

Storytelling as Decolonial Healing: Trauma, Memory, and Indigenous Resurgence in Michelle Good's Five Little Indians

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Abstract

Five Little Indians by Michelle Good is the subject of this paper that explores it as the de-colonial representation of storytelling that mediates trauma, memory, cultural healing and Indigenous recovery. It claims that the novel transcends the individualized interpretations of residential-school trauma by finding internalized suffering in the broken kinship, land, spirituality, and community and colonial institutions. By means of fragmented recollection, survivor witnessing, intergenerational discourse, ritual and the communal areas, Good proves that narration may not only reopen wounds, but also provides possibilities of the relational recovery. Special focus is made on the healing of Clara with Indigenous ceremony, the challenging experience Kenny has with legal testimony, and restoring the remains of Lily to the care of Indigenous care. After all, healing in the novel is not about forgetting about the trauma, but rather about reasserting interpretive power, belonging to a culture, ancestral relationship, and shared future.

Keywords: Decolonial healing, Indigenous storytelling, trauma, residential schools, Indigenous resurgence.

Introduction

Five Little Indians by Michelle Good is best read as a trauma novel not merely but as a decolonial narrative of the struggle to rebuild the personhood of Indigenous people in a world where a state-sanctioned institution has tried to deprive children of frameworks of kinship, language, land, spirituality, and futurity. The five

survivor paths of the novel are against one therapeutic script. Addiction, dissociation, fury, locomotion, self-destruction, political militancy, friendship, motherhood, ceremony, legal testimony, and re-entry into community exist independent of one another other than being ordered into a comforting story of injury to cure. Such an official and moral rejection is important as residential-school violence did not have to be a set of individual psychological traumas. The schools are named as an element of the assimilationist project targeted at the Indigenous families, cultures, and collective continuance, whereas decolonial scholarship insists that the ills of colonialism of settlers cannot be meaningfully put into a distinct clinical terminology (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 1–6; Tuck and Yang 1–3). Good thus politicizes storytelling as such: narration has the potential to open wounds once again, as well as recuperate relationality, have the dead remembered in the public, and place survivors as a source of knowledge, not as a victim of harm.

It is this decolonial orientation which is announced at the beginning of the novel in the prologue. Clara walks into the sweat-lodge of Mariah, and informs Kendra that “*lot of memories out there*” (Good 7). Memory is spatialized: it is not entrenched within the psyche of Clara, rather it is within trails, trees in the birch, medicines, bodies and relationships. The space politics of Lily is seen when she is buried. When the researchers find the remains of Lily, and the Church, after some time, releases them, Clara whispers, “*We found you, Lily. We brought you home*” (Good 8). Homecoming is not symbolic closure. It signifies the reversal of institutional possession literally: a child born outside of institutional possession of the body is constrained and brought back to the care of the Indigenous, ceremony, song and land. The fact that the issue of decolonization should deal with the idea of repatriating Indigenous land and people, but not being used as a metaphor as a means of generic social betterment makes this scene that much sharper and hard, as addressed by Tuck and Yang (1). The story of Good is not in itself able to enact the restoration of territories, but through repetition, it posits healing in line with practices of returning, giving back remains, histories, names, relations, ceremonies, and historical agency to Indigenous people.

This essay presents some reasons why *Five Little Indians* uses storytelling to decolonize healing in three ways. To begin with, it posits trauma as both colonial and relational and not necessarily intrapsychic to a degree. Second, its discontinuous, recursive memory form does not lend itself to chronological models which subjugate survivors to a traumatized past. Third, it relates narration to the Indigenous resurgence related to community, land, ceremony, political action, and intergenerational transmission. Good is Healing is not then forgetting or mastering the past. The

challenging rearrangement of memory such that the residential school does not have a monopoly on defining who the survivor will become or what will happen are the hard parts.

