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# Taking Back Stolen Voices: Mahlikah Awe:ri's poetry as resistance for more than 500 missing girls

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**Taking Back Stolen Voices**  
**Mahlikah Awe:ri's poetry as resistance for more than 500 missing girls**

Over the past 30 years nearly 600 aboriginal girls and women have gone missing under mysterious circumstances, many of them murdered and many still gone. This is a topic neither fully addressed by the Canadian government or by major news sources, a situation which is hugely problematic for the safety of this marginalized group. Despite the lack of Canada-wide media attention, in recent years many families of the missing girls, and some organizations have come forward to raise awareness of the issue and to support these women. Mahlikah Awe:ri, a Torontonion with African-American, Mohawk, and Mi'kmaq descent, is a spoken word poet, musician, poetic rapologist, and an advocate for indigenous peoples in Canada through the organization IdleNoMore. Because of her passion for the rights of indigenous peoples and her dedication to providing a voice for the missing and murdered women, Awe:ri now travels across Canada to speak and perform her resistance poetry. The poem I will discuss, "Dying Breed," is a spoken word poem addressing both contemporary and past issues faced by aboriginal peoples, effectively portraying the difficult position in which imperialist Canada has placed these individuals. In this essay I will argue that Awe:ri's poem effectively fulfills a need for resistance poetry for Aboriginal peoples by both bearing witness to colonialist oppression and linking traditional performance with contemporary poetry to reach a wider audience.

My argument will be twofold: I will begin by explaining the necessity of activism for these women by presenting first a historical representation of aboriginal peoples in Canada, followed by a description of my research procedure which will show the lack of representation of the missing women in current Canadian media. This explanation will support my argument that Awe:ri's poem is an effective poem of resistance, since I will then analyze how the poem fulfills this need by addressing the issues of silence and liminality in a style that itself acts as protest. Finally I will discuss the connection between the Native oral tradition, African performance poetry, and contemporary slam poetry, to display how Awe:ri performs a successful tool for activism.

For the purpose of this essay I will first explain the concept of liminality, or of being placed in a liminal position. To be in a liminal position is to occupy a space either between or on both sides of a threshold or boundary; however, in this context it can be interpreted as existing between two cultures, without entirely belonging in either. As imperialism and migration between countries and cultures has created nations such as Canada, it is very important to understand the resulting impact on individuals in groups who are forced into a liminal position and do not feel they occupy a place in their countries of residence. This first section of my essay will address the historical treatment and representation of Aboriginal peoples in Canada to examine one notion of what it means to be represented as if you were part of a cultural "dying breed", and then I will link this analysis to the fact that there are more than 500 Aboriginal women who are literally dying in this country as a result of rapists and murderers.

Canada has a horrific history of cruel assimilation and the removal of the culture of its Indigenous peoples. The residential school system that Canadian policy put in place

is responsible for long-standing and incredibly problematic stereotypes that shape the image of Aboriginal peoples in society today. Jasmine Redfern, in her article “My Story: Colonization, sexuality and Aboriginal youth” maintains that “[w]e as Aboriginal people have experienced and continue to endure a cultural genocide” (11). This might seem an extreme view, but it is incredibly accurate – despite the residential school system having been abolished, the insistence that Aboriginal peoples are ‘less’ than non-Aboriginals, and the attempts to drown out their culture still exist today. Redfern adds that after being taught in these residential schools to disregard traditions, replace Native languages with English, and neglect their identity, Native Canadians have been “taught to hate [them]selves by the colonizers for generations and many of [them] have internalized and perpetuated this attitude” (14). This teaching, in effect, has attempted to silence these peoples and annihilate their cultures, and has in turn affected every single First Nations resident of Canada. As Beverley Jacobs, the president of the Native Women’s Association of Canada, stated in her response to the Government’s apology for residential schools, “When a systematic process is created to destroy a people by erasing a language, a culture and a spirit, every single person is affected” (13). Colonization and its attempts to obliterate Aboriginal cultures has not only contributed to the idea that the native peoples are a ‘dying breed’, but also caused many social problems prevalent historically and currently in Aboriginal communities and on reserves. These issues, such as alcoholism, poverty, and abuse, have formulated stereotypes that continue to shape mainstream Canadians’ general opinion regarding our Indigenous peoples.

