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“We Were Always More than Things”: Intergenerational Trauma, Indigenous Relationality, and Decolonial Storytelling in Mona Susan Power’s *A Council of Dolls*

Silvia Martínez-Falquina

1. Introduction

- ¹ *A Council of Dolls*, published in 2023, is Mona Susan Power’s latest novel and a literary achievement of third-wave Indigenous writing. This new trend was recently defined by Louise Erdrich as “a very powerful time” that she bears witness to with gratitude and excitement, seeing that “so many people are out there writing, and so many Native people of all different backgrounds, all different sensibilities, different languages coming into consciousness” (qtd. in Orange). The present article aims to contribute to the definition of this third wave of Native writing, which, as I argue, is additionally characterized by new engagements of Indigenous authors with non-Indigenous literary forms and genres, by its decolonial motivation, and by its focus on the interplay between broadly shared Indigenous tenets and tribally specific cultural frameworks. An enrolled member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe (Iháŋkthųwəŋna Dakhóta), Power writes from a position shaped by Dakota intellectual, ethical, and relational traditions. Accordingly, *A Council of Dolls* is firmly grounded in Dakota experience and worldview, and it simultaneously participates in broader Indigenous and transnational literary conversations. The text is an account of historical violence and resilience, as well as a narrative intervention that mobilizes Dakota epistemologies and ethical values.
- ² The novel is inspired by family history, although Power claims that it is not autobiographical (“Mona Susan Power”). It covers three generations of Yanktonai

Dakhóta girls: Sissy, born in 1961, her mother Lillian, born in 1925, and her grandmother Cora, born in 1888. The multiple first-person narrators include the three girls and their dolls Ethel (a black Tiny Thumbelina), Mae (a Shirley Temple doll), and Winona (a mid-1800s Dakota-style doll). The dolls—who either have agency or are believed to possess it by the girls—act as confidants and protectors, especially through the girls' traumatic experience of growing up at boarding school. The narrative begins in the late 1960s, then moves back to the early 1930s to tell the mother's story, and further still to the early 1900s to recount the grandmother's. All the voices and experiences finally converge in the 2010s, when a meeting of all the dolls—the "council of dolls" in the title—takes place, and Sissy—now in her early fifties and going by Jesse—weaves their stories together in writing. Both the chorus of voices that compose the novel and its reverse chronology formally mirror the transmission of memory across history, foregrounding the intergenerational dimensions of trauma and healing.

- 3 These dimensions are rooted in a long history of settler colonial violence in which the boarding school system played a central role. As part of what settler genocide researcher Andrew Woolford describes as a broader "colonial mesh," boarding schools functioned within a network of institutions and practices aimed at resolving the so-called "Indian problem" through forced assimilation, most notably by removing children from their families and communities and subjecting them to coercive institutional hierarchies that deliberately disrupted kinship, memory, and place-based relations (32-33). Because the key was to eradicate Indigenous spirituality, languages, and ways of life, they aimed, in Wahpetunwan Dakota Waziyatawin (aka Angela Wilson)'s words, "their most concerted and brutal assaults on our most vulnerable and precious population—the children" ("Introduction" 360). Although boarding schools did not completely destroy Indigenous knowledge, they did succeed at severely disrupting intergenerational transmission and causing Indigenous peoples to question the value of their own traditions (360-61). As documented in *Carlisle Indian Industrial School: Indigenous Histories, Memories, and Reclamations*, edited by Jacqueline Fear-Segal and Susan D. Rose, "the nations sending the highest number of children were the Sioux (Lakotas, Nakotas, and Dakotas) and the Chippewa (Ojibwes)" (5-6). Native children were forcibly removed from their communities and subjected to programs of cultural eradication, with the Carlisle Indian Industrial School serving as the prototype for off-reservation boarding schools and exemplifying the colonial logic of elimination. Warren Petoskey (Odawa and Lakota) notes that "The residual effects of the boarding school experience is [sic] evident in every Native family" (334). Many of the stories of intergenerational trauma associated with Carlisle remained unspoken for generations, but descendants of boarding school survivors such as Dovie Thomason (Lakota/Kiowa-Apache) are now ready to speak and reclaim those stories, for they believe that their children need to hear them, as does everybody else (332). As she said at the 2012 Carlisle Symposium—which resulted in the publication of the aforementioned volume—"almost a hundred years after they closed the Indian School down," time has made it possible to see clearly, "instead of the guilt, and the shame, and the anger, and the blame" (332).
- 4 The legacy of silenced experience, inherited trauma, and healing storytelling is powerfully represented in *A Council of Dolls*. This is relevant because, as noted by Gabrielle Tateyuskanskan (Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate) in her review of Power's novel, reparative work to restore "the emotional health, respect and dignity of those who suffered as children and who have been forgotten by America" (86) is still necessary,

and the novel achieves precisely such reparation. Power is thus guided by the principle of *owotaŋna wohdakapo*—"telling it straight" and "telling it well"—which moves Oceti Sakowin storytellers according to Hernandez, Pexa, and Newmark (x), the editors of the 2023 Special Issue *Očhéthi Šakówiŋ* of *SAIL*. Building on this reparative imperative and accuracy motivation, Power's novel articulates female Dakota identity and emphasizes the imaginative and ethical dimensions of storytelling. In doing so, it affirms relationality, the preservation of memory, and culturally specific healing practices.