Trauma Beyond the Individual

The residential school in *Five Little Indians* is the kind of a machine of dispossession whose violence has continued to persist due to its attacks upon the relational conditions upon which the process of identity is upheld. The dramatic treatment by Kenny of this is in grim economy. When he reveals the bruises on his body and asks his uncle not to send him back home, he reasons that only that “*Brother. He hates us. They all hate us*” (Good 17). The case of plural pronoun is essential. Kenny personally feels abused but he interprets it as being towards the Indigenous children as a people. His traumatic experience cannot be disconnected of the institutional logic that disconnects him to the mother, disrupts the family contacts, patrols his travel, and normalizes hunger and violence. This was subsequently found out to be false as his mother wrote letters to him on numerous occasions and the school never received the letters, thus generating a sense of abandonment to the child despite the parents appearing to be abandoned (Good 18). The harm is therefore a family/political and also body harm.

This is one of the reasons as to why purely psychocentric reading is not sufficient. The analysis of the testimony of survivor of residential-schools as introduced by Rachel Burrage, Sandra Momper, and Joseph Gone differentiates individualistic psychological explanations of suffering and recovery and sociocentric, ecocentric, and cosmocentric explanations. Their respondents repeatedly connect healing with family, culture, spirituality, ancestors, and land; by page 46, the authors explicitly describe Indigenous healing accounts as relationally oriented rather than centered on an autonomous self (Burrage et al. 46). This multidimensional field of injury is played out by Good in its characters. Each has a personal symptom: Lucy in her fear, Maisie in her self-harm, Kenny in his compulsive move, Howie in his rage and Clara in her grief but the novel continues to relate the symptoms to fractured kinship, the racism, the poverty, the institutional silence, the cultural suppression and the unceasing power of the church and the government.

Natalija Stevanović also notes that characters of Good do not necessarily have or might use a clear clinical vocabulary of what occurred to them; the trauma of experience manifests itself through bodies, memory, avoidance, addiction, flashback, displaced feeling (84–89). Yet *Five Little Indians* however transcends the level of diagnosis to demonstrate that the so-called coping process cannot be separated out of politics. Indigenous activism participation is not simply an anger management

alternative, but rather it transforms personal anger into a collective action of resistance. Her education and her motherhood will not bring Lucy closer to erasing the Mission, but it will build a future where an Indigenous daughter will be able to occupy contexts that were previously meant to marginalise and suppress her. It is when Howie reunites with other victims that the meaning of his violent past transforms because it makes the past a part and parcel of a collaborative narrative of what the school had done.

The difference between survival and healing takes up one of the guiding issues of the novel. A survivor is an incredibly strong person, who can survive, earn money, build his or her own shelter, establish relationships, and defend others. But even survival can be a close-fenced state that is based on avoidance. Clara tells Mariah, "*I survive my own way,*" and Mariah answers, "*There is more to life than surviving, child*" (Good 161–62). It is not that the exchange deems survival being degradable: it acknowledges survival as the requisite accomplishment into which a greater decolonial problem arises: what can life come to be when the Indigenous existence is no longer determined by endurance of colonial harm?

Memory, Spiralling Time, and the Refusal of Colonial Chronology

The cut up of chronology by the interruption of memory is the greatest formal intervention by Good. The organization of *Five Little Indians* is organized by means of changing focalization, recursive memory, as well as those scenes where the past and the present are in identical perceptual field. April McInnes calls this spiralling time, by suggesting that Good is opposed to a linear model of residential-school identity based on the before/during/after model (102). This model will reproduce colonial assumptions unwillingly: it creates the image of a culturally intact Indigenous self before the school, a destroyed self during the school and a post-school subject the existence of which is forever marked by the traces of harm. McInnes however demonstrates that achronological narration by Good enables past knowledge to be accessible in the present and future, prefiguring a survivor agency vs the attempted social engineering of the institution (10-23).

