

Bone Memory

Transcribing Voice in Louise Bernice Halfe's *Blue Marrow*

Sing, Sing, *Nōhkomak*.
Lend me your wind.
Over the prairie
her Voice rolled (*Blue Marrow* 56)

As marrow runs through bone so do the voices in Louise Bernice Halfe's second book of poetry run through the bare bones of her narrative. Halfe, who was born and raised on the Saddle Lake Reserve in Alberta, and attended Blue Quills Residential School, now lives in Saskatchewan. She has written two books of poetry, *Bear Bones & Feathers* (1994), and *Blue Marrow* (1998). In *Blue Marrow*, a Cree woman searches for a past that is both personal and communal, remembered and imagined, and finds this history in the stories her foremothers whisper, shout, and sing as their voices roll across the prairie. The poems are direct forms of address between the narrator and her foremothers—who are explicitly and exhaustively named in the opening pages (3-5)—through their collective stories. Apart from imagining, in this way, a fascinating dialogue between history, taletelling, and memory, Halfe also initiates an intriguing correspondence between the written text and its oral equivalent. As in the above quotation, the stories the foremothers relate are described as “wind,” as “voice,” and breath, a nomenclature that immediately establishes an opposition between the written text and what has been called oratory.¹

Because the stories have been communicated to the narrator in oral form they may be termed oratory, yet our reception of them, of course, is through the written text, *Blue Marrow*. Halfe's writing mimes the idiosyncrasies and colloquialisms of speech through a wide range of dialects and registers

ingeniously communicated through typeface. Nevertheless, *Blue Marrow* is a written text, despite Halfe's presentation of multiple speakers whose clashing, intermittent language transgresses the authority of the conventionally bounded text. This translation of speech into writing is perhaps inevitable in the context of Western modes of production and reception, where poetry is typically communicated through the silent communion between the (absent) writer on one side of the page and the reader on the other.

However, habituation should not allow us to ignore the implications of such an act of translation: the fixing of the fluency and elusiveness of speech within the materiality of writing. Barbara Godard calls such a process "amputation," since the oral text, when transcribed, is "a pale reflection of the original speech act" (92). Neither performance nor event, the oral text becomes a "rendering" of performance in another medium (93).

Halfe playfully exploits this double act of translation, first transcribing the voices her narrator hears into writing and then agitating these words to approximate the vividness and indeterminacy of speech in the process of resisting its writerly qualities. As breath, wind, speech, the stories the foremothers tell and that her narrator gathers from the prairie breeze resist the primacy and dominance of the written word, allowing Halfe to frame "oratory" as an act of resistance. Yet orality, in the context of First Nations' history and, more particularly, in Halfe's multilingual text, is a complex and politicized enterprise in which writing, inscription, becomes the medium for many acts of forced compliance from the Bibles the missionaries wield to the treaties that sign away land and identity.² The ingenuity with which Halfe troubles such binaries as speech and writing produces a text, *Blue Marrow*, that pulses with the opposition between writing as utterance and the lyricism and jubilation to be gained from the performance of orality.

1. The Structure: Bare Bones

Grandmothers hold me. I must pass all that I possess,
every morsel to my children. These small gifts
to see them through life. Raise my fist. Tell the story. (5)

The poems in *Blue Marrow* comprise subtle points of transference between the narrator who "hears" and inscribes them in a writing act that is akin to dictation, and the generations of women—foremothers—whose voices she channels. As a conduit for the ancestors with their words of wisdom and grief, "every morsel" of which she is obliged to pass on (5), the first-person narrator enters a story that pre-exists her, a narrative that began "before I

was a seed,” and one to which she is bound by the umbilical cord her mother strings in her moccasins (1). The “big book” through whose pages her grandfather guides her childish fingers (1) is another version of this pre-determined narrative, a story whose words must be carefully gathered and whose bones must be strung and unstrung until they form the reconstituted skeleton of the “ferocious unburied woman” of the epigraph whose spirit, thus invoked, guides the narrator on her memory quest.

Halfe’s narrator, whose “crumbs of memory” (5) have not proved equal to the task of storytelling with which she is charged, enters the narrative by way of the written word, an enterprise for which she is gently mocked: “When I returned to the cabin I filled the pockets between the logs with / papers, stacked the walls with my books. A man, braids hanging past his / shoulders, laughed” (1). In fact, this moment is the repetition of an earlier one: in the Afterword to her first book of poetry, *Bear Bones & Feathers*, Halfe reports a dream in which she repairs her cabin with paper and books. “I had entered this ceremony, the stirring of my marrow, a living prayer of building and healing, feeding my soul,” she writes, going on to list the range of writers and texts she pores over in an effort to seek out an internal story that “demanded face” (*Bear Bones* 127). In this way the Afterword acts as a threshold, a doorway, connecting the reader with the grief-stricken poems of *Bear Bones & Feathers* and anticipating the multiple voices of *Blue Marrow*.

Equally significant, in the Afterword to *Bear Bones & Feathers*, is the narrator’s construction of writing as a “natural process,” a progression of “visible tracks” that she has to search out and interpret, becoming, by this means, a “wolf,” a “predator on the scent” (*Bear Bones* 127). Such a trope recognizes writing and history as pre-existing narratives to which the narrator can be connected if she listens closely, or to extend the metaphor, if she proves herself a skilled enough tracker—one ear pressed to the ground the other obligingly cocked to the voices of the ancestors. In *Bear Bones & Feathers* the narrator takes dictation from the universe, detailing how “The Great Mystery” enters her dreams (“squirrels shared their chatter, the wind blew its soul into my ears, and the water spoke its very ancient tongue” 126), yet in *Blue Marrow* it is the voices of her foremothers she hears and for whom she must speak since they lie effectively silenced, “tongueless in the earth” (6).

