Unraveling the Knot of Acculturation and Resistance in Anthony Thrasher's *Skid Row Eskimo*

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Few residential school survival narratives have found their way to publication *as literature.* Segments of hundreds of (largely anonymous) survivor accounts exist within historical studies and government publications, but these are mainly invoked as testimonial evidence and discussed in distinctly non-literary terms. (Such presentation is unsurprising, of course, given the veracity of such accounts depends on their perceived transparency, on the orator's reluctance to ornament, to mould, to play.) In a few instances, however, indigenous survivors have had occasion to record their residential school experiences within book-length memoirs which profit from the technologies of literary analysis.

Such life-writings emerge, for the most part, from an extremely small sector of the indigenous population within the geographical space of Canada. A cursory glance at the careers of authors of some of the most famous residential school survival narratives—Tomson Highway, Basil Johnston, Rita Joe[1]—reveals their distinguished status among the elite of Native letters: all have multiple publications; all are educators, lecturers, and activ-

1 Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* (1998), Basil Johnston's *Indian School Days* (1988), Rita Joe's *Song of Rita Joe* (1998).

ESC 32.4 (December 2006): 129–146

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ists as well as writers; all are considered pillars of their tribal communities and of the Native arts community in general; all have received honorary doctorates from Canadian academic institutions and two of the three are members of the Order of Canada (Johnston is a member of the Order of Ontario). Highway, Johnston, and Joe are among the extraordinary success stories to emerge from the assimilationist machinery of the residential school system. As a result, their life-writings both dramatize and serve as evidence for the capacity of the individual to overcome institutionalized trauma. They also relate how tribal languages, customs, and spirituality can participate in the healing of wounded identities which can ultimately be reasserted as viable, healthy, and ongoing through the magic of art. In short, these texts inspire hope with messages of possibility.[2]

However, these narratives remain haunted by the absence of other stories. They exist in the shadow of a far greater number of tales of perpetual disillusion, unhealed pain, and ongoing fragmentation of indigenous identity, tales that have remained either untold or hidden from the literary community within obscure sociological, political, and academic archives. As Highway, Johnston, and Joe are only too aware, their survival narratives carry with them, as obligatory subtext, the understanding that others have not similarly survived, that the overwhelming majority of former residential school students have never been able to achieve stable indigenous identities much less write about them.[3] As Cree writer and editor Greg Young-Ing has noted:

> [The residential school system] was hardly a training ground or a vehicle for promoting Aboriginal literature. One impact of the residential school system was to effectively stifle the Aboriginal Voice by denying generations of children access to their cultural knowledge while instilling in them negative perceptions of their cultural identities. Even if exceptional children

2 Highway has spoken about *Kiss of the Fur Queen* in these terms, suggesting it reveals that "if you dream hard enough you can do anything" (Yanofsky J1). Similarly, A. Lavonne Brown Ruoff describes Rita Joe's autobiography as "an inspiring story of survival, endurance, love, and achievement" (quoted on *Song of Rita Joe*'s back cover).

3 This is the reason, I would argue, Johnston takes such care in *Indian School Days* to identify the whole community of students at Garnier Residential School at the time of his tenure—even cataloguing names, nicknames, and current whereabouts (where possible)—and Highway makes the death of the younger sibling from an AIDS-related illness such a crucial aspect of *Kiss of the Fur Queen.* Each author desires to write those silenced by their residential school experiences back into the literary and historical discussion of these institutions.

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> were able to miraculously overcome these impositions, as well as the other racial, social and economic barriers, they were not given adequate skills enabling them to write. (180)

Young-Ing continues by quoting Stoh:lo writer Lee Maracle's assertion that residential schools produced "languageless generations [by forbidding] them to speak their own language and imped[ing] their mastery of English, creating an entire population, with few exceptions, who were unfamiliar with language in general" (180). Furthermore, residential school denied its students access to those resources that might otherwise have assisted their struggle to overcome trauma incurred within the residential school setting (including, of course, appallingly common sexual and physical abuse, but also the trauma of familial separation and denial of nurturing and affection). Residential school policy endeavoured to drive a wedge between youth and elders, children and parents, students and their cultural heritage, creating a situation in which communal and cultural networks for healing were seldom accessible to students after their release from institutionalization. Within this context it is entirely unsurprising that Highway, Johnston, and Joe are the exception rather than the rule for post-residential school literary accomplishment.