- 5 Central to this practice is the novel's decolonial reconfiguration of agency beyond the human through the central role of objects—in particular, the dolls—which are portrayed as entities with the capacity to act in the Dakota relational worldview. Power articulates these values by means of an aesthetic that is both emotionally resonant and epistemologically grounded in Indigenous epistemologies. The novel is openly didactic in the direct, extended way it presents us with the values which it seeks to assert. It also includes an element that could be qualified as fantasy, since it assumes that the dolls can speak and allows them to become storytellers in their own right. While this may challenge expectations about Native American literature—particularly because two of the three dolls are not Indigenous in origin or appearance—I contend that it constitutes a conscious affirmation of Indigenous healing and identity. Moreover, the novel has been criticized for its reliance on emotion, with a review in *Kirkus* describing it as "[a]n occasionally moving book that's been steeped a minute too long in sentimentality" ("A Council of Dolls"). Yet, as I argue, emotion here functions as a strategy of connection and care, grounding relational knowledge in lived, embodied experience rather than abstract reconciliation. Through the dolls, Power vindicates relationality—human and more-than-human—not only as a means of survival and resistance, but as a reclamation of Indigenous subjectivity and humanity on Dakota terms.
- 6 Building on these elements, this article examines how *A Council of Dolls* confronts the legacy of boarding school and articulates Indigenous experiences of intergenerational trauma and unresolved grief, thereby opening up possibilities for healing. In order to do so, my discussion unfolds in three acts. The first section of the analysis explores how the novel's reverse chronology and layered narrative mirror the transmission of trauma across generations, formally enacting the accumulation of historical grief. It then turns to the motif of the open wound and the figure of the injured woman to argue that the novel resists closure or reconciliation. Instead, it posits witnessing, memory, and ethical responsibility as ongoing imperatives. The second part of the analysis examines how the text constructs relationality and more-than-human agency as vital strategies for cultural and emotional survival, emphasizing kinship with ancestors, spirits, and objects. Grounded in Dakota values, these relational frameworks suggest the possibility of healing despite generations of rupture. In the concluding act, I examine the gathering of the dolls in the fourth part of the novel as an affirmation of storytelling and its healing motivation through relation and transformation. Foregrounding emotion and kinship, *A Council of Dolls* challenges dominant historical narratives, affirms contemporary Dakota and Indigenous identity, and invites readers to bear witness to the enduring consequences of settler colonial violence, while offering an Indigenous model of narrative healing.

2. Open Wounds: Intergenerational Trauma and the Ethics of Witnessing

- 7 Susan Power's engagement with intergenerational trauma in *A Council of Dolls* can be situated within Indigenous trauma theory, and more specifically, within Dakota and Lakota frameworks that conceptualize trauma as collective, cumulative, and relational rather than individual and episodic. This body of scholarship provides a culturally grounded alternative to Western trauma models that tend to individualize harm and detach it from colonial histories. A foundational figure in this field is Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart (Hunkpapa/Oglala Lakota), a social worker and mental health expert who in the 1990s introduced the concepts of Historical Trauma and Historical Unresolved Grief, thereby establishing a theoretical framework that has become central to Indigenous trauma studies.
- 8 Grounded in Lakota history and worldview, Brave Heart defines historical trauma as a communal wound produced by cumulative violence perpetrated through U.S. colonial policies. In "The Return to the Sacred Path," she emphasizes that "cataclysmic events" such as the assassination of Tatanka Iyotake or Sitting Bull in 1890, as well as the forced removal of children to boarding schools—both of which are described in *A Council of Dolls*—generated losses that were never adequately mourned, since the traditional Lakota ceremonies that "effectively afforded grief management" (289) and were based on the *tiospaye*, "the Lakota extended family kinship network" (290), were prohibited. The suppression of these relational mourning practices resulted in grief that remains unresolved across generations (289), deriving in a range of psychosocial and health consequences, including a high rate of suicide, alcoholism, poor health, and poverty.
- 9 This emphasis on unresolved grief is further developed in "The Historical Trauma Response among Natives," where Brave Heart identifies boarding schools as one of the most damaging colonial institutions, precisely because they separated children from families and culture, punished language and spirituality, modeled abuse and authoritarian discipline, and disrupted Lakota parenting traditions. In Brave Heart's words, "Forced assimilation and cumulative losses across generations, including language, culture, and spirituality, contributed to the breakdown of family kinship networks and social structures. This historical legacy and the current psychosocial conditions contribute to ongoing intergenerational trauma" (8). Moreover, "boarding schools have deprived these families of traditional Lakota parenting role models, impairing their capacity to parent within an indigenous healthy cultural milieu" (9). As a result, "[p]arents raised in boarding schools, who also likely have been victims of punitive or 'boarding school style discipline,' may be more likely to have experienced trauma as children," a legacy that negatively impacts parental relationships and contributes to risk factors for youth substance abuse (9). In sight of this, trauma is evidently systemic, rather than individual pathology.
- 10 While grounded in Lakota-specific histories and practices, Brave Heart's framework is not limited to a single context. As suggested by her co-authored article "Historical Trauma across the Indigenous Peoples of the Americas" (Brave Heart et al.), Lakota historical trauma theory is both culturally specific and transferable, offering an alternative epistemology to Western trauma models that remain inadequate for apprehending Indigenous experiences. In contrast to ordinary PTSD, American Indian Historical Trauma is collective, cumulative, and intergenerational, affecting entire

families and communities, and transmitted across generations, as Joseph P. Gone suggests (389-90). The need for culturally grounded approaches to trauma is further articulated by Eduardo Duran, who conceptualizes trauma as a "soul wound" requiring healing through spiritual reconnection and Indigenous ceremonial practices rather than exclusively clinical intervention (Duran, Duran and Brave Heart 60-76). Recent Indigenous scholarship likewise emphasizes healing over the individualization of trauma. As *Ora: Healing Ourselves. Indigenous Knowledge, Healing and Wellbeing*—edited by Leonie Pihama and Linda Tuhiwai Smith and offering a conversation of Aotearoa and Turtle Island experiences—insists, Indigenous approaches to trauma reject universalized trauma-informed care in favor of culturally specific practices oriented toward relational wellbeing and "seeking existential understanding rather than a relief of symptoms" (5-6). Taken together, these perspectives articulate an Indigenous trauma paradigm grounded in relationality and collective responsibility, foregrounding healing as a decolonial practice. Within this theoretical horizon, *A Council of Dolls* can be read as a literary enactment of Indigenous trauma theory grounded in Dakota experiences and healing practices.

- 11 While *Brave Heart* approaches historical trauma as a theorist and healer concerned with culturally grounded frameworks of intervention and recovery, *Power* approaches it as an artist, using fiction to render the affective and embodied dimensions of historical trauma while deliberately resisting narratives of closure or programmatic healing. With her treatment of the historical unresolved grief of various generations of Yanktonai Dakhóta women, *Power* unravels the damage that still determines Indigenous peoples' lives to this day by using trauma as an essential structural device in her narrative. Formally, she starts from the ongoing consequences of racism and violence on Indigenous peoples in the late 20th century and moves backwards, one character after another, to cover the traumatic experiences of a family across three generations, with a special focus on boarding school, colonial violence, and cultural erasure.
- 12 Within this intergenerational structure, one of the central mechanisms through which boarding school trauma operates in *A Council of Dolls* is language, which also functions as a connective motif across generations. All the voices in the novel are explicitly fluent in English, which was forced upon them by settler colonialism. The emphasis on imposed linguistic competence and language loss echoes *Brave Heart's* account of historical trauma as a collective and embodied process rooted in cultural suppression. According to Waziyatawin, the loss of language is devastating: "The generations of our elders who were punished for speaking our languages either had the ability to speak literally beaten out of them, or if they were fortunate enough to retain their language after years of abuse, they often chose not to teach it as a first language to their children" ("Reclaiming Our Humanity" 81). *Power's* novel gives narrative form to this historical process, showing how linguistic rupture becomes an inherited condition rather than a single traumatic event.
- 13 On the other hand, the girls' mastery of the language can be a useful survival skill and a source of conditional privilege, as happens to Cora, who attends the Carlisle Industrial School in Pennsylvania. There, she becomes a member of a literary club and is treated by some teachers as evidence that Native Americans can make progress. Yet, this mastery is also deeply contradictory, insofar as it exposes the instability of colonial categories such as savagism. This is the case of Lillian, whose academic success and

