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From "Burden" to Gift: Re-storying Disability through Indigenous Worldviews in *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* by Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson

De « fardeau » à don : réécriture narrative du handicap à travers les visions du monde autochtones dans *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* par Rudy Wiebe et Yvonne Johnson

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Abstract

Through the forced implementation of rigid colonial expectations, colonizers have generated the conditions for disability to become part of the oppressive apparatuses that operate to control Indigenous peoples. For Cree author Yvonne Johnson who was born with a cleft palate, her life writing is a journey in and out of disability. Although scholars have drawn attention to Johnson breaking her silence through her narration of her life story, their examinations have primarily addressed concerns around the "disabling" of Johnson's voice through the co-authorship of the text—specifically, the active role that white co-author Rudy Wiebe takes in the construction of her autobiography. This paper focuses on Johnson's own perception of her disability as she moves from a colonial framework of disability to a Cree worldview. I argue that Johnson's achronological rendering of her healing narrative in her co-authored autobiography with Wiebe, *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman*, transcends Western modes of time imposed upon her, disrupting mythic narratives of linear progress that have emerged through settler ideologies. While crip theorizations of temporality have emboldened Critical Disability Studies scholarship, this article mobilizes Indigenous voices to present an alternative theorization of time—spiraling time—that offers the potential to overwrite the pathological colonial narrative of disability to reorient focus toward community-based interventions.

Résumé

Par l'imposition forcée d'attentes coloniales rigides, le colonisateur a instauré les conditions propices à la transformation du handicap en outil d'oppression visant à contrôler les peuples autochtones. Le récit autobiographique de l'autrice crie Yvonne Johnson, née avec une fente palatine, constitue un voyage ponctué d'immersions et de

détachements vis-à-vis du handicap. Bien que des chercheuses et chercheurs aient souligné que Johnson rompt le silence en racontant son histoire, leurs analyses se sont principalement centrées sur les enjeux liés à la « limitation » de sa voix dans le processus de coécriture, notamment en raison du rôle actif joué par le coauteur blanc Rudy Wiebe dans la construction de son autobiographie. Cet article s'attarde sur la manière dont Johnson conçoit son propre handicap, à mesure qu'elle passe d'un cadre colonial à une vision crie du monde. Il soutient que la narration non chronologique de sa guérison dans *Stolen Life* transcende les temporalités occidentales qui lui ont été imposées, en perturbant les récits mythiques de progrès linéaire issus des idéologies coloniales. Bien que les théories crip de la temporalité aient enrichi les études critiques sur le handicap, cet article mobilise des voix autochtones pour proposer une autre conception du temps, une temporalité en spirale capable de réécrire le récit pathologique colonial du handicap et de recentrer l'attention sur des interventions communautaires.

Keywords
Indigenous disability; Temporalities; Decolonization; Indigenous knowledges

Mots-clés
Handicap autochtone, temporalités, décolonisation, savoirs autochtones

In the jacket cover synopsis of Knopf Canada's 1998 edition of Cree writer Yvonne Johnson's co-authored autobiography *Stolen Life: Journey of a Cree Woman* with Rudy Wiebe, disability is briefly mentioned as a hurdle Johnson overcomes through court-ordered surgery amid the other pressing matters in her life. Situated among comments on Johnson's early childhood memories of prolonged sexual abuse by family and community members, her later struggles with alcoholism as a coping mechanism from her trauma and poverty, and her eventual murder conviction, Johnson's disability is acknowledged once: Johnson is described as "a child with a double-cleft palate, unable to speak clearly until the kindness of one man," albeit a judge, "provided the necessary operation" (Wiebe and Johnson). However, Johnson details her life writing as a journey in and out of disability through connecting with Indigenous cultural knowledge at the Kingston Prison for Women (P4W) where she was incarcerated for 25 years without parole in 1991 for first degree murder of a man whom she believed to be a child predator. While the synopsis casts Johnson's disability as a minor aspect of Johnson's life, noteworthy only in terms of its curing, there is far more to Johnson's disability than its physical manifestation.

