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# Missing is not a destination: Bringing the indigenous woman home in MMIW literature

**Abstract.** This article underscores the relevance of literature within the current Missing and Murdered Indigenous Woman movement, which denounces the high rates of violence suffered by Indigenous women in Canada and the USA. As I argue, MMIW literature is a particularly useful form of activism because it makes the problem more visible as it offers a diversity of images that challenge the settler colonial silencing, dehumanizing and pathologizing of the Indigenous woman. Literary texts examine the multiple layers of the MMIW issue and its settler colonial sexist/racist roots, and simultaneously search for an emotional response that boosts engagement. The article offers a contextualization of literature within the MMIW movement in connection to activism, it reflects on the challenges of approaching the issue from a non-Indigenous perspective, and it engages in a close reading of works by Tanaya Winder and Linda LeGarde Grover to illustrate the most significant features of MMIW poetry and fiction. Both authors challenge the Western narrative of survivorism, moving beyond the passive or guilty victim roles in settler colonial representations, and positing relationality as a key value to refute the silencing and invisibility of Indigenous women.

**Keywords:** Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, settler colonialism, survivorism, activism, relationality, Marcie Rendon, Tanaya Winder, Linda LeGarde Grover.

## The MMIW movement and literature<sup>2</sup>

The present article examines the relevant role of literature within the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) movement<sup>3</sup>, a contemporary grassroots

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3 More recently, the movement has expanded to include violence against girls (MMIWG), two-spirit

coalition aimed at raising awareness about the high rates of violence suffered by Indigenous women in Canada and the US<sup>4</sup>. This violence takes many forms, including sexual abuse, murder, trafficking, or forced disappearances. The term “epidemic” is commonly used to refer to the MMIW crisis, but it is also contested since, as Sarah Deer claims, this is not “a contagious disease,” but “a crime against humanity” (2015: x). MMIW activists organize marches, compile information, promote legal change, and assist the affected communities. The most representative symbol of the movement is the red handprint across the mouth, which stands for the silence in the face of violence against women and the suppressed voices of those who have gone missing. Frequent catchphrases vindicate presence (“NotInvisible”), resist the missing women’s exclusion from history (“You are not forgotten”) or focus on the impact of violence on communities (“No More Stolen Sisters”). Artistic creativity plays a fundamental role in supporting MMIW activism, the most representative example being Jaime Black’s REDress project, an installation consisting of red dresses hanging in open spaces to symbolize the missing women which started in Winnipeg in 2010 and has since traveled in Canada and the US<sup>5</sup>.

As MMIW activists often claim, Indigenous women go missing several times: first and foremost, at the hands of the perpetrators; but also, subsequently, in the media, in data, in the justice system. They are not considered newsworthy (Barker et al. 2022), and “[o]ver 95% of MMIWG are never covered by the mainstream media” (Ficklin et al. 2022: 59). In 2015, the absence of official statistics moved Annita Lucchesi, a member of the Southern Cheyenne Tribe, to create the MMIWG2 Database, hosted by the Sovereign Bodies Institute. As she says, “[f]or too long, data has been about other people telling native people who we are... It’s time that we tell the world who we are, and the world [to] actually listen to us” (Bayona-Strauss 2020). As for the lack of justice, problems of jurisdiction due to the tribes’ lack of legal sovereignty have been noted in various studies, starting with one by Amnesty International (2007). All in all, missing women are not considered full citizens with basic human rights and are treated as ungrievable, precarious lives (Butler 2004) or “wasted humans” (Bauman 2004).

When Indigenous women are represented by others, their presence is more often than not buried under the prevalent dehumanizing images imposed on them. The

peoples (MMIWG2S), transgender (MMWG2ST), queer, questioning, intersex and asexual people (MMI-WG2SLGBTQIA). Both this article and the literary representations of violence it examines are focused on Indigenous women, so I will be using MMIW throughout my text.

4 Since the publication of Amnesty International’s *Maze of Injustice* in 2007, and the Canadian National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls in 2019, most of the texts about the different facets of MMIW start with an account of the outrageous levels of violence that Indigenous women are subjected to. See, as recent examples, Ficklin et al. 2022, Heim 2022, Joseph 2021, Luoma 2021, Mack & Na’puti 2019, Myers 2022, Parsloe & Campbell 2021, or Presley 2020.

5 See [jaimeblackartist.com/exhibitions](http://jaimeblackartist.com/exhibitions). Presley 2020 offers more examples of MMIW art.

stereotype of the promiscuous Indian woman, who is prone to deviance and incapable of controlling her impulses, is determining in the victim-blaming processes that are activated whenever an Indigenous woman goes missing<sup>6</sup>. Furthermore, Indigenous women are all too often pathologized and deprived of agency. In fact, the use of the passive voice is commonly associated with settler colonial accounts of MMIW, a tendency which downplays perpetrator violence and accountability, thus obscuring the responsibility of the state and its institutions (de Bourbon et al. 2022). Needless to say, it is extremely important for Indigenous women to take control of the images concerning them, to represent themselves from their own personal and tribal perspectives. This is relevant because, as Miranda offers, “without a voice, one remains a victim; with a voice, one becomes a survivor. [...] [B]y telling our stories, Native women can move past survival and into the role of healers” (2010: 105). Hence, we can argue that the major objectives of the MMIW movement are twofold: to make the problem of violence against Indigenous women visible, and to make the problem not the only thing that is seen or known about these women, so as to avoid re-victimizing them. This is very efficiently achieved through literature.