extraordinary ability to spell make her the target of a cruel nun who cannot stand the success of a girl she considers a savage. What becomes clear is that the girls and their families are acutely aware of the power of English and use it strategically to navigate colonial authority. Through Jesse, the final narrator, Power transforms this imposed linguistic competence into a form of narrative agency, converting a tool of discipline into a means of testimony and survival. In this way, the novel illustrates what Brave Heart theorizes as the intergenerational transmission of trauma through everyday practices and the adoption of survival strategies shaped by colonial constraint.

- 14 The first part of the novel, set in Chicago in 1969, is devoted to seven-year-old Sissy, who presents herself as the protagonist of a fairy tale threatened by a witch or evil stepmother. Lillian is, in fact, Sissy's mother, and her own behavior will later be explained as the result of the shame derived from the trauma experienced at the boarding school she was forced to attend. Sissy adores her, but is also painfully afraid of her. Lillian does not like to be touched (Power, *Council* 5), she avoids any expression of love on the part of her daughter or husband, a Korean war veteran, and the only place where Sissy can imagine hugging her is in her own head, "because it's the only place she lets me show her" (5). Lillian is unpredictable and ambivalent, full of anger, and she becomes a red-eyed devil who can really hurt her daughter, chasing her with a broom when she daydreams, shows her sensitive nature, or drops one thing or another. In Sissy's eyes, "[Lillian is] the only person I know who grows when she gets mad, gets bigger and bigger until it's like she fills the whole room, and there's no air left to breathe" (7).
- 15 While trying to understand her mother, Sissy recalls a story Lillian once told her about a nun at boarding school who locked her in a dark closet and warned her that the Devil was inside. Lillian had "taught herself to read before she ever went to school," although as a Native American she was "supposed to be dumb" (Power, *Council* 6). The challenge of the narrative of savagism that Lillian thus represents made her the target of this particular nun, who reacted with anger and violence, scarring the girl forever. On one occasion in the narrative present, Lillian is howling over the pieces of a porcelain bird her daughter accidentally broke and when she looks at Sissy, "her eyes are red. For the first time, I put together that story about the Devil keeping her company in the school closet with the color of her eyes when she's mad. Maybe the Devil drops in again when I make mistakes" (10). Trying to make sense of her mother's behavior, Sissy has inherited and internalized the idea of the Devil, a presence Lillian got familiar with through the nuns' perspective of her as a girl. Thus, Power uses Sissy's focalization to show how racism is enacted and inherited as shame across generations. The truth is that, in spite of sparse moments of kindness and transmission of knowledge and values, Lillian is not always capable of being the mother that Sissy needs. Power is thus rendering visible what Brave Heart identifies as the inheritance of trauma in the absence of culturally grounded mourning and healing practices, which are obviously not accessible to Lillian to deal with dislocation and loss. As a result, Sissy is compelled to repress her own emotions in a way that will prove unhealthy later: "I don't tell Mama about my nightmares. She doesn't like to hear what bothers me. So nightmares get piled up next to my angry thoughts, which don't get cleared away by penance anymore" (8). In the end, Lillian dies in a fit of rage, for she falls down the stairs when she is chasing Sissy after the girl dropped the grocery bags she was carrying. Although it seems unlikely that Sissy pushed her, and the traumatic wound does not let her

remember what happened, she will feel guilty all her life, blaming herself for her mother's death as she blamed herself for her anger.

- 16 As seen in the second part of the novel, set in the 1930s, Lillian's experience at boarding school was traumatizing not only because of the way the nuns treated her, but also because they killed her sister Blanche by forcing her to eat corrosive soap as punishment for singing a Native song honoring their revered Lala, aka Sitting Bull.¹ The scene is so cruel and traumatic that, as her sister is dying, Lillian has no choice but to resort to dissociation—in US psychiatrist and trauma researcher Judith Herman's words, "one of nature's small mercies, a protection against unbearable pain" (42-43). In this dissociative state, Lillian imagines herself becoming "weightless," floating above the violent scene from a distance, her emotions rendered "flat" and unable to affect her. Her beloved doll Mae plays a crucial role in this scene, for it comes to the girl's rescue and keeps her safe when no one else can. Claspings hands, they "have a bird's-eye view of the skirmish" (130): Blanche is being overwhelmed by the nuns, described through animal imagery that likens them to scavengers swarming prey, while Blanche herself appears as a "thrashing buffalo spirit no one can subdue" (131). As a consequence of this tragic episode, and of her subsequent repression of emotion, Lillian develops nightmares and an intense, simmering rage. Her later contempt toward her daughter can be understood—using Professor of Psychiatry Andrew P. Morrison's words—"an attempt to 'relocate' the shame experience from within the self into another person" (14), and thus an attempt "to rid the self of shame" (14). This defensive strategy, however, proves both ineffective and painful: lacking an appropriate means of mourning her sister, Lillian carries her trauma throughout her life and ultimately passes it on to her daughter.
- 17 As further proof of Power's aim to describe the complexity of traumatic experience, we learn that Lillian's traumatic childhood did not start at boarding school. Back home, her father, Jack, often got drunk and became abusive, threatening his children. Responding to violence with dissociation, on one of the occasions when Lillian and her siblings are running away from him, she says, "I'm sliding away from my body because it's too uncomfortable to stay inside it. Maybe Jack already killed me, and I'm a ghost looking back at myself and Blanche?" (Power, *Council* 77). Through Lillian's narrative we thus bear witness to the need to dig in the roots of racism and trauma to understand its current effects on families and individuals.
- 18 Expectedly, the story does not end—or, rather, begin—here. The third part of the novel, set in the early 1900s in the aftermath of the so-called "Indian Wars," centers on Lillian's own mother, Cora, and her relationship with Lillian's father, Jack. Jack is profoundly damaged not only by his own experience at boarding school, which was extremely traumatizing and full of deeply shameful episodes, but also because his own father was a violent and racist white man who may have killed Jack's sister, Alice. As Cora starts falling in love with Jack, her doll Winona warns her about him: he is, she says, "[n]ot whole like you, where the enemy is on the outside. Remember, he is half his father. Half his anger, and his sickness. He has so much to prove to himself. He will always unravel faster than you" (Power, *Council* 162). This section of the novel recounts Jack's story in relation to Cora and their shared experience in Carlisle, which the girl describes as a devastating transformation from wholeness to a self dominated by shame. Shame, Cora offers, becomes something she wears, invading her thoughts "like a parasite" (152) and reshaping her sense of self. She is not troubled by who she was at