This paper deals with one of the few extant "other stories": Inuit writer Anthony Apakark Thrasher's 1976 autobiography *Thrasher... Skid Row Eskimo.* Written predominantly in a Calgary prison while its author awaited trial for the killing of an elderly man—he was eventually convicted of manslaughter—*Skid Row Eskimo* chronicles Thrasher's descent into alcoholism, poverty, violence, and despair on the streets of southern Alberta cities. It publicly airs the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of a man who was able successfully to navigate his post-residential school existence in neither the economically devastated North nor the alien and unforgiving South. As a result, rather than mapping a path from institutionalized oppression to intellectual and spiritual emancipation, Thrasher's writing remains mired in unfreedom, powerfully symbolized by the cage from which he writes.

The trajectory of Thrasher's autobiography is, therefore, in many ways antithetical to the *Bildungsroman* structures of other residential school survival narratives. As Thrasher's editors note in their "Foreword," "This book ends with the author … on his way to a hospital for the criminally insane. [And although] Thrasher has since been released from that institution[,] … he is not better and the bad things go on happening" (viii). The informed reader today also knows that Thrasher's alcoholism persisted after this release and that he was subsequently re-incarcerated, convicted

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of a 1979 Edmonton rape (McMahon B1). He died on the streets of that same city ten years later. Unlike other survival narratives, Thrasher's does not inspire hope with a positive message. In fact, according to Thrasher's editors, "to hold out hope is to cheat on him" (viii). *Skid Row Eskimo* serves as a double warning: first, as its author intended, it is a cautionary tale for Inuit youth who might read of Thrasher's life and "know what to watch out for, so they [won't] end up like me, in a white man's cage" (132); second, it warns the critic of post-residential school literature against generalizations regarding the political, social, and literary function of survival narratives. For example, the common assumption that trauma writing is inherently cathartic and that by writing one's experiences of oppression she or he can achieve psychological and emotional healing must be re-evaluated in light of Thrasher's pointed failure to get "better." That is not to say the writing performed no redemptive function, but rather that such effects must be understood in dialogue with the author's eventual recidivism and the perpetuation of self-destructive elements of his life. Similarly, the assumption that indigenous literary autobiography, by documenting state-sponsored oppression and even violence, inevitably implies political effects must be weighed in relation to *Skid Row Eskimo*'s poor publication record and its mediocre distribution among northern peoples.

Furthermore, *Skid Row Eskimo* illustrates that the conditions of possibility for indigenous life-writing—both of composition and reception—should never be assumed homologous or coherent. Thrasher's narrative is the product of an extremely complex network of enabling and restricting forces. Thrasher had to negotiate the demands of his lawyer who intended to use the original manuscript in the author's defence, his editors who wanted the narrative to conform to certain standards of autobiography, and an intended Inuit audience far removed from the site of composition. Multiple voices were involved in the book's creation and multiple audiences were intended for its consumption. And these pressures were further influenced by the problematics of carceral composition, a condition in which, as Dylan Rodriquez states, "the writer … is never simply *free to write*" (409).

My concern in this article is to sort out the vexing relationship among text, context, and authorial voice in *Skid Row Eskimo,* and, in doing so, to suggest a possible critical strategy for dealing productively with residential school survival narratives. At a moment in which residential school history is finally widely recognized (although perhaps not adequately understood), with many individual institutions researched, abuses reported, governmental and church apologies given, and initial steps toward recompense and

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reconciliation made,[4] I will investigate through a study of *Skid Row Eskimo* how literary narratives can influence (both Native and non-Native) readers' understandings of the meaning of the residential school legacy. I will begin by supplying some background on Thrasher's life before examining the author's peculiar techniques for critiquing colonial oppression. I will then evaluate the implications of Thrasher's artistic interventions in relation to the legacy of residential school-induced acculturation.

The Colonial Experience of Anthony Thrasher

At times Anthony Thrasher's life illustrates with alarming clarity the climate of change affecting the North during the middle years of the twentieth century. He was a residential school student, an early Christian, and he was among the first Inuit to be transported to the South by the federal government for technical training. As his editor's argue, it is easy to see how his life "paralleled the process of [northern] urbanisation" (x), and how "in the prime of his life he became a symbol of something new that was happening in the far north" (viii). However, as they conclude, "in the end none of it was that simple" (viii). Thrasher's life-narrative functions as much at odds as in concert with some paradigmatic storyline about the Inuit experience of northern development and assimilation. The complexity of his life-story cautions against universalization.