Marked by her role as poet and storyteller—“On my left breast was a hoofprint. It disappeared when I began to walk for them” (3)—the narrator enters the “big book” of history *in medias res*, painstakingly acknowledging

the names of the women who have preceded her (3-5). As much a scar as a brand, the hoofprint upon her breast is what identifies her as woman and poet, as careful bone gatherer. As such, her problem remains one of genealogy: how to respectfully enter the narrative and how to heal the marked body in the process. She begins with intimate portraits of her four grandmothers in the form of prose poems, after which she invokes each woman directly announcing her obligation to remember and to imagine, to animate the lives of the “ferocious unburied” women who have preceded her and to pass their stories on to the women who will follow:

Oh Sarah, Adeline,
 Oh Emma, Bella,
 tongueless in the earth.
 Oh *Nōhkomak*,
 your Bundles I carry inside,
 the full moon dancing
 beyond my wails.
 I've seeped into
 your faces,
 drowned in the pictures
 I have gathered
 and cannot
 hold. (6-7)

This free verse invocation emerges from the structure of the prose poem portraits that have preceded it as if squeezed out of alignment by the pressure of memory and the force of obligation.

It is significant that the narrator imagines herself, in the above lines, as an overflowing container, a vessel whose memories are too excessive to admit of containment. In the poems that follow the narrator hears the voices of her grandmothers flowing thick as marrow in the bone as she struggles to gather and hold them before us. As both listener and narrator she is a conduit between the grandmothers who speak and the reader who listens; she is the privileged outsider who assumes her position at the margins of narrative yet whose insight allows her access to secret histories. Through the metaphor of the window before which she sits and the bone she fingers as she listens to the voices, the narrator negotiates her way out of amnesia and into memory presented as story.

In the iconography of *Blue Marrow* the window is the site of inspiration and enlightenment where the narrator habitually sits clutching the bone that acts as a goad to memory:

This long bone I hold
 leaves me calloused and cold.
 A few months ago I chewed all the meat off
 and now I've become clever
 I press these words hard
 with charcoal
 over and over
 so I can write. (11)

The bone, more particularly the “jaw bone of elk / lined with pearly teeth” (14) that the narrator chooses as *aide-mémoire*, hanging onto it through the double “whiteouts” of blizzard and amnesia (14), is both totem and *memento mori*. Although bones provide the charmed touchstone for a communal recognition of memory—“my bone / filled with the fists of women / of the fur trade” (12-13)—and a guide to writing—as when the bones “stand and sing” as they guide the narrator’s fingers “on this page” (2)—they are also weapons, piercing the temples (38) and splintering the mouth (42).

The narrator who sits beside her window and who ironically confesses herself “clever” because she has gnawed the meat from the bone, pressing charcoal into the words she writes so that they will remain permanent, nevertheless knows that she is in imminent danger of obliteration. In the lines that follow she lists the ways in which the bones of her foremothers have been disturbed, whether through the ambivalent pleasures of assimilation—as when “blond children / bred through the blood of the fur-traders / seep through our women” (11)—or through the much more violent contamination of religious colonization in the reference to the “holy bones” of the missionaries (12), and the restless remains of Columbus, whose “bones at the cathedral of Santa Domingo” have been moved four times (13).

With bone in hand the narrator protects herself from the metaphoric dangers of weather and darkness. The repeated refrain of “Cree-ing alone in the heavy arm of snow” (14) deftly combines references to the Cree language with the wailing cry of a woman anticipating the moment when she “won’t have to live / in whiteouts much longer” (15). The image of the blizzard as “whiteout” cogently evokes the plight of the narrator at her window, alienated as she is by the prospect of living in a world of white values, coldness, and lack of vision.³ Instead she turns inward to listen for the voices that will guide her through emotional storms and psychic darkness, that will lift the fog and shatter the ice (16), and the narrative that follows is a record of these voices as they sing through bone like the “blue marrow” that provides both title and extended metaphor for these poems.

2. Jaw Bones

*My inglish no good
Me stink of rawhide an burning drum.
Smoke my hair, greased in bear fat.
I no no udder way. (35)*

The stories the narrator hears and inscribes from dictation follow their own tempo, gaining momentum as more voices join the chorus, each one contributing “stories so small” they must be pulled like thread through the eye of a needle (53). Sewing metaphors and biblical allusions aside, the stories, though small, are not insignificant and in order to communicate them the narrator must construct herself as medium, as conduit for the voices that crowd the atmosphere:

I bring to you
these Voices I will not name. Voices
filled with bird calls, snorting buffalo,
kicking bears, mountain goats.
I do not recognize who speaks. (17)

Anonymous, collective, and exuberant, the voices create an audible text that plays the border between orality and inscription.

While frequently referring to themselves by the collective pronoun “we,” the foremothers also narrate individual stories introduced by the first-person pronoun. These stories appear as a sequence of narratives articulated either by a variety of speaking subjects or, alternately, by a communal presence inclusive of all voices in the text. Identifying themselves as “she who called” (27), the voices address the narrator as *Nōsisimak* and promise to guide her pen—“*We will flow, / we will flow, / the well / will never dry*” (27)—and her heart: “*We will hold you. / We will fill your lungs. / We will be there*” (28).

Although the message the voices bring is one of encouragement and acceptance—prepare a place for us, they seem to be saying, and “*we will come*” (28)—it is equally clear that speech is a fraught and precarious enterprise. The narrator describes her conversation with the voices as one in which words are squeezed through “blistered tongues” (17), in which the tongue itself is swallowed (17, 34) or torn out of the “open mouth” (18) and the mouth is alternately sewn shut or stifled by the fist (42).

It is no accident that the narrator’s guiding bone is the jaw bone of an elk “lined with pearly teeth” (14), thus emphasizing speech and its various impediments. The voices in *Blue Marrow* are generous with their lives and stories, freely offering memories of abandonment and despair, yet the lan-

guage in which they do so, ranging as it does from translated English to untranslated Cree, bears witness to the discourse of colonization, in which to speak is to straddle the narrow border between learning to “ride English” (5), and “Cree-ing loud” into the night (14).

One example of a woman who is represented as telling her story while drawing attention to the difficulties of address in a colonizer culture is the foremother who speaks in dialect, confessing her “*inglish no good*” but knowing “*no udder way*” (35). She is ironically represented as outsider, as “*udder way*,” as she stands in the snow outside the log cabin where the fur trader who was once her lover now lives with his British wife:

*I look in big window. He read,
she stand dere dall like dree holding his neck.
I lift his baby to my breasts.
He said dey brown jugs. I keep him still. His eyes
dahching my face. My inglish no good. (35)*

In this case the window before which the narrator habitually sits in order to gain insight through listening to the voices and writing their stories, the window that keeps her inside the narrative, is precisely what marks the unnamed woman in the snow as outsider, dividing her from the lamplit scene of domestic harmony within.