home, she explains, but by the "new creature who obeys rules that don't make sense, and whose natural inclinations for sympathy are roundly discouraged" (152). At Carlisle, values passed down by families are systematically inverted: "personal dignity becomes defiance, generosity is foolishness, sympathy seen as weakness, too much curiosity considered impudent, and courage is the highest offense, being viewed as rebellion" (152-53). As this scene from Cora's first person-narration makes clear, settler colonialism deliberately targets relational bonds in its effort to subject Indigenous peoples. The effect of this manifestation of racism is the destruction of attachment—between people as well as between individuals and the land, ancestors and cultural values—producing dissociation and profound self-shame that are transmitted for generations. Aware of this dynamic, Power's attempt to recover the dignity and humanity of her characters vindicates precisely the kindness and positive emotion that settler colonial violence sought to eradicate.

- 19 Importantly, trauma in the novel is not confined to the past but persists as a living presence that disrupts linear time and narrative closure. For this reason, the text offers no clear working-through of the traumas that we are presented with. On the contrary, the openness of wounds is deliberately and strategically underscored. One of the most powerful motifs in this respect is the injured woman, a spirit who appears to Cora, first, and then to Jesse as an adult. As a result of an episode "from a long time before when our people were massacred" (Power, *Council* 156), this young woman is naked and she has horrific wounds inflicted by slicing and gunshots. The woman's tongue was taken for a trophy (156), a radical act of bodily appropriation which silences her and further underscores the brutality inflicted upon her. Although the specific incident where this happened is not mentioned in the text—so that she stands for a long history of systemic violence against Indigenous peoples in general and women in particular—the woman bears the mark of nineteenth-century settler violence against Dakota civilians. She is probably a victim of the aftermath of the U.S.-Dakota War of 1892, when punitive expeditions aimed at ethnic cleansing "were sent into Dakota territory to hunt down any fleeing Dakota people, attacking villages, destroying winter food and shelter supplies, and killing or capturing warriors and non-combatants alike" (Waziyatawin, "Dakota Land Recovery" 591).
- 20 Despite Cora's initial impulse to look away, the injured woman compels her to witness her pain: "I want to close my eyes, but she makes a curious noise like a strangled hiss and I'm too afraid to disobey. She wants me to look" (Power, *Council* 156). Cora soon recognizes the woman as a relative, and realizes that she would not hurt her, but that she demands that her pain be seen. After a few visits, she facilitates a transformation in Cora. In the young girl's words, "I fall asleep thinking that her pain is mine even though my body is whole and unblemished. Her pain is mine. I carry it now" (157). Cora realizes she should feel horrified, but instead she is "honored by this connection, this intimacy across death and Time" (157), which points to the transcendence of physical and temporal boundaries as it underscores the embodied inheritance of trauma.
- 21 Moreover, in accordance with the Indigenous relational worldviews, those experiences and people are not past or gone—they are still alive here and now. The woman keeps the wounds alive, using her hands "to open the mouths of the most awful cuts that look like stabs from a bayonet" (156). The pain seems unbearable, but the woman wants Cora to see how "they desecrated her body" (156). This is not out of depravity or wanting to be perceived as pitiful: "She picks her wounds to keep them open because the

survivor's way is to allow flesh to sew its mouth closed, to forget, though scars mound atop what will never be the same, what will never be as whole as it was before (156). In other words, the woman is performing a sacred act of resistance to remember and acknowledge the suffering and violence endured by Indigenous peoples. As the spirit woman tells Cora, guiding the girl's finger "inside a bullet hole that has ripped through her heart," there is "no true healing without remembering" (156-157). Cora asks her, "Does the pain never end? Finally she responds, Not here" (192). The woman is thus an embodiment of colonialism's unresolved violence, for colonial history was never repaired and as a consequence suffering is ongoing.

- 22 This spiritual character underscores the importance of remembrance, which positions the novel as a call to bring the past into the realm of political action. As stated by Native American storyteller Dovie Thomason (Lakota/Kiowa-Apache), whose relatives attended various boarding schools in the US and Canada, the visit to Carlisle with her daughter made her bear witness to many stories, some joyful, some nostalgic, some wounded, with "wounds that will not heal until we clean them, until we gently remove the scab and tend the wound" (330). Wounds must be tended, not erased, for healing is not the same as closure. Rather, tending to the wound demands recognition of how the bodies were wounded in the first place, and this is a reminder of the ongoing nature of settler colonialism, which "does not represent a point in the past, or an event or practice that has ended, but instead, as in the case of the United States, is essential to the continuation of the nation itself" (Waziyatawin, "Dakota Land Recovery" 590). From this perspective, any effort toward reparative justice which entails "addressing harms within that colonial relationship" (590) emerges as a dilemma, perhaps even an impossibility.
- 23 Power's response to this impasse is not an attempted return to wholeness or complete balance, since this is foreclosed by the very nature of the violence narrated in the novel. Instead, *A Council of Dolls* ultimately suggests that if there is hope of healing, it will be found in storytelling—in its capacity to connect across time and bodies, and in its potential to enable ontological and epistemological redefinition. The novel thus aligns with Waziyatawin's insistence that colonialism is fundamentally a process of dehumanization which persists whenever Indigenous ways of knowing are dismissed or delegitimized. As she asserts, "As humans, we have the right to argue that our ways of knowing are equal to any on earth and we have a right to challenge colonial claims to superiority" ("Reclaiming Our Humanity" 79). Reclaiming humanity, in this sense, entails reclaiming the right to self-definition on Indigenous epistemological, cultural, and moral terms, and this is what Power's novel is achieving.
- 24 The text also resonates with Spirit Lake Dakota and Turtle Mountain Ojibwe descendant Alexander Cavanaugh's articulation of affective relationality, a framework that foregrounds feeling, lived experience, and relational accountability as forms of Indigenous knowledge production. Affective relationality emphasizes trauma as ongoing rather than past, and it is an emancipatory approach insofar as it focuses on healing instead of harm. Drawing on Dian Million's felt theory to address the trauma of residential school abuse and ongoing coloniality (29), Cavanaugh points to the "epistemological and ontological position of affect," grounded in "*feeling* the urgency of climate change"—the focus of his PhD dissertation—"and *embodying* relationships that are upheld by Indigenous traditions" (28-29). In this sense, affective relationality mobilizes Indigenous knowledge in opposition to colonial violence, deploying affect as