By MMIW literature I refer to Indigenous literary works that engage directly and explicitly with the MMIW movement, becoming a way of activism in their visibilization of the problem and their decolonial motivation. In spite of recent contributions to the field, it still deserves more critical attention, especially that produced in the US<sup>7</sup>. As I argue in the next section, approaching MMIW literature from a non-Indigenous perspective is challenging, and there are some ethical considerations to make concerning the risk of simplification and essentialization. For one thing, in order not to fall into further simplification or stereotyping—or, to use Chimamanda Adichie’s well-known term (2019), the “single story” of the disappearance of these women—it is essential to offer a diversity of images and stories from Indigenous perspectives. This is the first step in rebelling against the dehumanization brought on by the forces of settler colonialism. Hence, in this article I offer an overview of the main characteristics of MMIW literature by delving into two of its most relevant examples: the poems of Tanaya Winder and the fiction of Linda LeGarde Grover. These authors belong to different traditions—Duckwater Shoshone Nation and Bois Forte Band of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, respectively—and they resort to a variety of literary genres and forms, but they show a common motivation in their denouncing of the MMIW crisis.

6 See, for example, Morton’s analysis (2016) of the billboards warning Indigenous women against hitchhiking in the Highway of Tears, a particularly dangerous region in Canada, and her exposure of the way they are perceived as engaging in risky behavior—therefore, being willing victims and wrongdoers—without analyzing the reasons why they have no other options of mobility.

7 For previous studies of US literature in connection to MMIW, see Bowers 2017, Macklin 2021, Martínez-Falquina 2020 or Heim 2022. A good analysis of Canadian MMIW literature is offered by Hargreaves 2017.

Similarly to other kinds of MMIW activism (see Presley 2020), literature is capable of offering data—still very much in need of attention—as it aims at provoking an emotional response<sup>8</sup>. Yet, literary language is quite unique in the way it not only reflects reality, but also contributes to shaping it, and this makes it particularly useful to provide a complex and multi-layered vision of the situation. MMIW literature privileges the active voice, offers a diversity of voices and stories, and honors the lives of the missing women, going beyond the victimizing event that took their lives, reclaiming their right to belong as grievable citizens, and vindicating their place both in the community that mourns them and in society at large. Hence, it contributes to the recovery of the voice of the missing and murdered women, offering an outlet for grief and thus a possibility of healing. Furthermore, as Cécile Heim claims, “literature is instrumental in understanding and building resistance to this violence thanks to its capacity to perform Indigenous epistemologies” (2022: 21). As I will argue, the most relevant value that is articulated in these texts and which both connects to Indigenous traditions and challenges settler colonial structures is relationality.

### **“Don’t Tell me you Don’t See Indians Here”: Approaching MMIW literatures through relationality**

On one occasion in 2015, when White Earth Anishinaabe poet, fiction writer, playwright and activist Marcie Rendon was scheduled to speak at a spoken word show at the Loft Literary Center of Minneapolis, she realized that her intention to read all the names from the missing and murdered Indigenous women in the recently published RCMP inquiry was too much for her three-minute slot (Rehagen 2018). After all, “[t]heir names, single spaced, cover 90 pages” (Rendon 2020). Instead, she wrote a poem, “Trigger Warning, or *Genocide is Worse Than Racism*,” where each of the seven names that appear represents dozens of stories of women who went missing, were murdered, and did not find justice: “Lacey Feather. 17 years old”; “Tina Michelle Fontaine, 15”; “Angela Poorman, 29-year-old mother of three”; “Brandy Wesaquate, 28”; “Pamela Napoleon, 42”; “Freda Goodrunning a 35-year-old mom of six”; “Cindy Gladue, 36 years old” (Rendon 2020). The women’s identity, age or origin may vary, but they all share a similar, tragic fate: “No arrests have been announced”; “No charges have been laid”; “a jury found Bradley Barton not guilty.” Moreover, the number of such deaths “increases daily,” it is the same story again and again, and not surprisingly, says the poetic speaker, “*Sometimes, sorrow consumes my soul*.” The poet is grieving, as the world is, and it is through this connection that the grievability of the lost women is vindicated<sup>9</sup>:

8 The combination of data and emotion to connect with readers is exemplified in Ficklin et al.’s 2022 article, which provides a complete and up-to-date account of the reasons, statistics and activist manifestations of MMIW together with the presence of specific women’s names and stories.