The narrator gazes outside, hears the voices and absorbs their stories; the unnamed woman gazes inside and perceives the scene that marks her as outsider. As shared sign of enlightenment the window is the ironically transparent membrane between inside and outside, a glass that reflects the “outside” woman only as a reflection of “[h]is eyes / dahching my face.” The man who defines her as a woman with “*brown jugs*” and his new wife, who is unaware of her existence, are metonymically represented as twin mouths: her “*moudth pink like rabbit nose*” (35) and his mouth which she experiences as an enduring absence: “*I live wit his moudth . . . I live wit his moudth*” (35). The mouth—like the title trope of marrow in the bone or the ubiquitous image of the window—is the border between inside and outside, between speech and silence.

The narrator who sits at her window transcribing the voices as words on her page performs a peculiarly fraught transaction since she mediates the binaries of oral and written discourse and, as such, the territory between disenfranchised culture and colonizing presence. That she is aware of this opposition is clear in her construction of the technology of writing as a form of original sin:

My words get in your way.
 I feel your sting.
 My printer refuses to feed my leaves.
 A squirrel stakes out
 the sink.
 I feed him my apple.
 My printer sins. (31)

In a series of staccato, largely monosyllabic words the narrator establishes a rhythm to her invective. Like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, words “sting,” the computer printer “sins,” and the writer, in her guise as the temptress, Eve, offers an apple.

The allusion to Genesis is positioned as an ironic counterpoint to the voices that follow, which alternate between that of a dispossessed missionary who offers his life to “save savage souls” (31) and the chorus of foremothers who testify to the violence of the residential schools confessing, in the process, to their own acts of rebellion in the face of massive cultural appropriation and religious abuse:

*We were the ones who burned down the jesuits’
 church, trilled, danced and laughed through the night.
 We watched those cabins eaten by our flames. We
 were the ones, Nōsisim, who hid the Bundles,
 held council when we learned how those brothers
 lifted their skirts to spill their devils into our sons’ night. (32)*

Yet despite this subversion of the Genesis story as a narrative of sin and forgiveness, the allusion to an originary expulsion from Eden remains clear and resonates in the text’s later references to Aboriginal land claims and First Nations’ rights. At the same time, the use of the Biblical subtext as a further example of a narrative that has been transcribed from a variety of oral sources, reinforces the narrator in her role as scribe for the voices of the foremothers she hears calling perpetually from beyond her window.

3. Untranslated Borders

Ē-pēcimakik.
 I haunt them.
 My wailing stories. (49)

The narrator chooses to translate the stories she hears into English but this is a choice that is neither off-hand nor, as she makes increasingly clear, unproblematic. It is not explicit in what languages the voices speak, but the

appearance of words and phrases that have not been translated into English implies that much of what she hears comes to her in the form of the Cree language. In a departure from her first book of poetry, *Bare Bones & Feathers*, Halfe does not provide the reader with a glossary of Cree words conveniently arranged in order of their appearance in the text. This purposeful omission is an editorial choice that signals her acknowledgement that she is not writing predominantly for a white English-speaking audience.

Indeed, the poem sequence opens with a highly evocative scene in which the narrator's grandfather reads to her from a book, a phrase from which is rendered in pictorial form and which remains untranslated, in fact, given the form in which it appears, remains illegible for a reader like myself who is ignorant not only of Cree but also of the letters used in this alphabet:

When I was a grasshopper my Grandfather would open a big book. His fingers traced the path of ᐱᐱᐱᐱ, mouth moving quietly (1)⁴

I do not mean to imply that the letters are by nature illegible since a reader familiar with the language would find it an easy matter to read and understand the phrase that the grandfather shows his granddaughter. In acknowledging my own ignorance of the language I intend only to locate a position of ignorance that I presumably share with many other English-speaking readers of Halfe's text. The grandfather who points out the letters does not pronounce them aloud, and this too is significant in the context of the failure I share with other readers to translate or read this word.

The untranslated word that impels the narrative from this point situates a trope of incomprehensibility that functions to mark the non-Cree speaking reader as outsider, as opposed to his/her habitual mode of fluent language-user in the North American context where the linguistic currency is English. The grandfather's gesture, his gift of the word that his granddaughter chooses not to squander through a translation that could not possibly signify in excess of what the word represents in its pictorial form, anticipates the voices of the grandmothers who communicate with the narrator in a variety of spoken forms. The foremothers invoke, mourn, and exclaim in Cree and in English as well as in a dialect form that mimics the sound of English spoken in the accents of an habitual Cree speaker, one example of which is the "*my english no good*" speech. The patois functions to destabilize English as the colonizer's chosen discourse, a conclusion that has some credibility in the care with which many First Nations theorists and poets have taken to articulate their oppositional position *vis-à-vis* the English language.

In her essay, "Immersed in Words," the poet Roberta J. Hill describes her struggle with language by sharing a poetic allegory about an "Indian girl" and a boy named English. English, we are told, "loved the stuff, the goods, the hands-on boodle. He liked action, discovery, conquest" (84). But while English can't describe complex familial relationships in his language, the Indian girl's parents "offered seventeen different ways to describe relatives even if they gathered in one small room, with three old ladies sitting down to chat and nine boys heading out to go fishing" (84). After some time passes, the girl grows increasingly disenchanted with English, his arrogance, limited language, and acquisitiveness. Hill's story ends with an acknowledgement of the girl's continuing search for "ways to speak of relations" despite the fact that she has chosen to do so in a language—English—that is, as yet, ignorant of such connections (85).

Hill's implicit message—that English, as opposed to Indigenous languages, is a concrete signifying system too limited to communicate adequately the emotional ties between people—is a familiar construct in First Nations writing. Jeannette Armstrong writes eloquently and evocatively of a mother-tongue that speaks through landscape: "Voices that move within as my experience of existence do not awaken as words. Instead they move within as the colours, patterns, and movements of a beautiful, kind Okanagan landscape. They are the grandmother voices which speak" (176).⁵ Poet and critic Marie Annharte Baker refers to English as a "borrowed" language (41),⁶ while playwright Daniel David Moses articulates his difficulty with writing in English as an act of translation, not only from one language to another but from one set of values to another, "between, for instance, what each community thought was the definition of the word *human*" ("How My Ghosts" 137).