Thrasher was born in Paulatuk, Northwest Territories on July 21, 1937, among the youngest of twenty-one siblings. During his early years the family lived semi-nomadically, with Anthony's father, Billy Thrasher, hunting, fishing, and trapping for food, clothing, and trade while also working for the Roman Catholic Church, to which he was a convert. Billy Thrasher was a relentlessly religious man who demanded prayer and obedience from his children, but he was also a great storyteller of traditional Inuit tales, some

4 Numerous historical studies on residential schooling have been published in the last decade ranging from the broad and inclusive systemic overviews—John Milloy's *A National Crime* (1999), J.R. Miller's *Shingwauk's Vision* (1996), the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People's Report (1996), Judith Ennamorato's *Sing the Brave Song* (1998), the Assembly of First Nations *Breaking the Silence* (1994)—to studies of individual institutions—Secwepemc Cultural Education Society's *Behind Closed Doors* (2000), Constance Deiter's *From Our Mother's Arms* (1999), and Elizabeth Furniss' *Victims of Benevolence* (1995). Also, official apologies were made to the First Nations of Canada for residential schooling by the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (24 July 1991), the Anglican Church of Canada (6 August 1993), the Presbyterian Church (9 June 1994), the United Church of Canada (27 October 1998), the government of Canada (1999). See *Reconciliation and Healing: Alternative Restoration Strategies for Dealing with Residential School Claims* (2000).

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of which pepper his son's narrative. Thrasher's early life was thus subject to a variety of traditional and non-traditional influences, from orature to Christian dogma, from subsistence hunting to alcoholism. Thrasher's mother died of alcohol poisoning when he was still in infancy, and his father and stepmother drank heavily throughout his childhood.

At the age of six, Thrasher was sent by parental authority rather than legislative coercion (as would have been the case in the contemporary south), to the Roman Catholic residential school in Aklivik. Because residential school policy was not officially extended to the Inuit—who persisted outside the domain of Indian Affairs—until 1955, the Aklivik school presented somewhat of a northern anomaly. The handful of northern residential schools in existence prior to 1950—including the Roman Catholic and Anglican schools at Aklavik, Shingle Point School, and Fort George on the eastern coast of James Bay—were financed initially by the Department of the Interior and then, after government restructuring, by the Northern Affairs Branch of the Department of Mines and Resources (Milloy 242), neither of whom had a defined residential school policy. These schools were instituted at the behest of missionary bodies and were funded, administered, and overseen in a random fashion by governing bodies with no experience of education or Native issues. Without guidance from those departments who officially ran the schools (at least on paper), clerical staff and teachers emulated more southerly residential institutions, allowing religion to dominate pedagogy, corporal punishment to dominate discipline, and frugality to dominate the feeding and clothing of students. Unsurprisingly, historian John Milloy describes these early northern schools as "dreadful monuments[,] … cautionary tales to be read and their mistakes avoided" (247).

Thrasher's experience of residential school, like almost everything else, was mixed. He didn't excel at his studies, but he gained some recognition among both classmates and teachers for his ability to trap for extra food during outdoor activities and his exceptional physical labour. By his own admission, he "was not too bright, but … was a physical powerhouse for work" (26). He suffered from familial separation and, in particular, forced segregation from his sisters at the adjacent girl's school, with whom he could have no contact. Also, although certain nuns provided a nurturing influence, like Sister Alice Rae whom Thrasher claims to have "loved as much as [his] real mother" (13), he suffered physical and psychological abuse from some of his instructor-guardians. In one particularly troubling example, Sister Gilbert whipped Thrasher and three other boys with a "three-foot watch chain made of silver" for supposedly "sinning with some

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girls in the basement of the school" (37). The incident left a profound effect on young Thrasher, who refers to it on three different occasions in his autobiography. He says at one point: "My back was bleeding but something else burned more. Shame. It was branded in my brain. The silver chain has never left my mind. Even to this day you can see the scars on my back. When I touch my back I feel the pain in my mind" (38).

At the age of thirteen, Thrasher was discharged from Aklivik Residential School to help look after his family after his father incurred a debilitating stroke. He returned to Tuktoyaktuk and began hunting, fishing, and trapping to support his younger siblings, stepmother, and partially paralysed father. However, when Thrasher was sixteen, his parents, who had begun drinking more and more heavily after his father's stroke, drove him from home "for good" under the threat of violence. Completely alone and relatively autonomous for the first time, Thrasher worked various jobs, from reindeer herder to construction worker on the Distant Early Warning Line, before being convinced by a "government man" to fly to Edmonton and take a "six-week course in how to drive machines" (68).