9 On the politics of grief representation, see Granek 2014.

*Sometimes the wind isn't lonely, it's a cover for the bodies on the rise  
 Call the winds of grief to sing your healing into being  
 Sometimes the wind isn't lonely, it's a cover for the bodies on the rise*

The destiny of all these women is marked by their being Indigenous females living in a settler colonial state. To make this point, the poetic speaker looks her implied reader in the eye and states:

*don't tell me you don't see indians here  
 your only wish  
 is that we would  
 silently disappear*

By pointing to his/her wish for Native Americans to quietly disappear, the addressee is held accountable and identified with settler colonial institutions, moved by what Patrick Wolfe theorized as the “logic of elimination” (1999, 2006), which “strives to replace indigenous society with that imported by the colonizers” (1999: 27). This wish should also be understood within a larger set of strategies imposed on Indigenous peoples, such as the forced assimilation in boarding schools, the massive adoption of Native children outside their communities or the enforced sterilization of Indigenous women. The prevalence of crimes against Indigenous peoples or the lack of appropriate action on the part of the authorities are reminders that “settler colonialism is an ongoing structure, eschewing periodization” (Mack & Na’puti 2019: 366). This is an idea we should not lose sight of when dealing with the MMIW issue.

Marcie Rendon’s poetic lines also warn readers against making the lost women’s racial identity invisible or unimportant. Doing so would prevent us from finding a viable solution for the violence, for it would not allow us to see that it has been based on a strategic combination of racism and sexism that has determined Native and non-Native relations ever since Europeans set foot on the American continent. As various critics have convincingly argued, Indigenous women posed a threat for the colonial project insofar as Natives showed alternative ways of structuring gender relations. “Most tribes,” Mihesuah states, “were egalitarian, that is, Native women did have religious, political, and economic power—not more than the men, but at least equal to men’s” (2003: 42). Hence, the colonial system supplanted “women-centered societies with patriarchal, oppressive structures that condone and thrive on violence as a way to control and oppress members of marginalized communities” (Deer 2015: xiv). Key to this process was the objectification and degradation of Indigenous women, who were not only sexualized and demonized, but also considered inherently violable, just like the lands (Smith 2005: 12; Mihesuah 2003: 59). It is thus no wonder that “sexual violence against Native women

was common after invasion” (Mihesuah 2003: 59), and that it continues as long as Native people live in lands coveted by government or corporate interests (Smith 2005: 107). Very clearly, then, “[w]hen a Native woman suffers abuse, this abuse is an attack on her identity as a woman and an attack on her identity as Native” (Smith 2005: 8). Hence, as Rendon demands, we cannot pretend we “don’t see Indians here.”

Rendon’s lines thus connect to relevant issues to consider when writing about MMIW literatures, or about the MMIW issue in general for that matter. As Mack and Na’putti warn us, “challenging colonial logics is necessary to resist gendered violence in modernity” (2019: 364), which is why they call on us not to appropriate, commodify or extract knowledge from or speak authoritatively about MMIW, but to “radically de-center our voices as critics and center Indigenous knowledge about resisting gender violence in settler colonial nation-states” (365). In turn, Ficklin et al. encourage both Indigenous women and allies to become word warriors and to speak of MMIW with respect, to recognize “the importance of listening to and learning from Indigenous voices” (2022: 72). They remind non-Indigenous people that they do not need saviors, and reclaim

ownership of efforts for MMIWG and asserting sovereignty of tribal people, rather than adding invisibility. Furthermore, re-centering Native worldviews changes victimization narratives about Native women—restoring the sacred space women originally occupied in many tribal worldviews. Decolonization reclaims disenfranchised outlets for addressing ambiguous grief and loss by creating a sense of ceremony—often through community-based and creative efforts that enhance sustainability of grass-roots movements. Decolonization also repairs rifts in kinship networks, creating a sense of community and strengthening the bonds among Native peoples. (71)

Also significantly, Allison Hargreaves argues that we urgently need a critical analysis of the representation of violence against Indigenous women at a time when violence is “misrepresented in ways that pathologize Indigenous women while normalizing systemic colonial violence in their lives” (2017: 26). We should be aware that it is not the missing women who should be considered lacking or guilty in any way. It is the settler colonial structures that need to be scrutinized and challenged.

In this respect, an analysis of MMIW should attend to the settler colonial idea of survivorism, which is, in the words of Sarah Ropp, “an ideology centered around claiming the identity of survivor through the denial of one’s own vulnerability” (2019: 132). This is based on the binary opposition between survival and victimization, where the notion of survival has been constructed ideologically in the highly individualistic culture of the United States “as the positive assertion of personal agency that allows one to overcome the passivity associated to victimhood” (132). According to Ropp, the most destructive aspects of survivorism are “the reliance on a sacrificial victim in order to

assert one's survival and the inability of victim-blaming in order to believe in the myth of 'deserved' suffering (and thus escape the guilt otherwise brought on by inaction against another's suffering)" (132). Ropp suggests that survivorism is "a core habit of whiteness" (134), and offers as an example the compulsive urge to interpret US texts that feature child protagonists, particularly poor, ethnically marked children—like Esperanza, from *The House on Mango Street*, or Esch, from *Salvage the Bones*—within the context of redemptive survival, which "undermines our capacity to fully respond, either affectively or politically, to the suffering of less triumphant members of their communities" (133). In her view, this is connected to a typically American worldview where one should not delve into grief and adversity needs to be overcome. As Ropp offers, a critical awareness of survivorism as an inherited, pervasive ideology "helps the reader learn to honor the one who survives without blaming, depersonifying, or dishonoring the one who does not" (133). This idea is essential for my analysis of MMIW literature, where I intend to bring to the fore the way the texts avoid the destructive aspects of survivorism, resisting the trap of victim-blaming or reliance on a sacrificial victim, and vindicate both survivors and non survivors through the essential value of relationality.