In *Blue Marrow* Halfe energetically takes up the challenge of what one First Nations writer calls the "Indianizing" of English⁷ through her varied and complex use of italics. Italicizing words and phrases from a language other than the one used in the body of a text typically exoticizes the "other" language as foreign, alien, and in need of explanation. Similarly, the placement of a glossary at the back of a book of prose or poetry, by means of which these highlighted words are obligingly translated to a reader presumably ignorant of their meaning, sets up a relationship of discursive dominance by means of which the italicized language is subordinated, rendered difficult, troublesome, and in need of editorial intervention. Such words, it is implied, cannot be left to stand on their own but must be herded into a dictionary-like enclosure where their intransigence may be domesticated

through definition and correct usage. In a narrative that includes many speakers as well as multiple registers of discourse, Halfe uses italics to express her resistance to the act of translation as an easy alternative to the bilingualism inherent in a text that fluctuates between languages—Cree and English—and between discursive sites—the written and the oral.

Instead of exoticizing and subordinating Cree words through the use of a distinct typeface and a convenient glossary, Halfe multiplies her use of italics to indicate a range of voices and discursive functions, in this way resisting the monologic idea of one-to-one correspondence inherent in the act of translation. While it is true that she includes passages in which Cree phrases are apparently followed by their English equivalents, such mirroring, because it takes place simultaneously on the page (rather than the effect of textual footnoting that occurs when italics are referred to a glossary at the back of a book), gives the appearance of a bilingual text:

Pē-nihtacowēk, Nōhkomak.
Climb down, my Grandmothers.

Pē-nanāpacihiñān.
Come heal us. (16)

This invocation to the foremothers in Cree and in English is closely followed by an ironically inflected quotation from the Catholic liturgy, also in italics:

*Bless me, father. I've pierced my flesh. Dance
with the Sun. Bathe my face in blood. I didn't mean to.
Forgive me, father. I ask for absolution.
I promise to say my rosary and serve my time.
I promise to keep my hands to myself and swallow my
tongue. Amen. (17)*

This catechism, with its ironic promise of self-mutilation and muteness, is very different from the elegiac invocation to the Grandmothers on the previous page, yet both are inflected by italics. Rather than the exact correspondence between “foreign” word and translated text that the use of italics typically announces, Halfe extends her italicized texts to include multiple voices and registers of discourse from the collective chorus of the foremothers to the lonely voice of the unnamed fur-trader’s wife. The foremothers who promise to guide their granddaughter’s heart and pen testify to their disenfranchised status. Whipped by the men as if they were dogs or plough-horses (27), they come to her by night, in disguise:

*We will leave our tracks,
laugh through the thunder*

*Feel the crack of our whips.
We will cast lightning,
torch hearts
full of memory.
Listen. (28)*

In the interstices of the season, between the lines of poetry arranged sparsely on the page, the foremothers speak, their words the “tracks” upon which the narrator must travel in her quest for memory and understanding. “*We are here,*” they cry, “*here, / here*” (27), the indeterminacy of such an ambiguous position as “here” opening out into the textual absences by which their presence may be “heard.”

The use of italics in this case acts as a border⁸ between the living and the dead, between the colonizer’s language and the “whispering” but subversive words of the dispossessed (27). As a boundary line the italic exists as both a mark of connection and of division. In much the same way, geographical borders function to keep their inhabitants apart from marauding outsiders, but such borders may, of course, be opened, crossed, or eroded; indeed their very existence encourages such transgressions. In Halfe’s intensely heteroglossic text no border is unidirectional, no sign is monologic. Instead, the italicized site of the border functions as a linguistic tear or pleat, folding the text over and over, connecting diverse voices and parallel stories. By this means the foremothers are structurally aligned with the narrator, the one they call *Nōsisim*, as well as with all the other dispossessed voices in the text, from the ironic recipient of the Catholic communion to the unnamed woman who has been abandoned by the fur trader:

*Bitterness
eats me. I left too early,
was with him for five earths
before the talk of going over the waters.
One night
I felt the axe.
I watched him bury me. (43)*

The woman who has died, yet whose voice resounds clearly, who describes her own death and watches her burial, occupies a liminal place within the narrative and one that is delineated through the use of italics. In an extended section (38-48) her italicized voice alternates with that of the fur trader and the narrator, both of whose “speech” is represented in regular typeface. The woman who returns from her own burial to remind the narrator of her existence performs a doubled and ambiguous act of inscription since she persistently

invokes her own disappearance (43): “*I do not exist, / have not / since my bones / dissolved*” (44). As wraith she is insubstantial and itinerant, yet as ancestral voice she occupies a potent position in the narrative: “*Ē-pēcimakik. / I haunt them. / My wailing stories*” (47). The oral tradition, transliterated into what one writer calls “the rhythms, structures, and techniques of contemporary verse” (Gould 798), finds (im)material form in the voice of this dispossessed woman who has bequeathed to the narrator her “wailing stories.”

Halfe’s poetry affronts the master narrative of imperialism and commodification by offering, in its place, a vivid account of the dispossessed who, though dead and buried, refuse to be silent and whose stories wind through them as thread through the eye of a needle:

*aiy aiy aiy Nōsisim
here this needle
thread its eye
oh these stories so small
pull them out
squeeze them through* (53)

If autobiography provides, as First Nations poet Gloria Bird phrases it, a vital and necessary “decolonizing strategy” (47), then no story may be considered too small, too insignificant to be unraveled by the narrative *aiy* / eye / I.

4. Cooking up Stories

When the Voices roar,
I write.
Sometimes they sing,
are silent.
In those times
I read, answer overdue letters,
go for a walk or a jog,
stoke my fire, prepare baloney
mustard sandwich, wild rice salad. (48)

At her window, by the warmth of her wood stove and surrounded by “frozen woods,” the narrator describes herself as “cocooned one hour from the city” (48). In the deceptive guise of other window-waiting women—Penelope and the Lady of Shalott, Tennyson’s forlorn Mariana—the narrator does not loiter to be rescued by suitor or knight errant but instead waits upon the voices of the foremothers that “haunt” her (49) as her story haunts us. These moments of textual anchorage, where the narrator describes herself

and her surroundings as she writes, are few and fleeting and are inevitably followed by the voices with their discontinuous, unsigned tales. Since the tales in question are not owned but are conceived of as communal property, the tellers are often anonymous voices who are not always sure of their own identity. "I no longer know / who I am" (35), admits one such voice, the indeterminacy of this utterance along with what in another context James Ruppert calls the existence of "multiple narratives of identity" (vii) provides a powerful means of combating charges of essentialism that may conceivably be leveled at a text in which speech is constructed as oracular and the act of listening as a process of dictation.