One stereotype that has been continuously prevalent since the colonization of Canada is the notion that aboriginal women inhabit the role of either ‘Indian princess’ or

‘savage squaw’. Janice Acoose, in her book *Iskwewak--kah' Ki Yaw Ni Wahkomakanak: Neither Indian Princesses Nor Easy Squaws*, addresses the basis of this stereotype: colonizers, after coming to Canada, viewed Indigenous women as desirable, a feeling which conflicted with their Christian morals. To combat this conflict, the colonizers instead projected these desires onto the women, forcing them into the role of lustful, promiscuous ‘princesses’ or ‘squaws’ (42). This stereotype that exists in the minds and literature of Canadians has perpetuated a negative image of all Indigenous women and “more importantly foster[ed] dangerous cultural attitudes that affect human relations and inform institutional ideology” (Acoose 40). Therefore, because these stereotypes exist, the mindset also exists that it is okay to refuse agency to and acknowledgement of these women because of their role as ‘temptresses’. This sad reality is a result of the above-mentioned issues caused by colonization. The attempt of the residential schools to eradicate Native culture and language was an attempt to turn Aboriginals and their culture into a ‘dying breed’, as Awe:ri implies in her poem. Years of stereotyping have fostered dangerous cultural attitudes that have allowed this historical situation in which more than 500 missing women have gone unacknowledged by the media and unaddressed by the government.

Awe:ri’s poem is dedicated to what Amnesty International deems “more than 580 cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada, most within the last three decades” – a literal ‘dying breed’ (“No More Stolen Sisters”). Years of prejudiced government policy coupled with racist and sexist stereotypes have affected and impoverished Indigenous communities and denied their women and girls dignity and worth, resulting in a much higher risk of exploitation or violence to these girls and

women (“No More Stolen Sisters”). I began my research for this essay searching for information about this phenomenon, but quickly had the startling realization that this hugely distressing, and still occurring series of murders, has garnered practically no attention by the Canadian government or major news agencies across the country. The articles that I was able to find from major news companies did one of three things: questioned the validity of the evidence at hand, provided no concrete hope for change in the future, or blamed the victim.

In her article “Newsworthy Victims?” Kristen Gilchrist regards Aboriginal women as the “most victimized group in Canadian society” and addresses this issue through a study of the media surrounding three missing white women and three missing Indigenous women of similar ages and stations in life (374). The results of this study showed enormous differences in the information given to the public. A 6:1 ratio existed for articles about the three white women as opposed to the Aboriginal women in the local press, and within these articles, a 4:1 word count was evident. Furthermore, the headlines for the white females contained heartfelt, personal details, often including names or nicknames, as opposed to the headlines about the missing Indigenous women, who were given the more impersonal, generic titles of “woman”, “teen”, and “Aboriginal” (380-1). There is a desperate tone in the articles about the white women, a desire to bring them home, that is not present in the articles about the non-white women. This fact that the Aboriginal women are presented to the public less frequently, and represented more negatively, reinforces the horrifying notion that the lives of Indigenous peoples are valued less than the lives of white women – as Gilchrist remarks, “their lives were not similarly celebrated and their deaths not equally grieved” (385). This is hugely

problematic because as journalists decide what information is present or what tone is used in the media, they shape the opinions of the public.

Through my research in the news I have concluded that journalists, rather than reality, construct the content of the news. Media has the power to control public information and opinions, and Canadians put their trust in journalists to do so justly. But, despite the lack of transparency in the general media, there is a great deal of resistance to the dismissal of equal media representation of missing Aboriginal women and girls occurring both on the Internet and across Canada. I was able to locate websites that hold databases of the missing women, articles discussing the need to find advocates for those who are missing or have been murdered, and organizations like “Walking With Our Sisters” and IdleNoMore of which Mahlikah Awe:ri herself is a member. By describing my research process and explaining why there is an absence of mainstream news about these missing women, I am endeavouring to identify the importance of acknowledging the agency of these women. Resistance and activism are absolutely necessary if change is to happen, because otherwise the government will not get involved, and the journalists will continue to blame the victims. The following section of this essay will address how Awe:ri’s poem is an effective poem of resistance at a time where this type of activism is tremendously needed and is becoming possible.

“Dying Breed” is an extremely successful poem in its endeavour to raise awareness to the problems that Aboriginal women face, and more specifically to the missing women. A huge foundation for this neglect of attention is the consequence of the silencing not only of Native culture as a result of colonialism, but also the silencing of the women themselves. As oppressors we have undermined the independence of Aboriginal

peoples and chosen ignorance instead of acknowledgment of issues such as the missing women and girls. Eli Clare in his essay “Freaks and Queers” speaks to the importance of oppressed peoples bearing witness to past and present contentious acts of oppression in order to change or remove the stigmas that are attached to them. He claims that bearing witness is the foundation to being able to “strengthen identity, foster resistance, [and] cultivate subversion,” all of which are necessary if Canada is to see a significant change in the presentation of information about Indigenous peoples (98). Clare also notes the necessity of a particular “determination to be visible” (99) by the oppressed peoples. I would like to add to Clare’s point that there must also be a determination to be heard, which is why Awe:ri’s spoken word style is so effective; she not only bears witness, but she also uses performance poetry as a way to provide a voice to the silenced women who are missing and who exist as part of society but are not represented.