Irrespective of differential tribal traits, Indigenous cultures generally interpret being as being-with, and a relational way of being is "at the heart of what it means to be Indigenous" (Wilson 2008: 80). In fact, as Winona LaDuke put it, it is "our relations to each other" that bind Native cultures together (1999: 2). Such understanding of the self as inextricable from its relations is articulated in direct connection to the land, understood as the environment and all its creatures. People, Glen Coulthard claims, are "an inseparable part of an expansive system of interdependent relations covering the land and animals, past and future generations, as well as other people and communities" (2014: 63). In this view, the land is not only central to material survival and individual and communal identity; it is also "an ontological framework for understanding *relationships*" (60, original emphasis). Coulthard theorizes this as "grounded normativity," an ethical framework provided by the land as a mode of reciprocal relationship, which focuses on egalitarianism, sharing, respect, and the recognition of obligation to others and to the world. The land teaches us how to live "in relation to one another and our surroundings in a respectful, nondominating and nonexploitative way" (60). Not surprisingly, settler colonialism has striven to break Native Americans' relation to the land, to such an extent that the continued dispossession of Indigenous peoples is largely about breaking those connections. This explains why, especially in recent years, the recovery and nurturing of relations as the pervading principle of life is one of the most clearly decolonial strategies of Indigenous writers, artists and activists. As we will see in the following sections, it is by articulating the fundamental value of relationality that MMIW literature rejects the settler colonial view on Indigenous women as wasted and vindicates them as grievable lives and complex, sovereign human beings.

## The search for words to heal the missing woman in Tanaya Winder's poetry

Tanaya Winder is an author, poet, singer, songwriter and educator from intertribal lineage—Southern Ute, Pyramid Lake Paiute, Diné and Shoshone—and an enrolled citizen of Duckwater Shoshone Nation. Her heritage also includes African American. Acknowledging where she comes from is important to her, for it establishes her place in a web of relations: “I do this to ground myself but also to respect my ancestors; I believe we carry them, their light, and their love wherever they go” (2018c: 268). Relationality is essential to her work: whenever she visits a school and establishes that relationship with the youth, she states, “I leave with a commitment to that community; I will always be responsible and accountable to them because now we are connected” (268). She claims that “[o]ne of the ways we are related is through shared pain as a result of historical and ancestral trauma” (269), thus pointing to the shared vulnerability of Indigenous peoples under settler colonialism. Living with PTSD—which she re-defines as “Post-Traumatic Settler Disorder” (2020: 188)—“means seeking ways to survive” (188), and there is surely much to be done

in reclaiming and rebuilding the ruptures brought on by colonialism and capitalism—the trauma from historical genocidal acts committed against us. From relatives being taken away from their homes and families to be forced into boarding school to our women, girls, and two-spirit relatives being stolen, history is inscribed on our bodies. When our women and children go missing, it is our responsibility to seek justice. When the world is silent about our struggles, art can be an act of resisting that silence. (188)

Storying—“excavating our ancestors’ stories” (188)—is an act of survivance as well as an exhibition of creative sovereignty. And very importantly, in that act of excavation she finds love, the epitome of relation and the key to understand Winder’s work at large: “Our ancestors’ love flows through our veins. I imagine it as moments of impact, connection, and a web of light woven through each heart we encounter on our paths” (2018c: 271).

Winder’s activist work in support of MMIW includes the co-founding of the Sing Our Rivers Red (SORR) collective of Indigenous artists, poets and activists to raise awareness of the issue. SORR promoted National MMIW Awareness Day—established on May 5<sup>th</sup> 2017—as well as a traveling exhibit composed of earrings donated by the families of missing or murdered women, which has been presented in various states in the US and Canada (Carr 2017). The original exhibit included 1,181 single earrings, and like Rendon’s poem, or like the red dresses hung by Jamie Black, it resorts to beauty and the



emotional impact of art as it focuses on representativeness: each earring stands for a lost Indigenous woman, but it is also one of a pair, the second one missing, thus engaging with the tension of presence and absence.

These ideas also play a relevant role in Winder’s poetry, one of the most interesting examples of recent MMIW literature. In “Missing More than a Word” (2018a), she ponders the lack of language to apprehend the statistics:

Someone once asked me, what are the words I do not yet have—

...

...

...

verbs that will story our bodies into something more  
than missing, more than squaw or lost, beyond statistics:

*1 in 3 Native women will be raped in their lifetime. (220)*

The sets of three suspension dots indicate ellipses—the lack of words, the missing women, the single story of the Indigenous woman—which, in turn, become patterns on the page, the dots bringing the words together, the silences creating the space for a muted beat. The poetic speaker digs, layer after layer of settler colonial history, laws, injustice:

[...] I dig until mud and earth find home  
underneath my fingernails. I’ll plant something new  
in the absence *burn vanish underreport* [...] (220)

Her mission is to reach the place where Indigenous women will not be erased, and this is only found in the deep connection to the land:

Let us poem a place where you cannot erase us into white space.