Thrasher left the Arctic for the first time at the age of nineteen, one of the first to take part in a government initiative to make the Inuit more employable in the North. Without their baggage or money, he and over thirty young Inuit men were abandoned by their federal hosts in a rough section of downtown Edmonton, where they were left for the weekend to adjust to an alienating cityscape among the homeless, the addicts, and the prostitutes. Although he was no stranger to alcohol, it was here under the conditions of exile that Thrasher and his companions began to imbibe with alarming ferocity. Thrasher began "drinking *before* as well as *after* school" (78), and as for his "formal education," he claims, "I don't remember too much of it. I was too busy getting sick and drunk" (78). After six weeks of heavy drinking, health problems related to climate change, and frequent exploitation of prostitutes, Thrasher and the others were flown back to the Arctic, where they discovered they would actually be paid less for their labour than they were before taking the course.[5] Besides his newly acquired mechanical skills, Thrasher also brought to the North an insatiable dependence on alcohol that made holding employment difficult. He claims to have been imprisoned over thirty times in northern towns on

5 According to the autobiography, "Before the course, I was making as much as twelve hundred dollars a month in some jobs. Now I was only able to make two hundred dollars a month, plus room and board, working sixteen hours a day in the jobs the government found me" (80).

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drunk charges over the next few years. Unable to hold a job or a relationship, Thrasher again migrated southward to try his fortunes in urban centres.

Back on the streets of Edmonton's skid row, Thrasher's narrative takes a turn to the macabre. Detailing horrific beatings by thugs and policemen, muggings (both as victim and as perpetrator), agonizing bouts with detox, and trips to the drunk tank, Thrasher's skid row writings chronicle an ongoing enslavement to alcohol addiction augmented by street life's attendant violence. The author's downward spiral culminates—if a life affected by something as incoherent as alcoholism can be said straightforwardly to "culminate"—in the beating death of an elderly man named Charles Ratkovitch on 6 November 1969. As Dale S. Blake, the only other scholar to deal intimately with Thrasher's work, notes, "when Thrasher was arrested later that day for drinking in a public place[,] [p]olice found that he carried two wallets, one of them Ratkovitch's, and that he also had in his possession the keys to Ratkovitch's apartment" (103). Thrasher claims never to have met Ratkovitch, and only to remember having "stopped a fight. Two women and two men were beating up an old man" (110). Two days later he was charged with non-capital murder.

Remanded to Spy Hill Penitentiary, "a squat little place in a valley in the rolling hills west of Calgary" (*Thrasher* 112) where he was to spend six months before being convicted of manslaughter, Thrasher "spent most … days and nights in [his] cell, putting [his] thoughts down on paper" (132). Sober by necessity, he began to record his life story, along with some traditional tales, anecdotes about friends and relatives, and extended arguments about the state of Inuit social and political culture and ongoing imperialism in the North:

> It was something to do to pass the time, and it was also a way of educating myself. And I thought that maybe some day my writing would be read by Eskimo children and they would know what to watch out for, so they wouldn't end up like me, in a white man's cage. When I began to write, I didn't even know about putting periods after sentences and beginning new ones with capital letters. I learned all that and much more by myself in Spy Hill. (132)

In the shadow of a woefully inadequate residential school education, Thrasher ironically "learned" to be a writer in prison.

When Thrasher's court-appointed attorney, William Stilwell, "discovered that his client was taking this initiative" (Blake 104), he had the writings typed in periodic instalments. The resulting manuscript was later turned over to non-Native journalists Gerard Deagle and Alan Mettrick

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who worked with Thrasher to turn the writings into a publishable (collaborative) autobiography. Between Thrasher's sentencing in April 1970 and *Skid Row Eskimo*'s publication in 1976, Deagle and Mettrick edited the 512-page stream-of-consciousness manuscript containing vexing grammar, unpredictable capital use, erratic spelling, period-only punctuation, and no paragraph breaks into a 164-page collaborative autobiography of nineteen chapters. Given the lack of market for Inuit autobiography in the 1970s—outside a small anthropological audience far more interested in traditional nomadic northern existence than tales of residential schooling and skid row—and the fact that the book was ultimately published by Griffin House, a small Canadian press, *Skid Row Eskimo*'s concise and relentlessly autobiographical final product is understandable. However, it required the removal of a great deal of didactic material from the original manuscript, limiting Thrasher's capacity to argue overtly against Christian hegemony and the ongoing colonization of the North. Yet, despite such editorial intervention, Thrasher maintained the "power" to, in Kathleen Sands's words, "use the collaborative process to express difference [and] to use the narrative events to [his] own ends" (5). Unable to argue directly and at length, Thrasher subsumed a potent critique of colonial impositions like residential schooling within his narration of childhood and youth, mobilizing linguistic play to corrode the totalizing power of the Christian institutions under whose authority he grew.