In addition, the narrator deflates her heroic function by detailing the everyday tasks she performs when the voices are silent. She reads, writes letters, walks or jogs, and prepares food that is convenient and ordinary. This last point is hardly accidental; in the context of a narrative concerned with what (and who) has been consumed, commodified, and colonized and who has resisted these structures, the narrator's preoccupation with food is enormously significant. Shortly after her description of the baloney sandwich and wild rice salad she eats in the lulls between the voices, the foremothers instruct her to feed them. "We do not talk until we're fed," they explain (49), and what follows is the foods for which, presumably, they hunger:

Saskatoon moose nose sturgeon soup
 Indian popcorn bannock lard
 laced bowels bible tripe duck
 neck bones deer steak goose roast
 cottage cheese cream tea
 corn rice raisin strawberry pudding (49)

In the middle of this nostalgically inflected list of traditional food the word "bible" intrudes. Positioned as a rude interruption to the flow of memory and appetite that the list initiates, the "bible" is buried in the inner organs (between "bowels" and "tripe"), a fitting reminder that the missionary enterprise colonized the bodies as well as the minds and souls of their converts.

In contrast to the narrator's hastily prepared meal of sandwich and salad, the foremothers demand a feast, a celebratory meal that encodes the stories they tell as ritual and reciprocal events to which they welcome the narrator as to a potlatch: "Young and old women sit in a semicircle. / Hands on each steamed bowl, pot and pan" (51). Yet food as a trope of digestion and assimilation is hardly an innocent metaphor. bell hooks begins her significantly entitled essay, "Eating the Other," with a phrase that frames the consump-

tion of food as colonization: "Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture" (21).⁹ The eating of food, along with the pleasurable connotations of appetite, delight, surfeit, nourishment, and nostalgia, carries with it a darker freight of associations that link it to the dubious practices of assimilation. Ideas of greed, commodification, rejection, disgust, and consumption are staples of the colonizing enterprise and, in Halfe's text, are used interchangeably to describe the experience of being devoured and owned.

The woman who has been abandoned by the fur trader, for example, tells her child how she once cured the trader of his "*stink*" with a "*brew*" of nourishing herbs (47). Yet it is significant that whereas food is figured as curative in this image, the fur trader, in turn, is described as "*a slop of neck and gizzard*" (47). The man who does not give thanks to the animals he hunts for food and profit ("*Not once did the four-legged people / receive a Pipe*" 47) is himself transformed into a carcass, or more accurately, into unappetizing and inedible "*slop*." At the same time the woman who prepares an impoverished meal of "[*b*oiled roots and berries, / dried meat and potatoes" (50) is, not surprisingly, wary of the "*sweet white-skin women*" whose glances, she fears, will "*devour*" her spirit (50). Deserted by the trader, she feeds her children with the "*small portions*" her neighbour's husband leaves her, and she describes her abandonment as a carnivorous interlude: "*Fed to the dogs, / I rotted*" (52).

At the same time, metaphors of consumption become the shorthand for all acts of trade, from the barter and commodification of goods to the spectacle of sexuality figured as flaying:

*How many times as I lay beneath him did he remind me
I am the bargain from my father's trade?
How many times did he raise my dress,
Sweated hands smeared with dirt and cow,
bloody from skinning? And I received him joyfully.
I am a gentleman's wife. (52)*

The woman who has been traded from father to husband receives the latter's caress in the knowledge that her body has merely replaced the body of the animal he has been butchering. Both woman and beast are obliged to receive his hands "*bloody from skinning*," although in the case of the woman, his touch has another effect; that of awakening her into "*gentility*," a metamorphosis that is no less sinister since it carries with it associations of domestication that are apparent in the reference to his hands "*smeared with dirt and cow*."

The extended metaphor that connects woman with cow and sexuality with the act of skinning, *via* its twin associations of violence and commodification, continues in the next stanza where the woman refers to the factors at the trading post whose knowing glances “*slide*” down her belly as they “*lay their needles, run / their hands on satin*” (52-53). In the space of some fourteen laconic lines the woman traces her progress from rotting carcass “*fed to dogs*” (52), to skinned animal in the process of being transformed into cultivated cloth, into the satin that may, in turn, be used to outfit other “*gentleman’s*” wives (52).¹⁰

Forced to see herself, at every moment, as inhabiting the straightened confines of domesticated animal, she eschews the “*wild*” animals, “*the forest and its creatures*” that “*house*” her flesh (53), to subsist in the narrow interlude of assimilation. “*I have not learned to chime like their bells,*” she confesses, but can find no purchase in the culture into which she has been born since neither can she “*move like our canoes*” (53). In an effort to force whiteness upon herself and her children she admits that she has “*scrubbed with ashes,*” an enterprise that comes to nothing since her skin remains “*baked*” (53). This last word *chimes*—to use her verb—through the lines that precede it, resounding with the assorted connotations of meat skinned, fed, rotting, worked into leather and finally, cooked.¹¹

Of course, the binaries of wild / tame, savage / civilized are less than a muted subtext to the questions raised in the foregoing about the nature of the woman’s body constructed as site of trade and domestication. Yet Halfe effectively destabilizes the stereotypical association of Native woman with wild (or domesticated) animal by creating a complex web of associations that unfix this woman from any one identification. Instead, by self-consciously multiplying the forms and functions of the animals by which she (ironically) recognizes herself, Halfe’s unnamed woman remains uncataloguable, non-generic, neither typical nor typologically classifiable.