...

...

...

Let us dig to remind ourselves our roots are ancestral  
and there is nothing deeper  
than these sacred, dirt-covered hands. (220)

In “Extraction: Seeking Ways to Survive,” the poetic speaker engages in a dialogue with her grandmother, who teaches her to embroider and knit, as well as songs and “words,/ in ‘Indian’ as she says” (2020: 186). For generations, tongues were pierced with

needles, boarding school is “where people go to die,” in a system where the colonizers “saw our bodies as land full of resources / waiting to be extracted and exploited” (186). The women are still looking for words to heal from exploitation:

Can we un-suicide, un-pipeline, un-disappear our dear ones? There is no word for undo but many ways to say return. We never get to go back to before[.] (187)

Disappearance takes many forms: drugs into their veins—“alcoholism is the symptom not the disease” (186)—fathers “evaporating” (187) and mothers “flooding themselves/ into unglobable rivers because their mothers were taken long ago” (187). There is a continuity in the loss, and there is a continuity in the search, which does not stop:

We are still searching dragging rivers red until we find every body

that ever went missing. For as long as I can remember, we’ve been stolen:  
from reservation to Industrial boarding schools and today

our girls, women, and two-spirit still go missing and murdered.  
I could find no word for this. (187)

The weaving—of stitches, of words—is the way to healing: “Who taught us/ to sew new memories into old scars, fingers threading needle/ so precise in its recorded pain?” (187). Even when hands fail, the poetic speaker asserts, “my mouth wants to tell the story” (187).

The story recurs, as in “Love Lessons in a Time of Settler Colonialism” (2018b), where strategic enjambment points to fluidity and fragmentation simultaneously:

[...] as an Indigenous woman silence is deadening. There is danger in being seen, our bodies are targets

marked for violence. We carry the Earth’s *me too* inside us, a howling wind, our mothers & their mothers swallowed these bullets long ago. (221)

The reference to the global MeToo movement points to the connection of the violations on the land and women. Both are the victims of settler colonial violence, and being visible to those shooting eyes is undesirable, for their bodies are what bullets are aimed at:

The voices ricochet *I wish I were invisible I wish I were invisible*  
*I wish* echoes in my eardrums—we know what it’s like to live in fear. (221)

Having an Indigenous body, no Indigenous woman is safe. They live with the constant fear that they may be the next ones to go missing. Statistics prove such high probability of rape that mothers even prepare their daughters for it, as Louise Erdrich famously noted when commenting on her 2012 novel *The Round House*:

When I found out that Native mothers prepare their daughters to be raped, how to behave when it happens, you know, that it's sometimes considered unavoidable, and that—here's how we're going to behave and respond, it felt like a small devastation of my spirit. (in Tharp 2014: 28)

The poetic speaker of “Love Lessons” also prepares herself, as shown when she says:

[...] Should  
I go missing: don't stop searching; drag every river until it turns red  
and the waters of our names

stretch a flood so wide it catches everything. And we find each other  
whole and sacred, alive and breathing and breathing and breathing. (2018b: 221)

In “Sonnet MXLCXXXI” (2021), Winder converses with two of the most traditional Western literary forms—the sonnet and the elegy—to honor the missing women while emphasizing the vulnerability of both survivors and victims. The title embodies representativeness once more: 1181 women were taken, and one sonnet should be written for each of those women. The basic knowledge that we would expect to have in order to honor a dead person's life in an elegy is not always available, like that concerning the form of death: “Not when nor where but how, did we lose you,/ in between Last Seen \_\_\_ the words become elegy/ echoing sidewalks and streets” (25). A strategically situated comma—“how, did we lose you”—creates a caesura that points to disruption, to language interrupted. A similar strategy is used in line 9—“Are we invisible if nobody knows, why?” (25)—which opens various possibilities for questions, all unanswered: Why are we invisible?; Why does nobody know?; or even, Does nobody know why?

As visibilized in the poem, women are denied proper attention on the part of authorities, the police, the justice courts. As a consequence, the missing woman is exposed: pictures are handed out to strangers, posted on bulletin boards, categorized under the M-word—“Missing/ as if it were destination, a place one goes/ to disappear in invisible cities” (25)—which does not let the individual be seen as an individual, for “there's no hero like/ in the movies. No ads, mainstream coverage, or TV shows/ to show our story” (25). The blame falls not on the women, of course, but on society, which has been desensitized, does not see—does not want to see—the problem: “When 1,181 women were

taken, did eyes cease to have vision/ or pay attention to a body being swallowed up?” (25). Answers will not be found within the structures of settler colonialism, but in the ones who are left behind, whose sense of communal mission is replacing that of conventional heroes of the American tradition, becoming

an endless search of the cities in which we loved  
(and love) you. We will never forget. We demand for you  
action, words, even a poem that ends: your lives matter, too. (25)