This time structure is particularly brought to light through the memory of Clara about Lily. Over the years she has held the death of Lily in secret and self-blaming. The memory is an involuntary speech at Mariah cabin to see Clara understands that she has been constantly murmuring the name Lily. The moment breaks "*years of silent remembrance,*" and she finally narrates the child's death, the Mission, the lost angels, and her own guilt (Good 162). Her statement - "*We were children, me and Lily, and neither of us survived, even though I'm still walking*" (Good 162) - condenses trauma's temporal paradox. The child-self is stuck there at

the location of tragic events, yet Clara is alive. The narration of the story is not an immediate reconciliation of these self-time beings but it is a chance that Mariah sees them without school judgment.

Such witnessing of relations is recurrently contrasted to institutional extraction, as exemplified in the novel. However, in the film, Kenny first thinks that he will be able to become free of the past by testifying at the legal meeting of survivors: *"maybe if I can say what I need to say, things will be better"* (Good 206). However, the lawyer demands *"details. More and more details,"* and Kenny starts to feel physically sick as the memory comes to him by scent, by the hurt, by the trembling, by the nausea (Good 208). The scene unveils an ethical distinction among telling stories and forced evidentiary narration. Testimony may assist in getting legal recognition, and when textualizing violation into an institutionally legible form, the process of speaking can create vulnerability again. The novel is thus rejecting this naive healing effect that disclosure is supposed to be.

This tension can be explained with the help of the work by Francesca Mussi about the storytelling of residential-schools. According to Mussi, there are relationships in Indigenous storytelling: between the teller and the listener, between the storyteller and the community, and between the storyteller and the ethical responsibility; a story can be a good medicine but only when it is participated in respect and reciprocity by the listeners (663-64). It is this differentiation that Good dramatizes. The narration to Mariah is given by Clara; in a care patient food ceremony non-coercive-listening relationship. The narrative given by Kenny to the lawyer takes place in a legalistic mechanism which must have evidentiary specificity. Both are types of testimony and the results are different given the different conditions of listening.

Memory in *Five little Indians* is not a storehouse of facts, therefore. It is a live relation in the sense that its meaning varies with the recipient of it, the obligations which it entails, and it is used to reestablish relationship or to record loss of life. When narration is decolonized, it becomes a method of returning authority of interpretation to them and their communities instead of the final determiner of their memories, to the colonial institutions.

Storytelling as Relational Healing

The healing moments in the novel continue to make the lonely memory a collective story. Clara finally starts her breakthrough not with the interpretation of the clinical data but with the fact that Mariah is willing to sit next to her and let Clara cry, talk. Mariah does not require reason, order and evidence. She listens as Clara wanders between the death of Lily, the spiritual nature of her childhood, anger that

the ancestors bestowed on her, and hate towards the school (Good 162). It is this type of witnessing, which enables trauma to be returned to relationship. According to Mussi, the elements of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and active quality of the listener are the main points of Indigenous story work (664). Five Little Indians narrates these principles: what happens to be the content of speech and of the speech that is healed is not the origin of the healing, but the social circumstances under which the speech becomes tolerable.

Similar role is done on a communal level by the Friendship Centre. It has food, fellowship, and political education, practical assistance, cultural visibility, a place where the Indigenous people meet each other without the surveying eyes of the Mission. Clara initially feels nervous about “all that Indian-ness right out in the open,” precisely because the school taught her that visible Indigeneity would be punished (Good 118). Such spaces, however, with time turn that which the school has indicated as shameful into the mundane of community. In this case story telling does not have to be official testifying. Jokes, meals, memories, political discourses, labor of mutual aid, and mutual recognition are all elements of reconstructing a social world.

This relational model is particularly significant as not only memory is fractured according to the colonial trauma, but also trust. Without understanding what history informed the absences, Kendra grows up bitter towards Kenny. By the moment she makes it known to him that “*no one talks about it. About the schools,*” she recognizes silence as an intergenerational order, rather than that of a personal refusal (Good 205). The partial revelation by Clara affects the interpretation of Kenny by Kendra, and leaves room to be sympathetic without having to forget resentment. The scene shows how narratives are able to change inherited meanings. They do not absolve effects; they allow the next generations to learn that family dysfunction was created as a part of a history of forced displacement and institutional rape.