Similarly, in a text that throngs with all manner of animal, insect, and bird life positioned naturalistically as well as metaphorically as tokens, the narrator identifies herself with the chameleon (58). And it is significant that this reference occurs immediately before the recital of another menu, similar in structure to the earlier catalogue of traditional foods demanded by the foremothers but startlingly different in content:

Wild rice pine nuts
 coke potato chips baloney steak
 lobster dried meat rabbit kidney tripe
 earl grey cappuccino mint muskeg tea (58)

The chameleon, token of hybridity, is able to take on the hue of its surroundings and so make its way through potentially hostile territory existing, like the narrator, between competing cultures; symbolized here through the dissonant clash of traditional nourishment, junk foods, examples of so-called fine dining, and brand-name products. Each of the five stanzas that follow each focuses on a different theme—clothing, vehicles, musicians, dwellings, writers—and each provides a similar contrast between the traditional and the contemporary, between First Nations values and the values of a dominant literary, musical, or consumerist culture. Moccasins and buckskin rub up against hiking boots and jeans, Bach and Glenn Gould play alongside Buffy Saint-Marie and Mosquito Drums while Shakespeare and Pablo Neruda jostle for space with Louise Erdrich and Maria Campbell (58).

Although my instinct is to read these stanzas as representative of oppositional binaries, it is important to point out that Halfe simply lists her subjects in no discernible order and to no particular ideological effect. The catalogue exists as a general example of the commodification of writing, music, and history, and the appropriation of First Nations values by a dominant culture remains my own reading of Halfe's uninflected if not entirely neutral representation of contemporary culture.

I am not suggesting that Halfe has not intended this critique of appropriation *via* the commodification of goods and creativity, but rather that her catalogue is inclusive and offers many more choices than those afforded by the codified and hierarchical binaries of white/First Nations, writing/orality, and creativity/appropriation. For example, some of the names mentioned share traits from many cultures, evincing a chameleon-like ability to cross the lines between categories and so aligning themselves with the narrator whose characteristic stance is that of medium between past and present, between traditional stories and present-day contingencies, and between the foremothers who have gone before and the daughters to come.

5. 'Membering Story

*My mudder and fudder were little bid Irish
an French. My grandfudder, dough, he dick
dongue white skin speak grandmudder's Cree.
She, grandmudder, was a pure. I 'member dere
stories. (54)*

Categories of purity and pollution are notoriously easy to hijack to the ends of racial stereotyping and derogation.¹² In her representation of the Métis

woman who speaks, like her grandfather, with “*dick dongue*,” that is, in a patois transliterated from speech and represented as accented English, Halfe presents us with a character of mixed blood, mixed speech, and mixed antecedents. The narrator who wakes, on the first page, in her “white husband’s arms” (1) is the first such character, the woman who marries the British fur trader is the second. These representations of women of “mixed” blood—or First Nations women married to white men—occupy a significant position in a text concerned with hybridity as a privileged site of survival and creativity.

Yet despite Halfe’s careful positioning of hybridity in her poems, racial miscegenation remains a precarious and dangerous enterprise and one that directly threatens the woman, as doubly Othered subject, with effacement. The First Nations woman whose painstakingly related story takes up the first part of this text experiences herself as “disappeared” (43) and “dissolved” (44), since her body has been traded as a mere artifact passed between her father and the fur trader to whom she has been bartered. “*I was the open flap to all his trades*,” she admits in an image that is startling in its uneasy yoking of violence and sexuality with trade (41). In a later, poignantly lyrical, stanza she contrasts the spirited and graceful young woman she was with the currency she has become:

*I, his youngest,
with a squirrel’s tongue,
beaver-paw hands,
elk’s hips, deer walk,
burned deep from the sun,
fresh berry blood.
I became the trade. (51)*

That the foremothers share this state of commodification and estrangement from their bodies is clear. Like the other woman, they too have been passed between men whose status, while very different, is always greater than their own: “*Our breasts that hang from the belts / of prairie settlers / now sway in the hands of our men*” (21). And, like the effaced and unnamed woman who tells her tale to the narrator, the foremothers reclaim their bodies through speech and storytelling, an oral discourse that has no commercial exchange value but that is priceless in the context of recovery and memory that this text implicitly values above all other currency.

In a contemporary parallel to these stories of appropriation, the narrator relates her discomfort at being present at a reunion of her husband’s family.

One of “five Indians” in an extended family gathering made up of the children and great grandchildren of colonists who “preached the law of the land” and “taught the little savages to read” (61), the narrator feels the intense alienation of the “adopted” child whose membership in this family is contingent upon the oppression of her family of birth: “How many of my relatives were catted / onto the reservation during their settlement? How / much of my people’s blood was spilled for this / migration?” (61). The family reunion is implicitly contrasted to the communal feast of the foremothers but, in this case, the written word replaces food as the favoured medium of communication; each family has brought a book, we are told, containing “the history of their migration,” and the “click of wine glasses” only draws attention to the absence of food (61).

Bereft and angry, the narrator comforts herself and repossesses her children with an act of storytelling that, like the tales of the foremothers, combines bravado with grief:

Later, driving home,
 I weave a story for my children—how their
 great-grandma rode sidesaddle, waving
 her .22 in the air trying to scare those relatives
 away. I tell them how my relatives lived
 around the fort starving and freezing,
 waiting for diluted spirits and handouts
 from my husband’s family. I tell them
 how my little children died wrapped
 in smallpox blankets. My breath
 won’t come any more. (61-62)

The narrator who, in the opening pages, awakes in the “crook” of her white husband’s arms, “cocooned” in warmth (1), and whose happiness distinguishes her from her unnamed ancestor, now recognizes that any alliance with the white family she has married into compromises her own history. In the story that she tells their children as an antidote to the encroaching narrative of colonization they have been subject to at the family reunion, she balances the boldness of their maternal great-grandmother who chased the settlers from her land with the pathos of the ones who starved and froze waiting for “handouts.”

Beneath this poignant if conventional narrative of dispossession, however, runs a more radical subtext that is articulated at the level of the pronoun. The possessive first-person pronoun “my” claims children (“my children”), relatives (“my relatives”), in-laws (“my husband’s family”), and finally, even

the children of her ancestors whom she describes as “my little children” and who die of a fatal contagion with the settler culture. The word “my” traverses these lines gathering children and history, reclaiming family and land, leaving her gaping at its narrative power until, “[m]y breath / won’t come any more.” Like her foremothers, the narrator employs the medium of storytelling to reverse misfortune, to claim space within an alien family, and to teach her children (as she herself has been taught in the preceding pages) that narrative is the nourishing food that makes of diverse “morsels” and “crumbs of memory” (5) a celebratory feast.