After addressing how the perception of her cleft palate adversely impacted her childhood experiences in the chapter "My Eyes Became my Voice," Johnson illuminates a connection between physical disability and spiritual healing. The chapter ends with her encounter with a golden eagle, which she and her siblings find "hanging, flapping on the barbed-wired fence and crying out. It was a young golden eagle learning to fly; it had broken its wing crashing into the fence" (Wiebe and Johnson 46). Held captive by a human-made barrier, the eagle and its acquired disability seemingly restricts what the eagle

symbolizes: far-sightedness and transcendence, according to Cree healer Russell Willier (Young et al. 6). While Johnson also finds herself trapped by a physical fence later in life—that of the P4W—her disability also comes to represent a barrier. Like the injury of the eagle, Johnson's disability emerges from the human-made barriers that restrict her ability to transcend the confines of settler colonial discourse. While Johnson later describes the eagle as "watching and waiting to heal" (Wiebe and Johnson 46), her healing is far from a passive period of waiting; she takes an active role in both her healing journey and her narration of it. Through complex temporal renderings, she demonstrates far-sightedness by looking to the past and future simultaneously as a means of transcending settler colonial ideologies.

My objective in this essay is to demonstrate the way in which Johnson's narration illuminates the essential role of worldview in Critical Disability Studies. Although I can speak only from my experiences as a white settler, able-bodied researcher, I have mobilized the words of Indigenous and non-Indigenous theorists to analyze Johnson's representation of disability and temporality in *Stolen Life*; I hope this analysis contributes to ongoing discussions about challenging the hegemonic views of disability through a literary lens. I argue that Johnson's limited agency is not the result of the mere existence of a physical disability; rather, it emerges from the construction of her disability within a colonial framework, which is further compounded by the pathologization of her Cree culture by settlers. Through her achronological rendering of her healing narrative—a theorization of temporality that I am calling "spiraling time"—Johnson transcends Western modes of time imposed upon her, disrupting mythic narratives of linear progress that have

emerged through settler ideologies.[1] While crip theorizations of temporality have enriched Critical Disability Studies scholarship, Indigenous temporalities have largely been overlooked in these discussions, thereby evacuating the discourse of important decolonial tools; this article intervenes by illuminating an alternative theorization of time that stems from Indigenous temporal frameworks. Spiraling time offers the potential to overwrite the pathological colonial narrative of disability that plagues Indigenous communities and to reorient focus toward community-based interventions.[2] Although Johnson's future is threatened by racist ideologies, anti-disability rhetoric, and settler-imposed expectations of linear progress, her narration illuminates the power of Indigenous worldviews in re-storying her so-called "deficits" to resist colonial framings of disability and celebrate her difference as a gift.[3]

Although scholars have drawn attention to Johnson "breaking" her silence, their examinations have primarily addressed authorial ethics. In 1992, Johnson addressed a letter to Wiebe asking for his advice on storytelling after reading *The Temptations of Big Bear*, a book authored by Wiebe about Johnson's great-great-grandfather, Cree Chief Big Bear. Through phone calls and visits together at the P4W, Wiebe and Johnson began co-developing Johnson's life story. Published in the wake of concerns about the appropriation of Indigenous voices and stories in Canada, *Stolen Life* garnered attention for the collaboration between Wiebe—a white author and the first credited author of the book—and Johnson—the central voice of the autobiography.[4] As a white man who not only edits Johnson's work but also dedicates chapters to his own interpretation of her life events, Wiebe has been criticized for appropriating a Native story. Susanna Egan argues that

Wiebe "takes over from the collaborator and becomes a ventriloquist for Yvonne" (22), ultimately suggesting that the collaborative writing process continues to be part of Johnson's "stolen life." In contrast, Michael Jacklin asserts that Egan's approach risks paralyzing Johnson's voice. Jacklin employs the term "critical injury" not to discuss disability, but rather to illuminate the harm involved in the way Indigenous collaborators are marginalized in scholarly work concerned about their engagement with non-Indigenous collaborators ("Critical Injuries" 8). In other words, by focusing solely on Wiebe's involvement in *Stolen Life*, critics risk further stifling Johnson's agency. Deena Rymhs also complicates Egan's argument by illuminating the potential of *Stolen Life* as "a mediated text, which is not to say that [the text] is unethical or politically condemnable, but that the reader needs to keep the knowledge of this sense of mediation at the front of their awareness" (93). In a discussion with Wiebe, Johnson herself draws attention to the ethical dilemma of co-authorship: "Maybe not *only* my story—but it is *mine*. Others maybe won't agree, but I want to tell my life the way I see it" (Wiebe and Johnson 24; emphasis in original). As Rymhs notes, Wiebe's primary contribution involves providing insight on Johnson's legal trials, whereas Johnson herself writes her healing story (106). While Wiebe's involvement can be viewed as "disabling," Johnson's healing story—especially in her re-valuing of her disability—remains her own.