Marilyn Frye, a feminist philosopher, writes of oppression and being caught in a double bind. She begins her essay with an explanation of the root of the word oppressed: ‘press’ (1). Therefore to be oppressed is to be pressed or molded into a shape that is not natural. This concept is relevant when related back to the residential school systems, which forced assimilation upon Indigenous children, but it is also relevant today as Aboriginals are assumed to fulfill a specific social role: for example, of the drunk, poor, lustful savage. To be caught in a double bind means there are multiple constraints placed upon a particular group that provide only choices that lead to suffering in some respect. This bind is, for example, evident for young Aboriginal girls who, by our society’s definition, are sexually promiscuous. If any individuals act in a sexually promiscuous manner, they will simply be furthering this stereotype, and will be seen as the ‘easy



squaw’, but if they do not adhere to this social designation and do not take part in sexual activity, their reputation will still hold the label ‘easy’ because of existing assumptions about Aboriginal women. Therefore whether they choose to be sexually promiscuous or not, their image as an individual will still be judged by stereotypes that have existed for more than a century. As Frye writes, when one is in a double bind, “one can only choose to risk one’s preferred form and rate of annihilation” (10). Frye’s tongue-in-cheek statement expresses her claim that to be oppressed is to be restricted solely to options that lead to some form of suffering, and therefore one’s only option is what form of suffering they would prefer to endure.

Frye’s double bind is related to the notion of liminality addressed at the beginning of this essay because many young Aboriginal girls and women are faced with the decision of maintaining their culture, as their elders desire, or removing themselves from this culture in which Canadian society tells them that, as aboriginals, they are poor, drunk, and easy. By not fitting into both cultures and therefore feeling pressured to choose only one, Aboriginal girls are forced into a certain silence, since they cannot speak for their unique position if they do not occupy both aspects of it. This next section of my essay focuses on the specific examples that Awe:ri uses in her poem to bear witness to the problems that are caused as a result of being caught between two cultures.

Awe:ri approaches the idea of cultural liminality with the lines, “the elders plead for her not to cut her hair ... but she can’t / she wont”. The general ‘she’ of the poem is faced with the choice of pleasing the elders or turning her back on them. The cutting hair imagery is symbolic because it represents a past where Aboriginals were forced to assimilate to European culture. Cardinal-Schubert reminisces about when colonists

“herded [Aboriginals] onto reserves, washed [them] with scrub brushes and lye soap, and chopped [their] hair off, uniforming the children in religious residential schools in an attempt to knock out the savagery” (78). There is a direct link between this horrendous practice of the past in which children were removed from their families and sent to abusive and assimilating residential schools and young girls who willingly cut their hair and conform to mainstream societal ideals. It must be especially difficult for the elders because they cannot make the youth understand the true horrors of the past if these girls turn away from the elders and their communities. There is a painfully sad history of loss among Indigenous peoples, so much so that some cannot distinguish it from other aspects of their identity (Gladue 343). Cardinal-Schubert comments on this and, referring back to assimilation says, “[n]ow we are civilized, aren’t we?” (78). The sad reality is that colonizers did not successfully ‘civilize’ the Aboriginals because they were not ‘savages’ that needed to be ‘civilized’, and they continue to suffer from this attempted ‘civilization’. To reiterate what Jacobs has said, “When a systematic process is created to destroy a people ... every single person is affected,” in this case, even those not directly touched by the residential schools (13). This rings true for young Aboriginal females who, as Redfern explains, “struggle to be who [they] are and live in a modern life in western society” (14). Redfern also outlines how this struggle results in “a sense of uprootedness, disenfranchisement, and loneliness which can lead to pain and anxiety and puts Aboriginals at risk of engaging in coping behaviours and activities that could ultimately harm [them]” (14). Awe:ri addresses these harmful activities – alcohol and substance use, suicide, and a sad sexuality – linking them to vicious cycles of stereotypes that further negative situations for Native peoples and in turn reconfirm these stereotypes.