The ones who are left behind are the ones who are grieving—an expression which becomes a political act—and they are on a mission to search endlessly and to never forget. Relationality—at the basis of the dialogues between “we” and “you,” the past, present and future—is extended to solidarity across racial borders—the last line pointing both to Black Lives Matter, which shares similar issues with MMIW (Myers 2022: 32) and to poems in the African American tradition like Langston Hughes’ “I, Too” (1926). All in all, there is nothing that suggests justified or deserved suffering here; survival is not redemptive, there is no direct equivalence between agency and survival vs. passivity of those who are victimized. They all demand a voice, they all vindicate the rehumanization and reindividuation of the missing women, who should not be blamed for what happened to them, but honored as important members of their communities.

## **Alleviating loss through connection in Linda LeGarde Grover’s *In the Night of Memory*<sup>10</sup>**

*In the Night of Memory* (2019) is the most recent novel by Linda LeGarde Grover, an enrolled member of the Bois Forte Band of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, and professor of American Indian Studies at the University of Minnesota Duluth. Set in the fictional Mozhay Point Reservation in Northern Minnesota—familiar to readers of Grover’s previous fiction—*In the Night of Memory* is focused on the childhood, adolescence and early adulthood of Rainfall Dawn and Azure Sky, whose mother Loretta Gallette—who had a troubled childhood and adolescence which ended in alcoholism and poverty—was compelled to turn them over to the County and later disappeared. After the traumatic experience of separation and physical and sexual abuse in several foster homes, the two sisters are reclaimed, through the Indian Child Welfare Act, by their Mozhay Point family, who bring them home to raise as their own. The novel examines the dissociative effects of loss and abuse, legitimizes the grief of disenfranchised peoples, and theorizes about the influence of the past in the present, focusing on

10 A preliminary version of some of the ideas in this section were presented at the 2020/2021 Conference of the European Association of American Studies (University of Warsaw) and the 9th International Conference on Language, Literature and Culture (University of Bialystok).

memory as both a traumatic haunting and restorative process. The text also offers relationality and an ethics of care as an antidote to the absence, violence and dispossession imposed on Indigenous peoples by the ongoing structures of settler colonialism.

Grover significantly dedicates her novel “To the missing Native women / and all who grieve them.” Moreover, directly connecting the text to MMIW activism, the author contributed two pieces to the Bring Her Home: Stolen Daughters of Turtle Island exhibition, featured in the Minneapolis All My Relations Gallery from February 14 to June 27, 2019<sup>11</sup>. As specified in the exhibition flyer, Bring Her Home artwork joins the MMIW awareness campaign to stop sexual exploitation, showing visual stories of the affected women and their families. Resonating throughout the artwork is the plea to know where the missing women are and the wish to bring them home. The intended effect is the visualization of the magnitude of the MMIW problem as well as the honoring of individual women’s lives. The specific artwork authored by Linda LeGarde Grover and her late sister Susan LeGarde Menz is titled “Red Ribbons for Loretta #1 and #2,” and it features two pictures of a woman in a red plaid jacket in a wooded area, who, turning her back on the viewer, walks alone in an undetermined direction. Each of the two photographs—taken by Susan LeGarde Menz—is surrounded by red ribbons with handwritten text from *In the Night of Memory*. As the exhibit label reads, “Susie and Linda endeavored to communicate a sense of vulnerability and danger in the midst of beauty. ‘Weweni, weweni; walk carefully,’ we are saying to all Native women. ‘Take care; we love you and need you’” (2019). These pieces acknowledge the vulnerability of Indigenous women whilst addressing them directly, thus pointing to inclusivity and relation. Another relevant claim is made by the exhibition curator, Angela Two Stars (Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux), who warns against reducing the issue to a statistic. As she states,

My story is only one of many... I was nine years old when my Grandma disappeared. I remember how my family searched for her for months. [...] I remember when her body was found, and the horrific way in which she died. I don’t want that to be the only thing I remember about her... [...] I don’t want her to lose her identity to the violent act that took her life. (“Bring Her Home” 2019)

The frequency of the MMIW problem is such that it is not unusual for most Indigenous peoples to have been touched by it more or less directly. But as Two Stars claims, in line with the MMIW movement at large, it is important not to let the terrible events of these women’s disappearances and/or deaths be the only thing that is known about them.