"a call to action to make legible trauma in the wake of colonialism" (34). Read through this lens, *A Council of Dolls* uses fiction to convey the affective dimensions of historical trauma, and the text succeeds at articulating storytelling as an affective and relational practice, which Power defines in Indigenous and Dakota terms.

3. Relational Ontologies and More-Than-Human Agency

- 25 As Power exposes the damage of settler colonialism by going back in time to explore the deep roots of trauma and bearing witness to the open wounds that are not confined to the past but remain active in the present, she aestheticizes processes of survival and healing through emotion and through the connective motif of the dolls that belong to the three girls. Both companions and confidants, the dolls function as facilitators of resilience and care, participating in the girls' efforts to endure dislocation, loss, and violence. These attachments are not merely psychological or symbolic: they articulate an Indigenous ethical and ontological understanding of relationality that extends to the full community. Rather than simply reflecting the girls' inner lives, the dolls actively participate in a relational world characterized by the interdependence of people, nature, spirits, and both animate and inanimate beings. These other-than-human beings remind us that, as offered by Janet Dean, "[i]n Indigenous animistic traditions, nonhuman entities may have sentience, volition, mobility, and the capacity to metamorphose, and with these qualities they coexist with humans in a complex web of social relations" (213). Similarly to what happens in Louise Erdrich's *The Painted Drum* as analyzed by Dean, the radical vision of relationality in *A Council of Dolls* simulates "a breakdown of the subject-object dichotomy and bring[s] humans closer to an understanding of their place in the networks of the universe" (Dean 225). Thus, the girls' attachments to their dolls mirror Indigenous frameworks where identity is formed through relationship, the world is characterized by reciprocity and cooperation, and disease or dysfunctionality are derived from rupture and imbalance.
- 26 More than an element of magic or fantasy, the agency assigned to the three dolls is an act of cultural affirmation. As Vanessa Watts (Mohawk and Anishinaabe) explains, one consequence of the imposition of the epistemological-ontological Euro-Western thought is that "agency has erroneously become exclusive to humans, thereby removing non-human agency from what constitutes a society" (20). Yet, "Indigenous perceptions of who and what constitutes a societal structure are quite different from traditional Euro-Western thought" (21), for it is based on the conception of Place-Thought: "Place-Thought is the non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated because they never could or can be separated. Place-Thought is based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts" (21).
- 27 In the novel, the interaction of Sissy, Lillian, and Cora with Ethel, Mae, and Winona points to the interdependent nature of existence, made manifest in the integrated vision of humans and other-than-humans as well as of the past and the present. Such a reaffirmation of the "sacred connection between place, non-human and human" (Watts 20) can be read as aligning with contemporary Indigenous efforts to sustain and rearticulate relational epistemologies within colonial and decolonial contexts.

- 28 Indigenous relationality is an important value vindicated in this novel, and it is essential to the process of healing. After all, in Waziyatawin's words, "language and worldview, oral tradition, ceremonial life, values, and relationship with the land and other beings are all important in shaping Indigenous consciousnesses and ways of being" ("Reclaiming Our Humanity" 75-76). Yet, as we recognize its relevance for Indigenous studies in general, it is also essential to avoid generalizations, especially when reading from a non-Indigenous perspective. Alexander Cavanaugh specifically warns us against Indigenous holistic approaches, for, as he argues, terms like affect and relationality "tend to lose precision the more frequently they come into use" (32). In his PhD dissertation on relationality and resilience in Dakota and Ojibwe environmental justice literature, he tries to resist generalization by focusing on "the felt experiences of environmental injustice by specific communities" (31). Similarly, my analysis of relationality in *A Council of Dolls* will treat it as an Indigenous vindication as it points to specific Dakota understandings of the concept.
- 29 For Cavanaugh, precisely, relationality is not an abstract Indigenous principle but a felt, embodied, and collective experience as a means through which relationships among humans, land, other-than-human beings, and ancestors are known and sustained. His focus on *thióspaye*, a Dakota system of kinship, social organization, and governance, grounds relationality in a specific ethical framework structured by collective responsibility and reciprocal obligation. In his words,
- The *thióspaye* shapes Dakota worldviews as a sense of responsibility to the people, a logic that would later inform Dakota constructions of nationhood. *Thióspaye* ethics recognize the agency of more-than-human or other-than-human beings such as animals, plants, the land, and spirits, requiring the people to uphold reciprocal responsibilities to those beings. (53-54)
- 30 In turn, Christopher Pexa (Spirit Lake Dakota) further theorizes *thióspaye*—which means literally "camp circle" and also suggests the Dakota extended family or band (3)—not only as a system of kinship but as the cosmological and political ground of Dakota peoplehood, "a shared existential and political condition for various classes of beings, including humans, animals, and other-than-human persons such as spirits, rocks, and lightning" (xii). Against settler-colonial conceptions of land as property or abstract space, Pexa reads land as a sociopolitical location animated by dialogue among these multiple actors and held in common through ethical practice. Both Cavanaugh and Pexa draw on Yankton Dakota ethnographer and intellectual Ella Deloria's formulation of Dakota civilization as adherence to kinship rules and her call to be "a good relative" (qtd. in Pexa 37), which means acting with responsibility, respect and generosity toward all those one encounters. Without adherence to these kinship rules, a people "would no longer be Dakotas" and they would "no longer even be human" (Deloria qtd. in Pexa 38). Relationality is, in this sense, both the means through which Dakota identity is defined and sustained, and a mode of resistance to colonial regimes that seek to sever language, kinship, and land-based relations.
- 31 Developing a closely related Dakota framework, Kim TallBear (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate) foregrounds what she calls an "everyday Dakota understanding of existence" focused on "being in good relation" ("Caretaking Relations" 25). Like Cavanaugh and Pexa, TallBear insists that relationality is not an abstract value or cultural belief but a way of living that organizes ethical action amid the material conditions of settler colonialism. In this sense, relationality names a practice of caretaking relations—what she calls a "relational web" of humans and other-than-humans (25-26)—that requires

