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Book Review: *Memory Serves: Oratories*

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In *Memory Serves*, Stó:lō (Coast Salish) rememberer and storyteller Lee Maracle weaves together a selection of her speeches and lectures into a single volume of oratories. In the preface, Maracle expresses the worry that in the process of converting these spoken pieces into written form, “the words can lose much of the personality of the speaker” (xii). Her voice as a storyteller, however, coheres beautifully on the page, carrying the rhythm and consonance of her original orations. The recurrence of several themes (decoloniality, sovereignty, direction, memory) that arise throughout the text also gives us a powerful sense of her memory and personality as an Indigenous woman, elder, and rememberer who is anchored by the cultural values of her people. These themes point to the continuing devastation of colonialism, the promise of recovery and healing found in decolonial resistance, and the necessity of Indigenous remembering to find the path forward. Maracle’s oratories are as relevant today as when she first delivered them, in some cases over 20 years ago; they illuminate the ways that “memory serves to reflect on the path” to Indigenous sovereignty and decolonial futurity (33).

“I am weaver” Maracle intones, tying the responsibilities of Salish remembering to the art of Salish weaving (17). A storyteller’s first task is to learn the art of weaving before memories can be called to the loom, before patterns can be made. When tangles occur, she finds the thread that will help undo the knot and bring salience at once to the individual threads and the whole tapestry of her story. *Memory Serves* introduces a methodology of sifting through and pulling on threads of story that often double us back over already traversed terrain, but always asks us to assess from new perspectives. In Western literary and oral traditions, repetition or re-covering of “old grounds” is critiqued as unnecessary, redundant. By contrast, *Memory Serves* demonstrates how new ways of knowing arises from remembering and re-storying, as often as is necessary. Maracle chides the false construct of linear time in Western learning traditions that assumes time is a straight line, and that moving further along that line is somehow an indication of growth or “progress”. *Memory Serves* embodies the nonlinear, often circuitous remembering and knowledge-making of Stó:lō oral traditions, and of the very nature of memory itself.

Among Stó:lō people, Maracle explains, remembering is a task entailing enormous responsibility. Remembering “is not a simple act of recall” but a bringing-together and storying of memories for the sake of exploring and generating knowledge (14). Stó:lō rememberers are “responsible for pulling the best threads from our past forward to re-weave our lives” (14). Thus, Stó:lō remembering is a process of

(re)weaving stories that can be used to better understand the past and the present, as well as to find direction for the future. Not merely fictional creations, stories within Stó:lō tradition spring from collective and individual memory, and convey important truths about our world. In times of (especially difficult) change, memory serves to kindle a story when it is needed by a community, family, or individual, who then “work with that story to brighten the future of their children” (31).

Re-membering is an act of survivance for Indigenous peoples in Canada and throughout the colonised lands of the Americas who experience Euro settler colonisation as a dismembering of their communities and nations. Invasion and occupation by Euro settlers disrupt Indigenous life patterns, which “[lead] to social demoralization and implosion” of Indigenous communities (104). Indigenous people endure “traumatic colonial memories” as a result of this violence (37). Processing these memories (such as through ceremony, song, and medicine) aids in locating the path forward. Maracle rebukes settlers who “tell [Indigenous people] to ‘forget the past’”, because what they truly desire is for colonised subjects “to remain powerless” (37). Instead, she asserts that it is crucial to remember the past and sit with trauma to then overcome what she sees as the lethal stasis of “colonial hesitation”—an inability to move forward due to the inertia of suppressed painful memories tied to colonisation (36). Stó:lō re-membering is not only healing because of this shaking off of “colonial hesitation”, but it is also a manifestation of decoloniality that continues to hold settlers accountable for inflicting trauma. In other words, it is a survival strategy. As a collection of oratories that re-members Indigenous lifeways, stories, feelings, and memories, *Memory Serves* is an archive of survivance. .

Although Stó:lō memory and the creation and sharing of stories are processes always embedded in communities, Indigenous survivance also requires the storying of individual Indigenous people. Maracle’s story of her family and herself cannot be told outside the context of Stó:lō memory, but her storying of the pathways of Stó:lō community are told through her lens as an individual storyteller, for “[m]emory is always connected to the individual and their specific path” (26). She positions these two perspectives—that of the individual and that of the community—as two sides of the same coin; both are necessary to collectively making sense of the past and finding forward momentum. Storying is a process of self-transformation, but always with a sense of our part in broader communities, the implication for Stó:lō individuals being that the imagination and self-storying leading to self-transformation are interlinked with the destiny of their people.

Maracle sees Stó:lō imagination as an epistemological lens for understanding the interconnectedness of life at both macro and micro levels. Stó:lō memory figures humans as just one facet of the whole of creation, not more or less important than, for instance, sockeye salmon. Because we are all part of a whole, “Salish imagination requires that the history of the berry, the sockeye, human, and bear be considered together” as subjects dwelling in relation with one another, rather than extracting them as individual objects of study. Holding a view of these various individual facets in sum enables us to comprehend, for example, how “[the] health of salmon is directly connected to the health of Indigenous people” (58). The oratory “Salmon is the Hub of Salish Memory” is a case study for how all of us as researchers, activists, and community members are in dire need of “the influence of Indigenous thought on the direction humanity needs to travel [in order] to augment its humanism and connect itself to the world” (56).

As much as Indigenous epistemology is needed to return empathy and compassion to disciplinary perspectives and to entire worldviews, Maracle calls (particularly Euro settler) readers to be accountable to the ways in which “[Indigenous] knowledge [has been]

plundered gratuitously” even as “Western” fields of study framed Indigenous peoples as “without science or knowledge” (57). She urges us to strive for a “post-colonial imagination” that will enable us to centre Indigenous lives, lifeways, and wellbeing, with the aim of achieving Indigenous sovereignty (107). In Maracle’s dream space, the arc that bridges all of us to the future is built from two sides: Indigenous peoples are building from one side; (especially Euro) settlers must build from the other. She is “build[ing her] end of this arc”, she tells us, “word by word, dream by dream”; now we must do our part to build ours (112).

To open possibilities to a decolonial future, Indigenous peoples “must aggregate to see [themselves]” (95). All of us, then, have a responsibility to centre Indigenous memories, stories, and creative models that help to mark the path to decolonisation. Maracle’s call to generate “an aggregate body of [Indigenous] knowledge that we can study” is in some cases being realised, such as through efforts to preserve and disseminate stories about Indigenous residential schools in Canada—even to preserve the schools themselves (201). *Memory Serves* also provides a model for collecting and cohering Indigenous knowledge originally oral in form into a written multigenre piece.

This call for Indigenous peoples to “aggregate”, however, must include queer Indigenous and Two-Spirit people, who are all but omitted from Maracle’s oratories. The memories and stories of Two-Spirit people are crucial for completing the many links that Maracle identifies between settler colonial heteropatriarchy and the destruction of Indigenous lifeways. Furthermore, they clarify how both of these aspects of the settler project coincide with the genocide of Indigenous peoples and the more-than-human world. If this exclusion were brought to her attention, I suspect that Maracle would readily include the perspectives of queer Indigenous and Two-Spirit people, because she believes that “[d]ifference is valuable” (98). Two-Spirit people, like all Indigenous people, “remember that thousands of years ago [they] earned the right to be” (19).