emphasis on metaphysical detective stories.
 - 11 Muri’s inconclusive ending parodies the neat conclusions of detective stories, and also the conventional happy endings of comedies. She says, “nobody that I no is geting married, and its not even spring time” (95).
 - 12 Unlike Muri, a large number of feminist detective writers including Sue Grafton, Sara Paretsky and Marcia Muller refuse to forego the traditional and “satisfactory” conclusive ending in their detective stories and cling still to traditional climactic resolute endings (Tomc 52). Gertrude Stein’s essay “Why I Like Detective Stories” provides a self-critical commentary on Stein’s own decision to leave the ending to her early story, “Blood on the Dining-Room Floor” open because she later reconsidered and “concluded that . . . on the whole a detective story . . . has to have an ending and my detective story did not have any” (“Why” 148–149 and qtd. in Sweeney and Merivale 21). Muri breaks rank with these writers with her anti-conclusion and risks a certain amount of clarity in coding the identity of her murderer and writing back to the traditions of the genre.
 - 13 Muri’s feminist and metaphysical detective story is in the company of Margaret Atwood’s “Murder in the Dark” (1983) which provides a good example of a self-reflexive metaphysical feminist tale ending with a question; Carol Shields’ *Swann: A Mystery* (1987) and A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1991). See Sweeney’s and Merivale’s *Detecting Texts* for analysis of these stories (2, 20).
 - 14 The Muses, in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, are able to speak true and false things in a coded, double language: “We know how to say many false things like to real things,/ And we

know, whenever we want to, how to utter true things” (qtd. in Bergren 69).

- 15 See Penny Petrone’s *Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present* for an overview of the literary history of Native Canadians.
- 16 Harold Bloom lists six processes by which a poet responds to a precursor: *Clinamen*: poetic misreading where the poet swerves from the precursor; *Tessera*: completion and antithesis as if the poet failed to complete the work enough; *Kenosis*: a movement towards discontinuity with the precursor; *Daemonization*: a movement towards a personalized counter-sublime, in reaction to the precursor’s sublime; *Askesis*: a movement of self-purgation; and *Apophrades*: the return of the dead, as if the later poet had written the precursor’s characteristic work (709).
- 17 Immanuel Kant.
- 18 See Hélène Cixous for a discussion on how writing has been “run by a libidinal and cultural—hence political, typically masculine—economy (1093).
- 19 A reader may miss the reference to Samuel Coldridge if the following passage is not read out loud: “You no some times you just gotta make that leap . . . even tho you might fall into the gap or you might just barely scabble over to the other side . . . but there aint no way you no unles if you jump off from that stony *cold ridge*” (87).
- 20 See the proceedings from the *Saskatchewan Oral History Conference* (1981).
- 21 Muri’s novel, with its emphasis on orality, can be situated among the retrospective vernacular novels of other women writers including, Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel*, and Sharon Riis’ *The True Story of Ida Johnson*.
- 22 Métis writer Marilyn Dumont rightly points out that many native writers live in urban centres with no sense of “native community” or any of the stereotypical notions of what non-natives believe it is to be native. Dumont argues that there is a *continuum* of exposure to traditional experience in native culture which allows for evolving conceptions of native culture. “Popular Images,” 45–50.
- 23 See Thomas King’s “Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial” for an explanation of four models of Native writing: tribal, interfusional, polemical and associational.

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