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The Counter-Discursive Agency of Linguistic Play

Thrasher employs two main approaches to undermining the stability of church rule throughout his depictions of his residential school experiences. Like Basil Johnston's *Indian School Days* and many other survival narratives, *Skid Row Eskimo* celebrates the small acts of resistance and defiance that actualize the transgressive agency retained by the students within oppressive and authoritarian environs. More uniquely, Thrasher chips away at the foundations of church authority by de-sanctifying the sacred with humour throughout his depiction of personal residential school history. Thrasher injects a playfulness into his reminiscences that penetrates the solemnity of religious authority and, in effect, satirizes the system of assimilative control. His account of an incident in 1949 offers an example of both methods:

> On July 21st, I turned twelve years old.
>
> A few weeks later, I was back at school, being accused of sinning again with girls in the basement of the school. There were

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> two of us in the basement with four girls. All we were doing was throwing potatoes and having fun, but Sister Cote gave us hell. She lined us boys up against the wall and showed us what she thought of girls.
>
> "Winnie, Wilma, Rosie, Mary, Jean, Marjie, Lucy, Annabelle …" she shouted. "This is what I think of them …"
>
> She spat on the floor and stamped her foot on it.
>
> She didn't have to do that. I was still too young to be having any serious thoughts about girls. And anyway, I was too holy. Sometimes I'd steal into the chapel and pray like hell, all by myself. (45)

The actual behaviour leading to Thrasher's punishment was indeed in defiance of the school's code of conduct. While the boys were permitted to work alongside the girls to help maintain the school, they were not allowed to play together as such and certainly not surreptitiously to throw food stuffs beyond the surveillance of the nuns. In this respect, the youthful indiscretion Thrasher describes is a form of (innocent and harmless) resistance to authority.

However, Sister Cote misinterprets this transgression of institutional rules as a transgression of divine law, painting simple misbehaviour as "sin." To illustrate the foulness of the sexual activity of which the children are charged, Sister Cote spits on the ground—an odd and uncanny image that suggests symbolic ejaculation. Stamping her foot on the excretion, she dramatizes that profane male sexual emissions must be stifled, thwarted, and stamped out, much like the licentious young girls who supposedly solicit them. Yet all this theatricality on the instructor's part is exposed in Thrasher's telling as ludicrous, in light of the absence of any such sexual transgression and Thrasher's admission that he was "still too young to be having any serious thoughts about girls" anyway. The ridiculousness of the exchange is heightened by Thrasher's ironic declaration that "anyway, I was too holy," which harkens back to his account of receiving an award for holiness three pages earlier. Recalling the award, Thrasher explains that he had been "caught drawing a little devil-figure and had to stay after class, but I guess I made amends because I got a Sacred Heart badge for being holy" (42). Thrasher's containment of this "honour" within a sentence that details his drawing pictures of the Prince of Darkness exposes the arbitrariness of residential school implementation of reward and punishment according to a divine dichotomy of holiness vs. sin that is supposedly absolute. Furthermore, the qualification, "I guess," calls into question both the punishment extracted for the drawing and the award granted for "being holy,"

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suggesting neither is based on a keen awareness of both divine law and individual behaviour. The randomness of Sister Cote's invocation of "sin" to justify an unwarranted punishment similarly undermines the strength of her religious authority. "I was too holy" functions as verbal irony because both author and reader are aware by this point just how questionable the criteria for holiness have become. Because both Thrasher and his audience are in on the joke, rather than signaling personal evaluation according to divine hierarchies, Thrasher's use of the term "holiness" overturns those hierarchies themselves. Thrasher then punctuates the absurdity of it all with the marvelous admission: "Sometimes I'd steal into the chapel and pray *like hell,* all by myself." Continuing his ironic assault on Christian codes, Thrasher defines the extremity of his "holiness" through its approximation of "hell," thereby throwing divine signification into further disarray. Uniting the sacred and the profane, Thrasher undermines the sanctity of both prayer and chapel, violating church power through a language game. And he does it "all by [him]self," thereby removing both Thrasher the author and "Thrasher" the character from the tentacles of church authority and establishing an, albeit fleeting, spiritual autonomy.