11 See [http://www.allmyrelationsarts.com/portfolio\\_page/bring-her-home-stolen-daughters-of-turtle-island-2019/](http://www.allmyrelationsarts.com/portfolio_page/bring-her-home-stolen-daughters-of-turtle-island-2019/) The artwork for the 2020 Bring Her Home exhibition can be found here: [http://www.allmyrelationsarts.com/portfolio\\_page/bring-her-home-sacred-womxn-of-resistance/](http://www.allmyrelationsarts.com/portfolio_page/bring-her-home-sacred-womxn-of-resistance/)

Similarly, *In the Night of Memory* weaves several narratives around the disappearance of Loretta, and by transforming absence into presence through writing, the novel functions as an excavation of memories to honor the lost woman, to come to terms with the grief caused by her loss, and to reestablish belongingness for her relations. Individual and family trauma—the grieving for Loretta’s disappearance—cannot be disentangled from American Indian unresolved trauma and disenfranchised grief. In this respect, elder Auntie Girlie, one of the characters of the novel, states:

As Loretta’s auntie in the Indian way, I will tell you that there is more to Loretta’s story than her disappearance and more to her disappearance than the story. Stories like Loretta’s were and are sadly so common that it didn’t even merit mention in the news, that an Indian woman who lived a rough life had lost her children to the County and dropped off the face of the earth without anyone even noticing for the longest time. Loretta was one of those women, one of how many we will never know, and just as it was with Loretta it was for them, that the story is more than any individual lost woman’s failings, more than speculation about the mystery, surely more than rumor and gossip and any satisfaction that it was her own fault, or that what goes around comes around, that you reap what you sow, that people get what they deserve. It’s our history, the loss of land, of course, but there’s more to it: the Old Indians, they knew how to live in the good ways but then so much became lost, with everything that was happening—people getting moved all over the place, the Indian schools and the families that lost their children, and then the drinking, the wrecking of lives—it leads directly to all that is Indian Country today, including the disappearance of Indian women, who the Creator intended to be the heart and spirit, the continuity of the people. That includes Loretta. (21)

The novel deals with trauma, but it would not fit a conventional trauma novel structure. In other words, we do not have a sequence of acting-out behavior followed by partial or complete working-through of traumatic symptoms<sup>12</sup>. Instead of a sequential or linear kind of narrative—which, irrespective of the order in which it were presented would provide some sort of initial situation, climactic moment(s) and final resolution—stories are related in multifarious and interactive ways, time is fluid and characterization is decentered and communal. Unity is achieved through the web of characters, the protagonist being a community which is being observed from different angles. The tapestry of this extended family and their relations is visualized in a family tree at the beginning of the novel, which is introduced as follows:

12 On the applicability of trauma theory to Native American literatures, see Martínez-Falquina 2017.

Gakina Awiya—

*All Who Are Here*

bound by blood, by name, by love, by spirit

to Loretta Gallette and her daughters, Azure Sky and Rainfall Dawn

The web of relations around Loretta and her daughters is organized by place, including “Laforce relatives and friends of Mozhay Point reservation lands,” “Other LaForce Family and Friends,” “Galette Relatives and Friends of the Miskwaa River settlement,” “Extended Family and Friends in Duluth, Minnesota,” and “Friends from Minneapolis, Minnesota.” Several first-person narrators—most notably the two girls and other relatives—speak, and Loretta’s voice is thus not completely lost but kept alive, remembered and evoked, albeit indirectly. Her daughter Azure laments that she has forgotten her mother’s voice but, as she says,

my mother still whispers to me: when it starts to rain and drops of liquid quench the thirst within the sparse leafiness of the old maple tree in the front yard, the wet patter deepening on saturated leaves, rolling water onto the dryness of exposed roots. She whispers to me in the absence of rain, on days that the wind picks up and scatters dried leaves across a sidewalk; in the braking of a city bus or in the weighty freedom of northern lights in the night sky. (4)

The most resonant symbol in the novel is that of the Northern Lights, part of the memory in the title that refers to a moment before Loretta lost the girls to the Council. This memory accompanies them all their lives, keeping them united:

“Waawaate,” she says. “Waawaate; it’s the northern lights.” [...] “Biizindan, little sweethearts; shhhh . . . Can you hear them?” Pulled close, closer, our heads lift like our mother’s to listen to the low rumble that is the singing wind of Waawaate. Rising, Loretta pulls the edges of the blanket from the floor and wraps them around me and Rain, then turns to face the lights. She sways, and then she is dancing in the style of Ojibwe traditional women, hands on hips and feet kneading the fire escape floor, its boards softened with age and weather, pivoting half-circles left to right, right to left, lifting the invisible Eagle feather fan in her left hand to return the song of prayer that is the Creator-given gift of Waawaateg. (6-8)

The Waawaate/Northern Lights scene points to the dynamic nature of memory, to its connection to storytelling, and to its healing function by integrating past and present. The lost mother becomes a ghost to her daughters, but as she transcends the worlds of

the tangible to become one with the stars, she provides them with the cultural referent of her Ojibwe dancing.

Showing the relational emphasis made by the novel, after Loretta loses the girls to the County, they are separated and moved to various foster homes, a traumatic experience for both of them. Besides suffering from foetal alcohol syndrome, which determines her development and physical traits, Rain's face is permanently marked by a blow administered by a foster mother, who told them "that [they] were blasphemers who were nothing but fodder for hell" (120). Azure, on her part, suffers from sexual abuse from a foster parent at a very young age. Luckily for them, they are eventually placed in a home together, and once they are reunited, they can pretend that they can return to their younger selves again, "wounded and battered but each beginning to brighten a little more every day, reflecting the other's light" (202). In fact, the two sisters' connection—they have become "two halves of one sister" (5)—works as a strategy of survival and as an antidote to their grief. In the eyes of some foster family children, who cannot see the differences between the two girls, they become AzureRain (60), and they embrace this name and the strength it gives them.