This apparent “craving” for story¹³ does not preclude the rejection of this same story as unappetizing, difficult to swallow, and harmful to the digestion. At the same time, the story is transformative, and the last quarter of the book demonstrates this quality by transforming the narrator into storyteller, into the one who speaks rather than the one who listens and takes dictation. For in this final section the narrator is no longer the passive recipient of narrative, the one whose ear is poised to catch the voices of the foremothers. Rather, she is an active participant in the “membering” of her own story through the reluctant but compliant voices of her father and mother.

6. The Structure: Footprints

My father’s dubious eye looks.
I crawl into him,
drag out
his tongue. (72)

Blue Marrow is not, strictly speaking, arranged in sections, yet it is possible to read these poems in loosely organized parts, each one of which foregrounds a particular character. The voices progress forward in time from the undifferentiated chorus of foremothers, through the testimony of the fur trader and his wife, the narrator’s grandparents, and finally, to the alternating dialogue between the narrator and her father, and her final recollections of her mother.

Having heard the stories of her grandmother and grandfather (62-71) the narrator undergoes a crisis of story; she hears doors “slamming,” windows “crashing,” and slices her fingers on “these musty pages” (71). She experiences the past as “fresh food,” receives “the swallow’s / tongue” and is ushered into her own voice which although “frail, withered speech” (71), is nevertheless the cracked but necessary medium for the telling of her own story through her father’s memories and her mother’s invective.

Although the most reliable witness to her immediate past, the father's voice must still be forced, the narrator is required to "crawl into him" and "drag out / his tongue." The story he tells of the removal of his children by "Indian Affairs," his homelessness, alcoholism, and poverty, is taken up by his daughter, whose "small footprint," the forlorn trace of her presence, he finally buries (73). This half-buried footprint, always in the process of erasure, is the narrative equivalent of the hoofprint the narrator discovers on her left breast in the opening pages, which "disappear[s]" when she begins to listen to the voices and "walk" for those who have preceded her (3).

The fugitive footprint and the invisible hoofprint mark the narrator as traveller, the one who leaves home with a one-way ticket (76), who holds her breath for "a hundred miles" (77), yet who returns to "walk" for the dispossessed, the unremembered (3). As walker, wanderer, she represents the position of First Nations people deprived of home, land, language, forced into a spurious nomadism that, in the case of the narrator's father, is the prelude to degradation, as when he finds himself "on 97th street, smoking lipstick-stained butts" (74). As well, and perhaps more pertinently, the incipient nomadism by which the narrator is marked provides a creative means of articulating her fluctuating position in this text; listener and speaker, vocal writer and aural reader, she is the wandering signifier whose aimless and purposeful trajectory is the only means of fixing the story in memory.

Like her father, the narrator's mother occupies a precarious place in the story, welcoming her daughter from the threshold, the "door frame" (81), where she leans as she "remembers another doorway" (81). The doorway is the position from which she watches her daughter and her grandchildren drive away, and she waits for them to return at her window described, rather surprisingly, as "a smear of greasy neck bones" (82). In contrast to the window the narrator sits beside as she writes, which is transparent, the mother's window is opaque, "smear[ed]" with memory and smoke from the food she "eat[s] and eat[s]" to keep her heart from rolling in her belly (81). The narrator's mother, who has been physically abused by her husband and sexually abused by the Jesuit priests at the residential school to which she was sent, hovers at all manner of literal and metaphoric thresholds waiting for her daughter to return and preparing a feast to welcome her.

In addition, and perhaps most importantly, her mother is the structural threshold between the narrator's personal and communal past insofar as it can be witnessed through the memories the foremothers relate and the vision of Ram Woman she herself experiences at Kootenay Plains:

Ram Woman, I stood naked
 beneath the falls.
 Your hoofs pounded
 in that April rain. (87)

The hoofprint on her left breast that disappears as she begins her journey reappears in this incarnation of Ram Woman, who pounds fearlessly “in pursuit / of the laughing sun, the pregnant moon” (87), and who bequeaths the narrator her “large eye” to be used as a “stepping stone” (88).

Thus singled out for vision by Ram Woman’s “large eye staring” (87), and symbolically instructed to pound, kick, thump, dance, run, plunge, and fly (all verbs used to describe Ram Woman’s leaping progress), the narrator is prepared for the end of her journey by a series of questions she poses to the foremothers:

Did our Grandmothers know we would be scarred by the fists and boots of men? Our songs taxed, silenced by tongues that speak damnation and burning? . . . Did they know our memory, our talk would walk on paper, legends told sparingly? (89)

In contrast to the immediacy of direct address conveyed through the agitation of free verse that has previously been the preferred form of poetic conversation between the narrator and her foremothers, these final lines are arranged as a prose poem and the address to the ancestors is indirect and formal.

In this way, Halfe’s orally transcribed narrative approaches completion in the only way that it can—with the symbolic transmission of story. In the end, the story is never owned but merely passed along: from foremothers to narrator, mouth to ear, from speaker to listener, from writer to reader. A series of rhetorical questions initiates the narrator’s final realization that she is no longer speaking directly to her grandmothers because she has, in the process of communicating their stories, assimilated them, becoming her own old woman, wise one, ancestral voice. The complex task of transcribing voice ends with the vision of Ram Woman who provides the narrator with the impetus to assume the guise of storyteller. This transition is accomplished in the final line, “Grandmother, the Woman in Me” (90) which earths the “ferocious unburied woman” whose “adored bones” have remained ungrounded since the epigraph, adorning them, at last, in radiant flesh and blue marrow.

NOTES

I would like to acknowledge the generous assistance of the Izaak Walton Killam Foundation.

- 1 In an interview, Lee Maracle uses this word, acknowledging that it was coined by Marlene Norbese Philip, to describe “the structure of Indigenous story” which is “not poetry in the European sense and not story in the European sense either” (167). One, but by no means the only, way that oratory may be used as what one critic calls an “act of narrative resistance” (Sands 4) is through an oral tradition that resists the strictly linear and chronological narration of stories. Instead, multiple versions of story move seamlessly between past and present and between subjects who share a communal storytelling tradition rather than being in possession of individual, autonomous stories.

Such a communal oral tradition suggests that subjectivity is provisional and best articulated through the interaction of many shared texts such as autobiographical narration, oratory, and historical narrative. In *Blue Marrow* Halfe presents a version of autobiographical storytelling that uses both textuality and oratory to chart the shifting relations between languages, between writing and speech, and between narrator and reader/listener. In this way she bypasses what Lenore Keeshig-Tobias in “The Magic of Others” calls “the great white imagination,” a creative intervention, she maintains, that “kills Natives softly with white metaphors and poetry” (174).