The survivor-centered model of Burrage, Momper and Gone is applied in this case as it views family, culture and community as the dimension of wellness instead of being additional supports that were added to an individual theory of therapy (45-47). This orientation is constantly attested by Five Little Indians. The house of Lucy is the place of reconstructing broken relations; Clara assists Howie at the post-prison stage; survivors at the legal meeting know each other; Kendra transforms to become a doctor nevertheless it is possible to stay in touch with the Friendship Centre; Mariah cabin is a network of support, medicines, rituals, ancestors and visitors. Curing is shared out in these relations.

Good is not sentimental about community either. The survivors betrayed, abused, especially forsaken, and disillusioned each other. Kenny cannot stay with Lucy and Kendra, which hurts him; Howie is rageful and he has to go to jail; Clara is a militant and it can be dangerous, Lucy is stable, but it does not mean that she cannot grieve. This is not to say that the Magical healing of colonial trauma happens in Indigenous community. Instead, the novel discards the colonial fantasy which views the survivor as a solitary deformed person whose restoration can be quantified outside the social worlds. Storytelling goes decolonial when the survivor is reconstituted into a network of kinship, accountability, memory and futurity; when the networks can allow the complexity of the survivor instead of dictating exemplary victimhood.

Ceremony, Land, and Indigenous Resurgence

The moment when Clara spends some time with Mariah is the most eloquent moment in the entire novel of shifting the narrative of traumas to the resurrection. The sweat lodge, medicines, Cree prayer, trapping techniques, offerings, sewing and tales are not pretty cultural overlay on to a universal recovery scene. They constitute an alternative in epistemology to the Mission trying to establish Indigenous lifeways as primitive, sinful or disposable. Mussi contends that land is the core of Indigenous healing, spiritual regeneration and resurgence since land is not just territory but knowledge and language, story and relationship (666-67). Good stages Clara her metamorphosis by way of just those ground practices. The winter at the cabin of Mariah transforms Clara since she becomes reintroduced to the world where ancestors, animals, plants, weather, ceremony and the human community are all involved in meaning.

This monumental moment is followed by the moment when Clara volunteers to tell the story of Lily. Mariah gets ready to make the lodge, and Clara comes in. Good writes that *"one woman walked into that lodge and another walked out"*; Clara is taken back to *"who she was before Sister Mary,"* and concludes that life is *"no longer just survival"* but being *"an Indian someone"* (Good 163). This text may be interpreted as an attempt to go back to a purist precolonial reality. The analysis by McInnes allows that simplification to be avoided. Freezing a pre-school self with spiralling time; it permits past knowledge and self to be re-introduced into an irreversibly transformed present (111-16). Clara will not be a child she was before or a cured adult. She develops another relationship to the child - herself, Lily and the ancestors.

On the political front, resurgence is also a political phenomenon. Personal healing is connected with collective resistance to the continued theft of their land and

state violence as Clara is involved with the American Indian Movement. The novel, then, is a rejection of the story of reconciliation which would put colonial injury to a safe distance in the past. Tuck and Yang warn that decolonization becomes meaningless when it is used as a metaphor of a personal betterment without settler occupation starting to change (23). Mussi goes on to the same by claiming that residential-school reconciliation cannot be effective when they are not attached to the ongoing processes of land dispossession and settler colonialism (665-66). The narrative of that continuity becomes visible through juxtaposition of residential-school memory and activism presented by Good: the institution, which mistreated Indigenous children, and the political system, posing a threat to the Indigenous land, are in the same area of the historical sphere of domination.

This logic of resurgence is accomplished with the burial of Lily in its prologue. The drive to take Lily home is simultaneously memorial, ritualistic, spatial, and political. The fact that the Church was reluctant to give her remains out bears testament to the fact that colonial possession continues after death; the burial itself puts her back into a relationship web of Indigenous relationships disrupted by the school (Good 8-9). The violence is not gone through the honour song and sweat lodge. They change who has authority over Lily's memory and body.