In spite of such critical conversations, scholars have only mentioned Johnson's physical disability to contextualize her broader life story before discussing alternative topics, ultimately leaving her narration of her disability unexamined.[5] While Michael Jacklin writes about Johnson's disability in the preface of his 2007 interview with Johnson, he only

does so to identify her disability as the sole rationale for her prolonged abuse: "As Johnson had been born with a cleft palate, she was unable to communicate to others her suffering and so the abuse continued for years" ("Interview" 34). While Johnson's disability is a fundamental barrier to her ability to communicate freely in a social environment geared toward able-bodied people, Jacklin's claim abrogates the responsibility of settlers in creating the oppressive environment that operates to persistently restrict Johnson's agency.[6] Ultimately, the settler colonial state constructs and controls the perception of her disability.

Contained within Commodified Time: Creating the Disabled Body

In a system that places more value on white, able bodies, Johnson's journey toward re-casting her disability through her life writing is a challenging one. Critical disability scholar Lennard Davis argues that "[t]he binarism of disabled and abled, like so many others — straight/gay, male/female, black/white, rich/poor — is part of an ideology of containment and a politics of power and fear" (4). His use of "containment" is especially significant when applied to Johnson's life writing. Within colonial discourse, Johnson's disability is framed as a site of containment—a cage from which she must liberate herself in order to live a life of fulfillment. Johnson notes, "I have lived a captive from the day I was born" (Wiebe and Johnson 433). Cultural genocide and the forced implementation of rigid colonial expectations generate the conditions for disability to become part of the conglomerate of oppressive apparatuses that operate to contain the individual.[7] According

to Lavonna Lovern, "the primary issue of 'disability' discrimination is a product of Western cultural paradigms. In understanding that 'disability' is created and perpetuated primarily according to Western constructs, the 'issue of disability' is understood to no longer be a universal, but rather a product of Western ideology and colonization" (308).[8] Anishinaabe (Oji-Cree) scholar Nicole Ineese-Nash argues that "the label of disability is a colonial construct that conflicts with Indigenous perspectives of community membership and perpetuates assimilation practices which maintain colonial harm" (28). Within colonial ideologies, "[d]isability is always individual, a property of one body, not a feature common to all human beings" (Siebers 280). The perpetuation of this belief contrasts precolonial societies which "did not necessarily construe disability as a category of otherness" (Senier 18). Instead, as Anishinaabe Elder Arthur Solomon notes, "We had a responsibility to care for everyone in our community from the very youngest to the very oldest and all the way in between — which means that we had the best insurance policy that was ever devised" (19). However, just as colonialism has disrupted other facets of Indigenous knowledge systems, it has also disrupted understandings of bodily and mental differences and communities of care. Ultimately, the perception of disability as a "deficit" is generated through colonial ideologies that permeate Indigenous cultures to render disability a mode of alienation.

The colonial system not only creates Johnson's disability but continually reinforces it as a detriment through demands for efficiency within what Kevin Paterson calls "commodified time." Paterson argues that temporality plays a critical role in perceptions of disability; in (post)industrialized societies, time is indeed monetary: "Processes that