attention to responsibility, obligation, and accountability in the present. TallBear emphasizes that this framework is Dakota-oriented, even as it may be partially translatable across Indigenous traditions, and she cautions against readings that detach relationality from the specific histories and hierarchies produced by colonial violence. Moreover, TallBear ties the violence of settler colonialism to what she identifies as "animacy hierarchy" (25), which ranks beings according to degrees of life, sentience, and agency, therefore sustaining the human/nature divide and justifying violence against both Indigenous people and other-than-human beings. Refusing such graded distinctions between forms of life, TallBear turns to an ethics grounded in relation, one in which humans and other-than-human beings emerge through their ongoing connections to one another rather than as separate or hierarchically ordered domains. In her account, settler relations appear as property relations that dispossess Indigenous peoples not only of land but of relations themselves, rendering settlers "very bad kin" according to Indigenous logics of responsibility and care. In response to this condition, TallBear proposes "making kin" (37) as an ethical alternative to liberal multicultural inclusion—an approach grounded in Dakota histories that seeks to repair relations gone bad rather than merely negotiate coexistence between abstract political entities.

- 32 Taken together, these Dakota-centered frameworks establish relationality as a lived ethical practice grounded in kinship, responsibility, and place. This is the epistemological, ontological, ethical, and political context we need to consider to approach Power's *A Council of Dolls*. In the novel, the *thióšpaye* is mentioned in reference to Cora, who was singled out as a future leader by elders in her childhood, and who later proved to her people "that she was still one of them" (80) even after years at Carlisle, "that she knew how to behave and understood what we owe one another in our *thióšpaye*, and beyond that, in our *oyáte*" (80), meaning the tribal group and the nation as a whole. It is precisely her capacity to move between worlds—to speak, listen, and perceive the relationships among different languages and peoples without relinquishing her Dakota obligations—that situates her within a long line of familial and communal leadership.
- 33 The relational understanding of leadership also clarifies the novel's distinctive treatment of material objects. The representation of dolls as relational actors in the novel builds on a longer trajectory in this author's fiction to make material objects participate actively in the restoration of kinship under conditions of colonial rupture. In *The Grass Dancer*, as studied by Samantha Majhor (Dakota and Assiniboine)—who acutely argues that restoring kinship ties that have been broken is "a central concern in Native American literature" (64)—nonhuman objects like the blue beaded dress function as agents of relational continuity and political agency, moving across time and space to sustain kinship ties disrupted by war, removal, boarding schools, and forced assimilation. Within this Dakota framework, objects are not inert symbols but participants in "a human and nonhuman relational network that is informed by an *Očhéthi Šakówiŋ* worldview (Majhor 65). Power also explores relational agency of material objects in intertribal and cross-cultural contexts: in *Sacred Wilderness*, nonhuman objects such as a Mohawk mask and a wampum belt function as participants in Indigenous relational networks that move across nations, temporalities, and epistemologies (Martínez-Falquina).
- 34 Within this relational framework, in *A Council of Dolls* the context is explicitly Dakota, as the characters are dislocated and reconnected to place along the same trajectories that

historically moved the Dakota people themselves. The earliest events recounted in the novel occur after the Yankton Dakota had already been displaced from their original homelands east of the Missouri River, although that place remains alive in memory. The protagonist family lives on the Northern Plains, including the Standing Rock Reservation, before being pulled eastward to boarding schools as far as Pennsylvania, and are later relocated to urban Chicago. These movements are not isolated episodes but part of a longer history of enforced mobility, one that repeatedly disrupts relations to land.

- 35 The dolls that accompany the three girls become relational witnesses and record-keepers, holding and carrying the unacknowledged grief that Sissy, Lillian, and Cora cannot always speak themselves. Ethel is the black doll that Sissy begs her father to get her for Christmas, "since she looks more like us—closer to Indian than white dolls" (Power, *Council* 4). Sissy expresses deep trust in Ethel, who calms her with a wisdom and kindness that Sissy does not always receive from her mother. The doll gives Sissy her opinion on people they meet, interprets the world of adults for her, and protects her when her mother is having one of her fits of anger. As Jesse expresses from her adult standpoint, "Ethel told me about my mother's death, how I had nothing to do with it I've spent a lifetime wondering what caused Mama's fall. Did I push her? Or the madly absurd alternative that it might've been my baby doll" (256).
- 36 In the previous generation, Lillian's doll Mae—a Shirley Temple doll—becomes more than a toy—she is treated like a relative with rights and preferences. When Lillian receives the gift of the doll, she knows it is second-hand, which the girl takes as a sign "that the doll has love in the bank and a heart big with practice" (Power, *Council* 112). The first thing she does is something she wishes adults did with children: "I ask the doll what no one ever asks kids: 'What do you want your name to be?' The doll doesn't even have to think about it. She says, 'Mae,' in a voice that is solid and warm, not the squeak of a peppy little girl" (112). Lillian can only keep her precious doll Mae for a while before she has to give her up to a dying girl with whom it is buried. But Mae, who is more than a mere object, comes back spiritually to accompany Lillian at school, giving her strength to survive through years of violence and abuse.
- 37 The earliest doll is Cora's Winona, a mid-1800s Dakota-style doll and the most familiar with trauma of the three, mirroring the period in which her owner has to live. According to the memories she whispers in Cora's ear, Winona witnesses the massacre of Whitestone Hill, when she is saved by a dog and later repaired. She is then burned as soon as the children reach Carlisle and their picture is taken, thus becoming testament to the old, "savage" selves that they are supposed to leave behind. The doll's heart, a small black stone, survives the fire and a new version of it will be made again. Cora's relationship with Winona is rooted in shared experience, mirroring trauma and survival. As Cora says, "My earliest memory is of the doll, Winona, bound up with me in the cradleboard as if Ina had given birth to a second daughter and wanted us to look after each other She was so pretty and elegant, certainly the boss of me and not the other way around" (Power, *Council* 134). Winona acts as a spiritual ally and an interpreter of the difficult, changing times she has to live in, and she is particularly protective of Cora when she feels drawn to Jack, for Winona sees danger in this broken boy already.
- 38 The three dolls, who are treated as kin rather than owned, do not simply reflect the girls' inner lives, for they speak, move, and act with intention. They have autonomy in

choice and act as protectors. In other words, they have agency, or what Power calls "spirit." As the author puts it,