Returning to the topic of the double bind of Aboriginal girls and sexuality, Awe:ri says, “instead of giving prayers she’s giving head to blank stares in piss-drenched alleyways and nameless motels.” There is a fallenness apparent in this line, a certain sad, ruined sexuality for these girls. As previously mentioned, the sexuality of female aboriginals has been exploited by colonizers who have projected their desires upon these women – their sexual ownership has been taken from them and they have been labeled as ‘cheap’ (McGrath 31). A serious issue exists where young Indigenous girls are becoming sexually active before they receive any sexual education and are therefore losing their agency and ability to make decisions about their bodies and their sexuality before they even have the means to develop it. Redfern speaks of her experience as a young girl believing that her self-worth was determined by the attention of male classmates: “The sense of shame and silence around sexuality that colonization has instilled in our communities leaves those of us who are just waking up to our sexuality hungry for information and vulnerable to misinformation” (12). Because they did not receive formal education regarding sexual safety before becoming sexually active, there is a much higher risk for sexually transmitted infections and teenage pregnancy. This is an example of how colonization has forced a stigma upon Aboriginal peoples and in turn caused these stigmas to remain relevant. Redfern also remarks, “[n]o one told me that there were ways I could be sexually confident without having sex or that I was allowed to decide when and with whom I would have sex” (13). This issue is hugely problematic because the position that girls such as Redfern are placed in due to colonialism causes them to be silenced in a situation where they don’t even know they are supposed to have a voice. While Redfern is discussing her experience of many years ago, this issue still exists

today, as the sexual stigma has not been lifted from these girls and women – and it remains a definite cause of the lack of attention surrounding the missing women and the assumption that they are all part of the sex trade, which is incredibly incorrect. Regardless of whether these women are or are not involved in the sex trade, their disappearances are still worthy of investigation and they are worthy of remembrance and value. While there has not been a significant change made yet to government policy or wider media coverage, Awe:ri has set a stage for advocacy and provided a voice not only for these girls, but also to these girls because she speaks to pubescent girls across Canada about these issues and more, both in her poetry and through her involvement in IdleNoMore.

Another feature of Awe:ri's poem is the connection between identity and ceremony in Native communities. The first line in the poem that addresses this connection is the following: "no round dance speaks to the soles of her feet. She has no soul." This concept exemplifies the liminality in the lives of these girls and the feeling that they do not belong in a community. By 'round dance' Awe:ri is talking about ceremonies such as Pow Wows, making a connection between the performance of Pow Wows and the expression of Native identity or of having a native soul. It appears there is a significant connection between Indian identity and having a native soul with such ceremonies. Beverly Jacobs in her "Response to Canada's Apology to Residential School Survivors" writes of the governmental genocide and its attempts to eradicate Aboriginal culture, how the government stole ceremonies that celebrated young men and women and taught them mutual respect. Jacobs bears witness to this cruel act, but also builds pride for aboriginal peoples by saying "[d]espite the hardships, we have our language still. We

have our ceremonies. We have our elders” (12). Jacobs writes that it is extremely important to her and to individuals, such as Awe:ri and other activists, to “revitalize those ceremonies and the respect for my people not only within Canadian society but even within my own peoples” (12). Taking back these ceremonies means taking back an identity that colonists sought to damage but this cannot occur without recognizing the cruelty that has existed, the hardships that have been endured. When Awe:ri writes of the fallen sexuality of ‘she’ in her poem, she declares “this is her Pow Wow, this is her gathering.” Awe:ri is making the sad claim that these stereotypes, these stigmas, and the realities that exist because of these stigmas have become the difficult identity with which young Aboriginal women must contend.

As the place of Aboriginal peoples in Canada has changed over time, so have their ceremonies. Many Pow Wows invite ‘outsiders’ to join in so as to experience some Native Canadian culture, if not understand it. One aspect of Pow Wows is to “expresses cultural continuity” and celebrate the always-changing lives of its people (Valaskakis 153). Communities are forever changing, as are people and as are cultures. Change provides hope that, through taking back ceremonies and inviting non-Aboriginals to participate in them, Aboriginal peoples can regain agency and build a voice for themselves. This may not be a change that happens quickly or with ease, but it is a change that is necessary. Awe:ri acknowledges that possessing a distorted sexuality, having no control or ownership of their bodies, and being made invisible and silenced simply should not be the ‘round dance’ of Aboriginal girls in Canada, and she works to create change, but knows that she cannot ignore what has happened and what is still happening.

The past three years have witnessed a great increase in awareness regarding the missing women and the alleged causes of their disappearances, much of which Aboriginal women and allies have instigated. Jacobs addresses this need “for collaboration among all those working to draw national, regional, and local attention to the missing women and how awareness itself can help guard against further disappearances and murders” (14). This collaboration has begun in a number of ways across Canada, among organizations such as “Walking With Our Sisters” (beaded moccasin ‘vamps’ sold to commemorate the missing girls), the Native Women’s Association of Canada, and Amnesty International’s “No More Stolen Sisters” campaign. Awe:ri works with IdleNoMore, so she uses a craft different from art or beading, but equally as powerful – her voice.