Luckily, the girls are not completely lost, and when they are fourteen and almost thirteen, they are told that they are going to another home "because of the Indian Child Welfare Act. [...] Somebody we were related to had requested us" (73) and they are brought back to their Mozhay Point extended family. As is later explained to the girls, this federal law, passed in 1978, gives tribal governments exclusive jurisdiction over tribal children in matters of custody. Still, "[t]he Indian people are in grief for the loss of so many of our children" (91), a result of settler colonialism made manifest in the loss and abuse of children in boarding schools, or the foster adoption system, so that the past still has "an influence on the present and, in fact, never goes away" (23).

Soon after they are settled in with Junior—a Vietnam veteran suffering from PTSD—and his mother Dolly Johnson, the girls are taken to a powwow where they go through an informal symbolic adoption ceremony. Elder Auntie Girlie, a "magical old woman" (111), holds the girls' hands in hers, stands and remains "upright between the warmth and youth of the girls who, found, would link the generations before me to the generations after them" (117). For the community, the recovery of the girls is a way to bring back Loretta, her absence "shift[ing] shape into a love and care showered onto her daughters, Azure Sky and Rainfall Dawn" (150). For the girls, this means the possibility to heal and find a place in the world, as Azure's words show:

Each time, whether I am dancing or watching from the side, my heart lifts with happiness and gratitude at being a part of this, but I cherish the early memory of the sobriety powwow at the Coppertop church the most dearly. It was there that Auntie Girlie told Rain and me that we look like our mother—her gift to Loretta and to us that acknowledged and



clarified our right and proper place in the LaForce and Gallette families, and in the world, as surely as the order of women dancers at Grand Entry. (106)

Loss can be alleviated through connection, but Grover refuses to offer a redemptive or conventionally happy ending to the novel. It is made very clear that some people cannot be found or saved, like Loretta, or like Rain, whose degenerative illness—connected to the consequences of historical unresolved grief—makes her move backwards as Azure moves forward. The younger sister wonders,

What makes one child survive and one not? And at what point in the heaviness of grief did Rain stop moving forward and fall behind as I continued to run? [...] She looks like the child to whose beginnings she is returning in her dementia. This could be her second chance at childhood; not many get to do that, and I hope that the revisit will wipe out some of what surely is left in her soul from the first. Stroking her hair I think that if I absorb her traumas into myself, she will be at peace, that I must have space for them somewhere and will never be at peace myself anyway. (200-201)

Rain's voice is gradually silenced, but Azure does not let her fall into a secondary or victimized position. Both survivors and non-survivors are honored in this novel, the difference being that whereas some have their voices stolen, those who do not take it upon themselves to speak up for those who cannot.

## Conclusion

As the works by Tanaya Winder and Linda LeGarde Grover show—albeit with different strategies in correspondence to the poetic and novel genres they each choose to articulate their message in—MMIW literature avoids the most destructive aspects of survivorism, refusing to blame victims or rely on a sacrificial victim to emphasize the triumph of an individual, and thus further developing the Indigenous value of relationality. As Ropp stated, “[s]urvivorism depends on the shutting down of one’s access to one’s own vulnerability and full affective range” (2019: 145). This costs people their capacity for intimacy, authenticity, and a sense of connection. Hence,

[i]f there is a “choice,” an agency discoverable in the pursuit of survival, it is the choice between asserting survivorism—straightening up and allowing the other to lie prone—and inclining toward one another in a posture of mutual openness and caretaking. (147)

The works analyzed in this article show victims or less triumphant members of the community who are not blamed or silenced but cared for, honored, made ever-present in spite of the gaps in their lives and representations. As a result, there are no

ungrievable or wasted lives here. Both survivors and non-survivors are seen as part of a community who struggle to regain agency and a voice for self-definition. Doing so requires a recognition of vulnerability, which should not be seen as a sign of weakness but of strength, for it is at the basis of relationality, which, we could argue, is not only the most useful quality to live, but the only way to actually live.

On another note, although there is no question that, in order to understand the current MMIW crisis, we need to examine the history of settler colonialism in America, we should never lose sight of the fact that it is the present conditions of sexism and racism that can and should be changed. The work of Indigenous writers and poets is particularly relevant insofar as they engage with the past to dig into the roots of the contemporary situation, at the same time as they offer new ways of looking not only at the problem but at Indigenous women in general, stressing their humanity, vulnerability and resilience, and offering options for a better future. These writers' creative process is inherently political, a form of activism, for unfortunately, what they represent through words is still too solidly based on the real world, which is unequal and unfair. In response to the MMIW crisis, Anishinaabe writer and critic Leanne Simpson articulated her rebellion by emphasizing presence—"I am not murdered. I am not missing" (in Fahs 2020)—and making the decision to honor the missing women, continue their work, and fight for Indigenous nations and a relation with the state "that is no longer based on violence, heteropatriarchy and silence." As she claims, and as the texts analyzed here also prove, "[t]his is co-resistance. This is community."

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