- 2 Derrida’s articulation of the supplemental status of writing *vis-à-vis* speech in *Of Grammatology* provides critics with a framework to discuss so-called oral literature. Julia V. Emberley, for example, emphasizes the orality of storytelling as a form that has been subsumed in the master code of colonial history. More pertinently, James A. Gray asks how it is possible to communicate an oral idiom in a language—such as English—that historically and aesthetically privileges the written: “How can novels in English . . . serve as vehicles of continuity for tribal oral traditions carried on for centuries in different languages embedded with different cultural assumptions and using narrative strategies dictated in part by their performative contexts?” (146-47).

Such a problem has direct relevance to my project and I take very seriously Janice Williamson’s interview question to Lee Maracle: “What do you imagine my role as a White literary critic should be in relation to your work?” (168). At the same time, to pretend that Halfe’s text, *Blue Marrow*, suffers in its translation from the oral to the written merely because Halfe is a First Nations woman and a writer engaged in retelling an “oral” text, is essentialism of the most offensive kind. Halfe’s performance of “oratory” as writing is ingenious and engaging, and unworthy of the pretense that it is inaccessible to white critics.

- 3 In a similar way, poet Marilyn Dumont writes of being a “survivor of white noise” in her book *A Really Good Brown Girl* (59). In these poems Dumont, like Halfe, uses the metaphor of “white noise” to indicate the shrill but undifferentiated sound of a dominant culture that drowns out the “small single words / of brown women” (60).
- 4 The importance of this moment is clear in that it is referred to throughout the text, the narrator’s grandfather frequently guiding her fingers through the “thick black book” (64), while she observes her grandmother’s “shrill / fingers” paging through the “leather book” (65). Such emphasis on the “bookishness” of history deflates the stereotype of orality when applied to First Nations people.
- 5 Armstrong’s construction of writing-as-dictation seems essentialist at first glance. However, in the same essay, she writes of her “continuous battle” against the rigidity of

English as an invasive and imperialist language (194). Such active confrontation of the rigours of English promotes a creative rather than essentialist solution to what she calls the “reinvention of the enemy’s language” (175) from the perspective of the Indigenous writer. On the other hand, when critics attempt to discuss this construction of language from the unacknowledged position of outsiders, they fall into the essentialism concomitant upon stereotyping the Indigenous voice in First Nations writing, frequently drawing uncritical attention to what one such critic calls the “delightful ‘Indian’ humour” of Halfe’s narrator when she assumes “a thick Cree ‘accent’” (Crate 190).

- 6 Baker, who refers to herself as a “word warrior” and, more wryly, as a “word slut” (43), frequently coins neologisms, employs *doubles entendres*, and makes punning use of English poetry in order to escape the second-hand lineaments of a borrowed language.
- 7 A. A. Hedge Coke expresses her frustration at the insufficiency of language to find a term other than “colloquialism” to describe the reclamation of “even simple English words” from their connotations of encroachment. Rather than the term “colloquial,” she proposes the adaptation of the verb “Indianizing” to describe the transformation of English words (107).

In addition, Hedge Coke professes herself opposed to what she calls “convenient translation” into English as well as the practice of using italics to indicate “foreign” words since “italicizing words causes them to appear garish or cartoonish, or a caricature of what they are” (114). While Hedge Coke’s admonition is timely and well taken as a necessary reminder of the effects of translation, it is possible, as Halfe demonstrates, to use italics in a subtle and ironic manner, thus undermining their comical function.

- 8 The metaphor of the border is never used accidentally in First Nations writing, and is frequently constructed as a trope by which to articulate issues of appropriation, nationhood, and nomadism. Robin Riley Fast, for example, applies Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of borderland writing to a consideration of Native American poetry. For Fast, the border may signify the site of bilingual speech as well as the multiplicity of ways in which a text “signs” itself as Native American.
- 9 In her cogent discussion of narratives that “unabashedly dramatize a process of ‘eating the Other,’” hooks ends with a warning that, once again, utilizes the metaphor of consumption to caution against racial appropriation: “The over-riding fear is that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate—that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten” (39).

Such tropes are neither accidental nor infrequent. In the preface to their anthology of *Canadian Native Literature in English*, Daniel David Moses and Terry Goldie discuss the issue of appropriation in words that, once again, borrow the language of assimilation and hunger to describe the act of linguistic colonization. “There is a sense,” says Goldie, “that a white appropriation of Native voice is trying almost to swallow Native culture and have it inside” (xv). Moses replies that such racial hunger “can’t be filled by eating” (xvi).

- 10 In utilizing such empirical categories as raw and cooked food, freshness and decay, wild and cultivated flesh, I am, of course, borrowing Claude Lévi-Strauss’s binary categories in *The Raw and the Cooked*. In Halfe’s text, the transition from rotting meat to domesticated animal (cow), to the product of that animal (leather), makes a complex point about the inevitable racialized interpretation of myth and culture.
- 11 It is significant that the stanzas dealing with the woman’s transition from rotting meat to baked flesh occur within the framework of the ritual feast the foremothers demand if they are to continue their stories. The exchange begins with “young and old women”

sitting in a semi-circle, their hands on each “steamed bowl, pot and pan” (51), and ends with an acknowledgment that food has been eaten (53). The framed narrative of the feast reminds us of the possibility that food may be consumed to the ends of communal harmony and peacefulness rather than the violence that Halfe’s unnamed woman has gestured toward in her complex recital.

- 12 I refer here specifically to Mary Douglas’s interpretation of the “abominations” of Leviticus in her book *Purity and Danger*. Douglas provides a reading of pollution and moral danger that derives from our perceived uneasiness with sites of ambiguity and hybridity. In her essay on abjection, *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva demonstrates how such intolerance for ambiguity may be applied to linguistic, semantic, religious, and racial categories.
- 13 In her essay on contemporary women’s long poems, subtitled “Craving Stories,” Susan Stanford Friedman describes a broadly defined “craving for narrative” (17), an “insistence on story” (38), as the distinguishing mark of narratives that claim historical or mythic discourse as a means of articulating feminine identity.

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