Awe:ri, being of both African-American and Aboriginal heritage, effectively uses spoken word poetry – a hybrid style of African performance poetry, Native oral tradition, and contemporary slam poetry. This is effective because her style has the ability to bear witness to the past, resist oppression, and reach a wider audience. I have already explained how Awe:ri bears witness to the past; here I am going to provide the association between her spoken word style and African performance poetry of protest. I initially linked this style to the Indigenous oral tradition and the support of narratives and reflection in Aboriginal healing (Waldram 61), but there is also a direct tie to the performance style of Awe:ri’s African American roots. While I agree with Ruth Finnegan’s argument that oral poetry cannot be defined in one sentence, since all performance poetry is a different combination of intention, content and style (3), traditional African performance poetry typically falls into one of three categories: epic,

protest, and satire. “Dying Breed” falls under the category of protest, as it “speaks against oppression and domination of colonial rule” (Obaje and Yakubu 21). In certain African cultures, as in many others, oral poetry is a method of channeling communication, to convey thought to others, and “reaffirm the cultural heritage of the people” and of cultural rehabilitation (Obaje and Yakubu 21). Similarly, Finnegan writes of oral poetry’s ability to maintain social order in a group, but also notes that it can be used in ceremonial settings to express the views and position of a minority group (243). By providing a standpoint for and bearing witness to the truths that Aboriginal women and girls face every day in this oral style, Awe:ri is performing a poem of protest for her Native sisters in the style of her various ancestors. I argue that this is a significantly successful method because she is creating poetry that falls into a liminal category, neither completely in one culture or another. Awe:ri’s poetry shows that a liminal position is not always a detrimental position to be in, and that it can actually create strength to pursue action to create positive change.

Oral poetry can also reach a wider audience. Finnegan writes, “‘Oral’ poetry essentially circulates by oral rather than written means; in contrast to written poetry, its distribution, composition or performance are by word of mouth and not through reliance on the written or printed word” (16). The presence of “Dying Breed” on the popular media website “Youtube” means that it can be reached by Internet users from across the world. Awe:ri travels across the country performing her music and her poetry so that a wider range of people can listen to her poem, can be moved by its meaning, and can learn about the horrendous number of missing women and girls in our country – a number that is still rising. This style of poetry is active rather than passive, and this is an area where

action is needed, where activism is needed. I have found a connection also to slam poetry – a more contemporary style of spoken word poetry where authors and artists perform their poetry to compete against one another (Bañales). Slam poetry events bring artists together to perform poetry about the issues in their lives and in the world around them, and one lucky, or skillful, or passionate poet can win a prize. Awe:ri's poetry does the same; it brings people together so that they can function as a collective group considering a particular topic. She is skillful and passionate and poetic. But this is not a competition, and her prize will only be received when these forgotten native women who have been murdered and/or are missing are acknowledged by mainstream Canada.

To conclude this essay I will refer back to Jacobs's response to Canada's apology for the residential school system, which gracefully summarizes my argument:

Every Canadian person should know [the residential school system's] impacts on Aboriginal peoples, and more specifically on Aboriginal women. Everyone should know that the negative issues of the poverty, alcoholism, drug addiction and the cycle of violence can be traced back to Canada's policies. We can even trace the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women to the residential school system. All of this must be mandatorily taught in all Canadian schools.

(14)

While I agree with Jacobs that this information needs to be taught, I do not think this change will occur in the short term. However, I would also suggest that Awe:ri has taught this lesson brilliantly through her poem "Dying Breed," and that activists such as Awe:ri can be the teachers who spread this information until it is introduced into the Canadian school systems. In this essay I have addressed a serious issue, which is linked to



colonization, that exists in Canada today and also exposed the gap in media coverage of the missing girls to create an understanding of the need for resistance among Aboriginal peoples and among those non-aboriginals, such as me, who believe in the justice of this resistance. This expressed need for resistance has served as a basis to recognize how Awe:ri's poetry fulfills the need and becomes a platform for activism by bearing witness to the wrongful treatment of Native Canadians and providing an outlet for their voices to be heard. By connecting various oral traditions, Awe:ri is creating the notion that liminality can be beneficial, and ultimately there is a place for young Aboriginal women in Canada, but for this place to exist there needs to be advocacy and exposure for these girls.

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