take a long time, procedures and actions the duration of which cannot be accurately estimated and calculated, are cast out as 'waste' and 'delay'" (168). Caught amid the rush of commodified time, Johnson is seemingly trapped in her body, which impacts her and her family by not conforming to the demanding temporal expectations of society. According to Métis scholar Kim Anderson and scholar Jessica Ball, "Of all the abuses that Indigenous people experienced, the attack on Indigenous relationships was perhaps the most devastating" (99). They turn to the late Anishinaabe Elder Peter O'Chiese's analogy of colonization as the shattering of the "complex and snugly fitting puzzle" of Indigenous cultures and communities (Anderson and Ball 99). Within this puzzle is Wahkohtowin, "a Cree word that can be defined as kinship relative, relationships, or the act of being related to each other and all things in creation" (Anderson and Ball 99). Cree Elder Peter Nakoochee acknowledges that in a traditional context, "family will look after you, so you are not destitute and not thrown away like garbage. Thus, this traditional approach towards family responsibility supported those with disabilities. People with disabilities are not seen as a burden and are not the job of the government" (36). In his case, residential schooling "created" his disability through the imposition of colonial learning standards. Nakoochee was tormented for his learning disability (presumed today to be dyslexia) which impacted his ability to learn English at the pace of his peers, and this disrupted his relationship with his family: "[M]y school experiences affected me and my family relations because [my family] abused me for my inability to learn English" (34). The requirement to write in English in order to survive in the oppressive colonial world generated a disability in Nakoochee where one did not previously exist. His inability to communicate in English limited his

family's capacity to participate in a society that values seamless productivity and efficiency, casting Nakoochee's bodily behaviour as a barrier to assimilationist policies.

Much like Nakoochee, Johnson's inability to engage in verbal communication creates tensions within her family. The disruption of Wahkohtowin impedes communal responsibility of care and leaves Johnson and her family struggling on their own, generating social conditions in which Johnson's disability becomes an issue. Far from Red Pheasant Reserve—Johnson's mother's home in Saskatchewan—Johnson's mother and father attempt to make a life for themselves and their six children—which later rises to seven—in a mining community in Butte, Montana. However, Johnson's abilities are quickly overshadowed by her specific needs, and her mother's inability to support her without community intervention casts Johnson's cleft palate as a "deficit." Johnson states, "Mom could never understand me. I would try and talk, but *she was always so busy*—so many kids—and *she never had time to figure me out*. Sometimes she'd just sit and cry, 'What do you want? I don't know what you're saying, I can't do anything'" (Wiebe and Johnson 29; emphasis added). Whereas traditionally "child-rearing was typically shared in family groups" with everyone supporting the child's growth and development (Anderson and Ball 103), the fragmentation of the kinship structure leaves Cecelia, Johnson's mother, alone to raise her children. As Johnson notes, her mother had too many responsibilities dealing with the other children to dedicate time to tending to Johnson's specific needs. Johnson, as a person "with [a] speech impairment[,] [is] marginalized because [she is] framed as a threat to the fast and 'easy' flow of communication" (Paterson 168). Scholar Colleen Calhoun points out that Cecelia resorted to giving Johnson gifts "to buy [her] off" (Wiebe and

Johnson 30) as an alternative method of caring for her (88). To care for her other children within a fragmented network of Wahkohtowin, Cecelia swaps one commodity—gifts or cash—for another—more time.

Since Cecelia "never had time" for Johnson in order to survive in a society that requires the body to adhere to a forward-facing timeline, Johnson becomes an obstacle to her family's progress. Johnson acknowledges that her mother said of her, "I was spoiled at birth, given the 'special treatment' of being fed with an eyedropper, my parents taking shifts to make sure I didn't choke in my sleep" (Wiebe and Johnson 35). This "special treatment" only involves keeping Johnson fed and alive and, notably, it is time-consuming. In this case, Johnson is not viewed with integrity, a concept which settler scholar Sam McKegney argues "is cultivated when one's full humanity is honoured and respected by those around them, enabling meaningful integration into the family, community, and nation; it is affirmed through recognition that one is indeed *integral* to those very systems of relation" (*Carrying the Burden* x). Due to lack of support and commodified time, Johnson becomes a "burden" to her family instead. According to Okanagan writer Jeannette Armstrong, "the whole process of colonization is about making things easier, quicker. … And it's not just okay to do that, but you're successful if you do that. You're great if you do that. You're put on a pedestal" (14:31–14:56). Since Johnson as a disabled person is impeding such progress, she is perceived as preventing them from joining others on such a pedestal. Under the colonial conditions in which the family unit is fragmented, Johnson's inability to verbally communicate casts her as "other," and without access to the cultural

knowledge that renders her disability as difference not "deficit," Johnson's body becomes a cage to not only herself, but also to her family.