Such overt use of verbal irony and literary satire to critique church authority and colonial imposition occurs sparingly in *Skid Row Eskimo.* Thrasher continues his countervailing assault, however, through satirical allegory. Shortly after arriving at the Aklivik school, Thrasher and his classmates go on a campout during which one of the students tells the unsanctioned Inuit "legend of … Iliapaluk, an orphan who lived with his grandmother, Ananaa, in the bush country" (16). According to the story, Iliapaluk discovers that someone has stolen the snares on which he and his grandmother depend for meat and survival. They go to the village and the old woman, who possesses "the magic power [the Inuit] call Angatkolik," warns the people "not to make fun of a poor orphan boy. She [tells] them she [will] give whoever took Iliapaluk's snares a chance to return them to him" (16). However, no one comes forward. The two go home and the grandmother takes roe from a fish the boy has hooked and covers herself "from head to toe." They then return to the village:

> When they arrived, she told the boy to call everyone out of their houses. When he had done this, the old woman began talking to them.
>
> "I will touch all of you, one by one," she said. "If you are good people, do not be afraid. Only the liar will get hurt."
>
> She touched everyone, until she got to a man who suddenly dropped dead.

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> He was the thief. He had the snares.
>
> Then the grandmother told the people, "Whatever you do, do not ever steal from an orphan who has no mother, and who fights hard to live. He only has those little strings to live on, and when you take them away, he can starve and die." (16–17)

The recitation of this tale again illustrates the exercise of cultural resistance, this time by revisiting traditional Inuit orature while on brief respite from the carceral space of Aklivik Residential School. The telling of this tale, complete with magical powers and sorcerous vengeance, is itself an act of defiance, animating a tradition the Aklivik school is attempting to suffocate. Yet, upon closer examination, there is more to it. The choice of tale is itself significant, something that Thrasher plays up in his retelling. Having lost his own mother at the age of two, Thrasher is himself "an orphan who has no mother" and has fought "hard to live." Also, he relates having set a snare and "caught a whisky-jack" on the very excursion during which the tale is told, suggesting a personal identification with the young trapper Iliapaluk. And the tale's implications can resonate even more broadly. Given the context in which the tale is told—an outing at a Roman Catholic residential school for Eskimos—the role of the victimized orphan could easily apply to the entire student body. For what is residential school other than an institutional violation of the parent/child relationship that creates orphaned children and, by official governmental decree, recasts them as wards of the state?

For an allegorical connection between the Aklivik students and the orphan Iliapaluk to make sense within Thrasher's narrative, however, one must account for what is stolen from the children and how it is reclaimed. By immediately adding the assertion, "Story telling was a part of life in the North" (17), Thrasher helps clarify the tale's allegorical function. While Iliapaluk's loss of the snares represents a threat to his *physical* survival, it is the potential loss of the students' connection to Inuit heritage as embodied by oral storytelling that threatens their *cultural* survival. In order to stave off residential school-induced acculturation, the students need to re-engage with traditional Inuit culture. For just as the grandmother's magic power allows Iliapaluk to have his snares restored, it is the unnamed student's clandestine telling of the legend of Iliapaluk that helps remind Thrasher of his culture's narrative tradition, symbolically restoring to both his life and the narrative valuable cultural material. Thrasher suggests this progression by moving on in the following paragraph to a discussion of his grandfather, Old Apakark, "the greatest [storyteller] of them all" (17).

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The Iliapaluk tale is thus instructive in two ways: first it argues for the importance of sustaining Inuit culture—here the oral tradition—in the face of Christian hegemony, and second it illustrates how that oral tradition can be used to analyze the very hegemonic systems it faces. In this way, Thrasher predicts Creek scholar Craig S. Womack's incitement for indigenous critics to actualize the "level of political critique" the "oral tradition has always contained within it" (57) in dealing with contemporary political issues and colonial legacies. Through the Iliapaluk tale, Thrasher allegorically proclaims both that northern residential schooling has created a generation of Inuit orphans and that its assimilative project of denying those orphans Inuit heritage materials constitutes a crime (at least symbolically) punishable by death. Each of these is implicated in Thrasher's recognition elsewhere that the greatest crime in traditional Inuit culture is to mistreat an orphan.[6] Thrasher's playful narrative techniques create—to borrow the title from Eden Robinson's fabulous collection of short stories—"traplines" which capture back for his Inuit audience some of the agency the churches and the government sought to divest them of. He, in effect, "snares" the reader into recognizing the appalling transgressions of the church and government without ever having to detail them in a didactic digression. Not straightforwardly through argumentation but more subtly through the playful telling of his life-story and the creative re-envisioning of his residential school experiences, Thrasher moves toward reclaiming an adaptable Inuit cultural heritage while simultaneously suggesting the inadequacy of hierarchical and dominating Christianity.