This is what makes the healing in the novel as resurgence and not recovery. Recovery can usually entail the restoration to a previous normal level. The active renewal of relations and practices that colonialism was aimed at eradicating is called resurgence. The process of healing is not the withdrawal of Clara in political in the spiritual world; the ceremony and politics support each other to build an Indigenous future. Storytelling is involved in that future because it brings the memory of the violence, as well as the information about the survival, kinship, land, ancestors and the presence.

From Testimony to Futurity: Conclusion

The final question that is raised in *Five Little Indians* is what can be done with traumatic memory when both silence and disclosure are no assuring way of healing. There is no single answer of the good since the ethical worth of storytelling is a matter of circumstances. The process of sharing a story can be done to unlock the shroud of shame to a trusted listener; the process of sharing a story can re-traumatize a story to a lawyer; the sharing of stories with a group of fellow survivors will create recognition; sharing a story in ceremony with the ancestors can help reconnect the living with the dead. Narrative is not as such curative. Its decolonial strength is in its relations it establishes and in the power it reinstates to Indigenous people on how their history is understood.

The redemptive simplification is particularly as resistant to Kenny in the novel. When the legal interview he falls ill, takes alcohol and dies, it almost appears to be a validation of the devastating tenacity of trauma. But Good does not want to leave him behind in a clinical history of failure. Kenny, in the liminal sequence that takes place after his death, is greeted by his mother and ancestors and treated to a village that was organized by abundance, kinship, crest, work and belonging (Good 209-11). He is going back to the same road to which he has been in the past but this time memory is not the sole ordeal of the Mission. He is instructed by his mother to go to the village; he is later sent away by Lucy with the ceremony and clothing, moccasins, cedar and song (Good 210-11). Television is not romanticizing death as being a remedy. It rather re-contextualizes Kenny in an Indigenous cosmology that goes beyond what the residential school tried to make his life to be meaning making it nothing more than damage.

It is this excess, which lies at the centre of the decolonial aesthetics of Good. According to McInnes, the novel does not allow residential-school experience to monopolize the Indigenous identity; as its spiralling up and down time creating allows knowledges and ways of being that anticipate coercion and scope of state intervention (102). The symptoms prevalent across the novel are accurately defined by Stevanovic, who perceives the novel as a trauma, but the bigger template of Good still requires the change suggested by Burrage, Momper and Gone: the shift between an isolated psychocentric model to sociocentric, ecocentric and cosmocentric relations (46-48). Trauma is the factual and devastating but the survivor can never be reduced to trauma.

The stakes of this argument not only apply to literary interpretation but also the political ones. This historical record of the TRC has rendered testimony by survivors a necessity to the knowledge of the population but in the process, reconciliation might turn out to be a state-controlled narrative unless listening in turn brings about structural responsibility (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 6-8; Mussi 664-66). Five Little Indians says that evidence should not just testify to dead history to institutions of the settlers. Stories carry obligations. They challenge their audience to question the ongoing systems that constructed residential schools, and acknowledge Indigenous people as a political, cultural and intellectual subject in the present.

The most radical intervention, then, of Good is to make memory a medium, a medium of resurgence, of brokenness. Clara is able to remember Lily without being confined to the time of Lily's demise; Kendra is able to rewrite family history by reinterpreting the story of residential schools, survivors are able to locate each other;

it is possible to resuscitate the dead by conducting a ceremony to reopen the door of repressed memories. Telling of stories does not seal the wound. It transforms the social world surrounding the wound as well as where the survivor finds him/herself. Decolonial healing in *Five Little Indians*, the shift of being told by the colonial institution: inmate, victim, case, problem, damaged subject- into being a teller, a listener, a relation, an ancestor, an activist, a parent, friend, an Indian someone so that the school cannot hold all of her future.

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