Beyond Curative Time: The Pathologization of Indigeneity

As a site of carceral containment, Johnson's body is a space from which she seemingly needs to be freed, and the opportunity comes when her disability is scrutinized by a judge during one of her early trials in 1978. After a night of partying with an acquaintance, Frank Shurtliffe, and his friend, Douglas Barber, Johnson is charged for driving Barber's car without the owner's consent, a predicament that arises after Frank chooses to leave Douglas in a field during a cold winter night. The field is familiar: "it was here we once found an eagle hanging on the wire" (Wiebe and Johnson 129). As suggested in this paper's introduction, Johnson—still a child at just sixteen years old—mirrors the eagle caught in the fence: here, she is trapped in a situation from which she desires to free herself. Johnson begs Frank to take her to her mother who is staying at Johnson's grandmother Flora's house, but he takes her to a motel in Montana instead. She waits for Frank to fall asleep, takes the keys to the car, and drives herself away.

When Johnson cannot speak to the charges in court due to her physical disability, the presiding Judge Olsen chooses to implicate disability in Johnson's vehicular charges, implying that Johnson's disabled body is one from which she must be freed in order to become a more productive member of society. Rather than explore an alternative mode of communication to understand Johnson's decision to drive Douglas's car, Judge Olsen tells Johnson the story of a teenage boy who "was always in trouble, always showing up in his

court for sentence until finally he found out that the boy had impaired hearing. So he sentenced him to an operation, that he have his hearing repaired. It had been done, and that boy never showed up in court again" (Wiebe and Johnson 131). Despite having only correlational evidence to consider the situation, Judge Olsen applies the same mode of thinking to Johnson, sentencing her to plastic surgery to "fix" her disability. For Judge Olsen, there is a direct link between criminality and disability: Johnson's bodily "defect" relegates her to a life of criminal behaviour. He sees her disability as the root cause of her issues, not a byproduct of colonial influence. By viewing Johnson through the medical model of disability, which considers "disability as a property of the individual body that requires medical intervention" and "has a biological orientation [that focuses] almost exclusively on disability as embodiment" (Siebers 290), Judge Olsen fails to notice the systemic obstacles that operate to control Johnson. Instead, his actions stem from mythic progress narratives embedded in curative time. Critical disability Alison Kafer argues,

> In our disabled state, we are not part of the dominant narratives of progress, but once rehabilitated, normalized, and hopefully cured, we play a starring role: the sign of progress, the proof of development, the triumph over the mind or body. Within this frame of curative time, then, the only appropriate disabled mind/body is one cured or moving toward cure. (28)

Judge Olsen assumes that freeing Johnson from her disability will free her from the circumstances that have led to her presence in his courtroom. The very colonial conditions that render Johnson's disability a "deficit," though, are the same conditions that contribute to her recurring run-ins with the law. In considering Johnson's disability as the root of her

criminality, Judge Olsen underscores the limitations of medicalized solutions to the compounded marginalization that restricts Johnson's agency.

Judge Olsen's actions, though well-intentioned and transformative for Johnson on an aesthetic level, do not acknowledge the social structures that perpetuate Johnson's silence and marginalization. For healing, Solomon advocates a holistic approach: "To try to deal with the physical without recognizing the spiritual entity is not enough. It is like putting a band-aid on cancer" (45). Although Johnson responds positively to Judge Olsen's sentencing, his intervention does not significantly alter her engagement with the world around her.[9] After her procedure "cures" her of her disability, Johnson herself notes, "Just because I was capable of speaking doesn't mean I did. I had nothing to say, even if I wanted to talk" (Wiebe and Johnson 143). Johnson's ability to vocalize her thoughts does not eliminate the trauma inflicted upon her through colonial devastation, especially the racism and sexual abuse she experienced as a child. To conclude her discussion of her plastic surgery, Johnson states, "At last, I could speak" (Wiebe and Johnson 133). However, as Calhoun argues, Johnson's acquisition of speech "lacks the symbolic presence that a voice traditionally creates for the subject" (92). Even though Johnson has been "cured," the "correction" of her disability does little to put her on a path toward healing.