Complications to Thrasher's Critique of Residential School

In the later sections of *Skid Row Eskimo,* Thrasher occasionally fashions narrative escapes for his incarcerated self through imaginings of a traditional Inuit family life on the Arctic tundra. His initial recourse to this idyllic imaginative space occurs the evening he is charged with murder: "That night, I dreamed of a future that would never come" (111). Italicized to accentuate its dream-like quality, the passage emphasizes the warmth, security, and joy of traditional Inuit family life through its contextual juxtaposition with the author's imprisonment and its narrative juxtaposition with the harsh northern weather outside the imagined Thrasher family's

6 The cultural reverence given orphans among the Inuit is addressed in Dale S. Blake's doctoral thesis, "Inuit Autobiography: Challenging the Stereotypes" (2000), which identifies as one of the two most culturally influential Inuit oral tales "the legend of Kaujjarjuk," an orphan who overcomes abuse to become a leader of his people.

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igloo: "*The North Wind blows outside. A blizzard*"(112). Against this climatic extremity, Thrasher and his dream-wife "*warm each other with our love until our heart beats are out of control. Sweet, sweet love.... Life is beautiful. All is love and happiness*" (112). Later, Thrasher continues:

> *I tell my family a story of my Atatak, my grandfather.... They curl up in one bed against the cold, naked. Their bodies and the fur hides keep them warm....*
>
> *Here in the igloo, my children want to hear Unipkarq, a story. I pick up my Krilaun, Eskimo drum. I sing of how I make my kayak, my canoe. I sing of how I make my Angooni, my paddle. I sing of how I will paddle my kayak....*
>
> *My woman tells me it is time to sleep. The children are asleep already, and they dream of my songs and my stories.* (159)

The irony is that while Thrasher narratively upholds the traditional Inuit family unit as an ideal, he avoided every chance to approximate that ideal.

Strategically placed near the narrative's conclusion and after the reader has fully digested the events and circumstances of Thrasher's life, the dream-narrative achieves poignancy by virtue of its impossibility (given the author's exile in the South and, more crucially, his imprisonment). Thrasher's imagined potential "future" is unattainable, one assumes, because of colonial impositions like residential schooling. Thrasher gestures toward such a conclusion in the sentence with which he follows the dream-narrative: "Now our young people are put in schools to learn the white man's language and customs while our culture dies" (159). Effectively orphaned—and thereby denied first-hand experience of natural parenting patterns—and at least quasi-assimilated through residential school policy, Thrasher could not expect, it seems, to achieve such a nourishing and culturally endorsable family life as that presented in the dream-narrative other than within the sanctity of his imagination.

Thrasher's anger and sadness is, however, complicated by a factor that goes unacknowledged in *Skid Row Eskimo*'s final pages: Thrasher's apparent unwillingness to be a husband or a father. Although the dream-narrative is presented as a tragically unattainable ideal, Thrasher encountered opportunities during his life to at least attempt to create a functional family unit, all of which, it seems, he rejected. Shortly after returning from his training in the South, Thrasher received "news" in Inuvik that he "was the father of a boy," whom his "uncle and auntie from a reindeer station adopted" (81). Thrasher recalls, "I used to go and visit him when he was little. The last time I saw him, he was five" (81). Similarly, Thrasher recalls being told in the mid-1960s that he "had two children at Foxe Basin, another two at Tuk, and one at Reindeer Depot. Two more girls had me marked, too, so in May 1967, when I got my chance, I moved South again" (90). The irony

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is that while Thrasher upholds the traditional Inuit family unit as an ideal in narrative, he avoided every chance to approximate that ideal by parenting his own children. In fact, he fled the North—where a traditional Inuit family lifestyle would seem most plausible—to escape the constraints of familial responsibility.

Within the specific context of the residential school survival narrative, Thrasher's failure to live up to traditional Inuit parental obligations might actually support, rather than undermine, his claims about the destructiveness of residential school familial intervention. As is widely recognized, the seeds of neglect, abuse, and other forms of intimate violence within many Native families and communities are to be found in earlier residential school experiences. Okanagan author Jeannette Armstrong calls residential schooling "the single most devastating factor in the breakdown of our society. It is at the core of the damage, beyond all the other mechanisms cleverly fashioned to subjugate, assimilate, and annihilate" (x). Similarly, in her study of the intergenerational impact of the residential school system, Constance Deiter argues that the "loss of being parented in a loving home leads, of course, to poor to non-existent parenting skills in the children who are now adults. If the condition is untreated, these losses are passed on to the next generation" (81). Residential school constituted a profound interruption in what might be termed the natural progression of family development, whereby the child learns familial responsibility through enduring contact with parents and elders. One of the resounding questions with which Native people have had to grapple in its wake has been: how do those who have not been parented become healthy parents?