I wrote the book in such a way that you can wholly believe the dolls have spirits—as the girls feel they do—or that they are manifested by the deep yearning of girls who don't know how to manage the trauma of their times without backup. If you want to know what I believe, my mother taught me that everything has spirit, everything is potentially alive. Our cars had names and histories we invented and it was always heartbreaking when we had to trade them in. Mom and I would weep over the hood offering our apologies I believe wholeheartedly in the spirits of Ethel, Mae and Winona. ("Mona Susan Power")

- 39 Hence, more than an element of magic or fantasy, the agency assigned to the three dolls is an act of cultural affirmation. In the novel, the interaction of Sissy, Lillian, and Cora with Ethel, Mae, and Winona points to the interdependent nature of existence, made manifest in the integrated vision of humans and other-than-humans, as well as of the past and the present.
- 40 Traditional relationality is taken for granted in the novel, but the colonizer's treatment of children at boarding school deliberately threatens this important Indigenous value. Apart from their intimate and interdependent relation to their dolls, the girls define themselves through this ethical tenet which Power is set to recover. Lillian, for example, accounts for herself in connection to place by grounding her endurance in the presence of the Missouri river, whose "steady voice" flows beneath the school grounds and whose continuity precedes the boarding school, the teachers, and even "English words." As she affirms, the river is her "relative," and its strength exceeds that of anyone inside the institution (Power, *Council* 92-93). In grounding her sense of self in the river's continuity, Lillian affirms a relational ontology that exceeds the spatial and temporal confines of the Carlisle campus and its military rules and routines.
- 41 Lillian's sister, Blanche, more rebellious at boarding school, experiences a similar relational connection shortly before her tragic death, describing how she breathes "with Lalá, with everything," a spiritual connection that makes her become part of a whole world in which "[w]e all breathed the same" (Power, *Council* 126). This expression of cosmic connection does not save her from dying at the hands of the nuns, but it does give her the courage to refuse to be defeated spiritually by them.
- 42 Another explicit view of relationality is found in the puzzle which Cora's father carves in wood for her, which is made of circles within circles, each representing an expanding set of relations—from the self, to family, to "the thióšpaye, our close relations," then their "Iháŋkt̥hujwayna Dakhóta and Húnkpaŋha Lak'hóta heritage—two bands of the Očhéthi Šakówiŋ," followed by "the oyáte, our nation complete" and finally "the world and all of its beings, who lived with us in accordance with agreements made before we were born" (Power, *Council* 148). As Cora explains, her father began with the outer world and gradually filled it inward, and when it was completed "the click of wholeness" would give her a satisfaction that would last for hours (148). The girl, by contrast, usually started with her "small, lonesome self" and then built the puzzle outward, "one encompassing circle at a time," a practice that emphasizes humility and protection rather than individual primacy (148-49). Cora internalizes this reciprocal worldview and as a young girl, she communicates with natural world accordingly, as when she sits against a dogwood tree she calls "a gracious lady," asking it to give her strength and maturity, and to help her friend Jack (170).

43 These—and many more direct references to relationality scattered throughout *A Council of Dolls*—are very clear definitions of this key Indigenous value from a Dakota perspective, and they position the novel itself as an act of re-storying and relational restoration. As Michelle Johnson-Jennings and Karina Walters argue in their Choctaw-centered study of land-based healing, “Indigenous re-storying can shift historical trauma narratives toward ancestral love, resilience, and sacrifices to improve individual health” (245). Much like the healing walk of the Trail of Tears that they organized—where participants transformed trauma narratives into shared stories of endurance and care—the literary articulation of relational restoration in Power’s novel through material relations, most evidently through the dolls, becomes an act of self-healing for the characters. Such re-storying is, as in the case of the Trail of Tears revisiting, “an active choice” (Johnson-Jennings and Walters), and the dolls—like the land—“can serve as a catalyst to re-story or transform narratives of trauma into hope and resilience and support relational restoration to kin” (253). The dolls, which carry history, grief, and care across generations, function as vessels of ancestral memory and relational obligation, allowing characters to revisit trauma without being undone by it, and to situate suffering within a broader narrative of survival and love.

4. Conclusion: The Council of Dolls and the Work of Narrative Repair

44 After the three sections devoted to Sissy, Lillian and Cora, part four of the novel—titled “A Council of Dolls,” and set in the 2010s—works as a conclusion to both the novel and this article. The chapter is written in the first person through the consciousness of fifty-year-old Jesse, who as a young woman changed her name from Sissy. Either directly or in conversation with her good friend Izzy, Jesse shares details about her trauma, which she names and defines expertly. She recognizes that her mother Lillian was traumatized, and wishes she had been able to resort to a therapist, although the family could not afford one and Lillian did not trust them, thus admitting that they were not prepared to deal with Indigenous inherited trauma back then. After many years, Jesse can understand that, “[t]riggered by things that weren’t even real,” Lillian was “acting out her pain and disappointments” on her husband and daughter (Power, *Council* 268), “dumping a lot of her anger on [Sissy/Jesse], from earliest babyhood” (268). Jesse is now aware of the consequences this had for her, for she has learned that “[t]rauma can also damage a child’s brain development, causing the kinds of memory lapses I’ve experienced” (270-71). As a kid, she carried the burden of the responsibility of trying to keep her parents safe—coming up with various tactics to break the tension, or hiding dangerous kitchenware when things got rough—and she always felt that her mother’s abuse was a result of her own clumsiness and inadequacy. After Lillian’s death, and having blocked the specifics of her fall down the stairs, Jesse blames herself for decades. She could never talk to her father about it; and although she went to college and enjoyed a relatively successful career as a fiction writer, she could not put the story together or understand her own place in it. In her words, “I’ve often wondered where I fit in our family lineage of leaders and activists. Me, the introvert hermit who lives in her imagination” (281). Key to her healing process is the awareness of trauma as historical and collective, as opposed to specific and individual. As Jesse says, “I’ve spent decades attempting to heal what was broken in my life the day my

mother died, which I used to think stood alone as an awful event beyond my comprehension, but now understand connects to a chain of misery and betrayal that came before" (282). It is not until she puts all the stories together, situating her grief as part of a much larger story, that she can make sense of it all and start to heal. She recognizes this as an opportunity: "I wanted that chance to break the chain of passing on harmful inner scripts, the self-loathing that comes from brutally effective colonization" (265).