The adverse effects caused by the institutionalized orphaning of indigenous children have been augmented by the patriarchal ideology with which residential school policy was enforced. The coercive ideological surroundings into which these children were thrust proclaimed male dominance over women, the filthiness of the corporeal form, and the inherent sinfulness of sexuality, all of which conspired to engender catastrophic crises of identity, sexuality, and social role among many students. Beyond being separated from their mothers and fathers—from whom the children might have attained a healthy understanding of maleness and femaleness—the students were forbidden to fraternize with the opposite sex, other than with the (supposedly asexual) nuns and priests. The first experience Thrasher recalls of the Aklivik school was being separated from the female students with whom he had arrived. When his younger sisters were old enough to attend school in subsequent years, Thrasher was forbidden to socialize with them, despite the fact that he often acted as their caregiver during

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summer holidays. Such perplexing contradictions were clearly difficult for the children to reconcile:

> We were told not to play with the girls, because that would … be a sin. I thought that was strange, because I had played with girls before I came to school. Now they were telling me I shouldn't touch them. I was taught not to look at girls, and not look at dogs mating. But I had seen these things long before I went to school. I had seen people in the sex act when I was as young as three years of age. I knew exactly what it was, and how to do it, by the time I was six. (14–15)

Coming from a semi-nomadic youth, during which the family often slept in a single bed and parental lovemaking was not always sheltered from the children's view, to an institutional setting in which girls were not only separated from boys but were derogated as lesser people worthy only of the nuns' disdain, it is understandable that Thrasher's views of family roles, relationships, and women would be problematic.

Thrasher's crisis of gender relations is usefully illustrated in a brief account of his inaugural exploitation of skid row prostitutes. After agreeing to a friends' suggestion, "Let's get some whores," Thrasher recalls: "We found two women. It was the first time I ever saw two women take on six guys at once, and make a lot of money for it in less than an hour. It was quite a surprise. *These nice-looking women had less morality than the most primitive people you could ever find*" (my emphasis 74–75). Entirely absent from Thrasher's recollection is any self-reflexivity about the "morality" of the men implicated in this sexual act. After all, it was they who solicited and financed the supposedly depraved encounter. Yet, harkening back to Sister Cote's graphic suggestion about the filthiness of the feminine from his residential school days—"This is what I think of [girls]" (while spitting on the floor)—Thrasher locates the lack of morality solely in the women, which brings us back to the relationship among text, context, and authorial voice in residential school survival narratives. The difficulty in analyzing discussions of colonial interventions like residential school is that not only has colonialism created social and political conditions that complicate indigenous authorship, it has also supplied the ideological framework—and indeed the language—in which such discussions predominantly take place. So whereas elsewhere Thrasher laments the colonial conditions that have rendered indigenous subsistence so difficult that many must rely on criminal activity (like prostitution) to survive, he supplies none of this context to his discussion of the two prostitutes whom he simply subjects to the vexing and highly gendered moral codes he encountered in residential school. To

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explain this experience he falls back on the conceptions of morality taught to him by the nuns and even employs a specious evaluation of the women according to notions of primitivism (which, we should remember, were wielded vociferously in residential school denigration of indigenous cultures and histories). Grasping for means of articulating his post-residential school experience, Thrasher remains mired in the sexist ideology and racist language he was beset with therein.

Conclusion

Anthony Thrasher is a writer torn by colonial history, alcoholism, and institutionalization. Unlike the choreographer in Alootook Ipellie's "Walking Both Sides of an Invisible Border," he could never "invent" the "distinctive dance steps" necessary to thrive in both Inuit and non-Native worlds. Although he argues eloquently for the resilience of Inuit culture against the hegemonic power of Christianity, Thrasher could never actualize this empowering potential and free himself from the perplexed and misogynist ideological aftermath of his residential school experiences. As a result, while recognizing the beauty of a traditional Inuit familial existence, Thrasher abandoned his own children, perpetuating the cycle of neglect initiated for him in Aklivik Residential School. However, this negates neither *Skid Row Eskimo*'s political potential nor its evocative force. Quite the contrary, I would argue that this tension renders *Skid Row Eskimo* all the more valuable a resource. Thrasher's autobiography represents not only how residential schooling is implicated in the corrosion of Inuit cultural and familial existence, but also how it has influenced the ideological and discursive fields through which Inuit survivors must express their outrage at colonial interventions. *Skid Row Eskimo* remains an enormously important (albeit sadly neglected) text because it both argues against colonial imposition and embodies the effects of such imposition within the texture of its narrative. Thus Thrasher's impassioned allegorical and ironic pleas against residential schooling's criminal violation of Inuit family and culture remain undiminished by the misery of his incapacity to parent, connect, and love—in fact, this incapacity itself constitutes the most powerful form of evidence.

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