- 45 Jesse finds the dolls, she overcomes the initial shock of the flood of memories that come to her at seeing them, and eventually she is ready to listen to and write down the stories they have to tell. With the collaboration of Prince, a funky cockatoo that lives with Jesse, the dolls come together "to address old problems that still strike them as urgent" (Power, *Council* 249). Jesse recognizes that "all beings are capable of providing love medicine" (254), thus confirming the agency of animals and things in the Indigenous worldview. The dolls are now speaking in chronological order—Winona, Mae, Ethel—turning time back again. However, this should not be taken to imply that the novel posits a restoration of the Western linear understanding of time. In fact, one of the lessons we learn from the novel is that the past is emphatically not past, but present, and that what happens today—what Jesse can do to understand and start to heal—will have a direct impact not only on the future but also on her own ancestors. As one of the dolls tells Jesse, "we can't heal the story by changing the plot, pretending the awful stuff didn't happen. Tragedy just breaks out somewhere else along the line. The story won't heal until the players do" (281). The dolls have been sent by Jesse's ancestors, who "set this chapter into motion" and "have a stake in everything that happens to [Jesse]" (280), but they are not just hoping to heal her, the dolls tell her, but "a whole chain of you, carrying awful stories that get handed down from one generation to the next; harmful stories and mean thoughts that invade your mind, wreck your health, like you're all drinking poisoned water" (280).
- 46 The council of dolls thus becomes a ceremony aimed at restoring balance through renewed relations. It is clear from reading the novel that new rituals are needed when the education of girls like Cora, Lillian and Sissy in their families and cultures has been so violently interrupted by settler colonialism. The dolls become the vessels who keep those teachings in custody, acting as the friends, mothers, aunts and grandmothers that the girls cannot have with them. They are imbued with agency and cultural significance, and thus embody, perform and preserve the Indigenous and Dakota relational worldview.
- 47 Thanks to the stories that the dolls tell her, Jesse learns that her main responsibility is to try to heal herself, to tell the stories differently, decolonizing her mind to set it free from inherited shame and prejudice: "The healing I've worked on for most of my life has, I realize now, been an extraction of the influence and judgments and values that infected generations of our children as much as smallpox and other diseases that indigenous people of this continent weren't prepared for" (Power, *Council* 281). In this process, the more she rejects "toxic messages, the more room there is for ancestors to return and connect" (281). This place of relation is what Jesse can work for, and she will do this through words, a job that connects her to the generations of storytellers she comes from: "We are the chroniclers and interpreters, the speakers and translators, the ones who respect the power of language. I belong with them. I have my own words to

craft and offer up to the present moment. Words can undo us or restore us to wholeness. I pray that mine will be medicine" (281).

48 Jesse learns not to blame herself or her mother anymore, for she now knows that Lillian's fits of anger came from her inherited trauma, which she was simply not prepared to deal with herself. But Lillian is accompanying her and looking after her, as are Cora and the injured woman too: the three spiritual beings leave Jesse's body and take shape under a full moon in a very symbolic scene of reconciliation and love. There are four of them, and Jesse is aware of the significance of that number: "I think of the power and stability of the four directions, four legs of a table, how we pin the world down from our different corners. It took all of us to make it here" (284). Her three ancestors eventually leave, but Jesse does not feel bereft, for she knows she will always carry them with her. This is a balanced combination of differentiation and relation, and it is the only way to healthy living.

49 As for the dolls, they are given the last word in the novel. Speaking like a chorus, they say, "We thought we were Things. We were always more than Things" (Power, *Council* 301). They tried their best to help, yearning for happy endings. But when they fail, their awareness of the relational nature of time makes them try again. After all, they say, "For inanimate beings stuffed with nothing but air or whatever came to hand, we know a lot about persistence and Love" (285-86):

We've learned that healing the present doesn't only clear waters flowing into the future, recovery also flows backward and alleviates the suffering of ancestors. So they can set down their tears and dark memories, their guilt and shame, their vengeance. And because Time is our relative, a flexible being that moves through every thought and memory, branching into a million rivers of possibility, healing even one of its streams will eventually heal the world. Wrecked children inherit the power of the destroyed—a formidable energy. They create the ferocious allies they need either to survive or let go and embrace destruction. Mended children carry stronger medicine. Their magic unites the flow of Time with Love, our oldest waters. And so they bring us Home. (286)

50 Familiar with personal and inherited trauma, and inspired by generations of storytellers and activists who came before her, Mona Susan Power calls us to embrace all the work there is to do, for "[i]t's up to us to transform the story we're living" (Power, *Council* 285). Wounds are still open, and healing takes generations. Yet, as *A Council of Dolls* makes it clear, we can connect to ourselves and others through art. Jesse is very aware of how "[c]reativity that comes from our most courageous, authentic heart opens us to the Flow, an unseen river of images, insights, and visions where we connect across time with all that has ever lived" (249). When combined with emotion, as it is in Power's fiction, the potential of art to connect is multiplied, and it acts as a transformative ceremony full of balancing, healing possibilities.

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NOTES

1. This seems to have been a common kind of punishment, and as Christopher Pexa recalls, "my relatives more than once ended up with a bar of lye soap in their mouths for speaking Dakhóta" (16).

ABSTRACTS

A Council of Dolls (2023), the latest novel by Mona Susan Power (Standing Rock Sioux Tribe), is an important contribution to the third wave of Indigenous writing that attests to its vitality and diversity. This article aims to refine and expand the characterization of this recent creative movement through an analysis of Power's novel from the perspective of Indigenous trauma theory and Dakota history and onto-epistemology. It examines how, through reverse chronology and layered narrative, the novel articulates the transmission of trauma across generations; it delves into relationality and more-than-human ontologies through an analysis of the dolls that accompany the protagonist girls in and beyond boarding school; and it underscores how the novel vindicates open wounds to resist the silencing effects of narrative resolution, offering ethical witnessing in place of therapeutic closure. All in all, Power's novel is a relevant decolonial intervention insofar as it offers a narrative model of healing grounded in Indigenous relational accountability and cultural continuity.

INDEX

Keywords: contemporary Native American fiction, Indigenous relationality, Indigenous trauma theory, Dakota epistemologies, more-than-human agency, narrative healing

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