Within curative time, Johnson's disability becomes two-fold: her physical cleft palate *and* the colonial conditions that impact her perception of Indigeneity as another "disability" to be cured. Critical disability scholars Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell acknowledge that a common view of Indigenous peoples—along with African slaves,

Jewish gentry, and disabled people—arises from the conceptualization of "the 'deviant' body as that which automatically disqualifies individuals from [dominant] cultural participation (and biological desirability)" (112). Such attitudes are reflected in the implementation of assimilationist policies, including those enacted through the residential school system. Not only did these schools "create" disability, as was the case of Nakoochee, but they also "*pathologized* Indigeneity, which was likened to a *disease* and ostensibly *cured* by killing all traces of this identity through Eurocentric industrial education" (Churchill; Woolford & Gacek qtd. in Ineese-Nash 33; emphasis added). In likening Indigeneity to a disease and offering their Western culture as a cure, colonial agents crafted themselves as "normates," a term coined by critical disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson to denote "the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them" (8). Within the given context, to be "normal" is not just to be able-bodied, but white as well. In Nakoochee's experience, the imposition of "normalcy" corrupted his life trajectory: "I believed I was not 'normal' and I was different because of what the teachers told me, how they labelled me, and then punished me according to their views at that time, which impacted my development" (34). Within settler colonialism, the assertion of curative time demands not only the "correction" of a physical disability, but also on the assimilation of the individual into the dominant culture.

When discussing her disability, Johnson states, "Was my wordlessness then the reason I remember enduring so much hopeless misery? … It seems that way" (Wiebe and Johnson 77). Her wordlessness, though, appears to signal more than just her strictly

physical silence: "For me to acquire the words with which I could explain myself to all the powerful people around me never seemed more than a vague possibility of *endless slowness*" (Wiebe and Johnson 77–78; emphasis added). As Paterson states, "A person with speech impairment 'dys-appears' because there is 'no slack' when negotiating the choreography of everyday life. One must keep 'in time' and 'in step' with the tempo of communication because slowness is the embodiment of failure and 'deficiency'" (169). Even as Johnson acquires "the words with which [she] could explain or defend [herself]," she articulates that they are "gradually, and with great pain, carved and sewn into my face" (Wiebe and Johnson 78). The use of such graphic yet "slow" verbs illuminates her ongoing isolation from linear progressive narratives. While Johnson evokes her disability through her medically charged terminology, she also demonstrates her recognition of her marginalization beyond her disability: she is silenced through her limited access to power and must learn to access the language necessary to be heard by "the powerful people around [her]" (Wiebe and Johnson 78). She describes "living" as "a long, silent secret where the very act of breathing already made me guilty of something. I did not like to hear myself breathe; it was so loud, so noticeable" (Wiebe and Johnson 78). Her existence, the very breathing that keeps her alive, is entrenched in settler-enforced silence and shame about her identity and the sexual violence she experienced growing up. Johnson's experiences of sexual violence began at the age of two and persisted into early adulthood when she was incarcerated, distorting any sense of safety. She explains that "the low, heavy breathing of another person was a sure sign of pending pain and violence," and her learned solution to contending with the very presence of others is to

> never sit with your legs apart, never forget to wear long pants under your dress or they'll see your panties if you forget yourself and play as a child will play, never talk back, never, ever look them in the eye but listen to every sound, watch, be always alert and ready to outmanoeuvre danger before it's close enough to catch you. (78)

As a means of protecting herself, Johnson demonstrates an understanding of the colonially imposed social codes regarding gender and adherence to authority. Thus, Johnson's silence is a survival mechanism, not a matter to be cured with surgery. While Johnson's disability cannot be separated from her silence, it cannot be flagged as the sole reason for her silence either.

A Spiralic Transformation: Challenging Commodified Time and Curative Time

In spite of all the factors that contribute to Johnson viewing her disability as a "burden," she comes to re-cast her disability in favourable terms, even referring to it as a gift. Métis scholar Jo-Ann Episkenew posits that "Indigenous autobiography exposes the pathology of colonialism as it is experienced by the colonized" (73), and in crafting her story, albeit with Wiebe's assistance, Johnson comes to imply that colonialism is the illness from which she must heal. As Salish scholar Luana Ross writes, "One way in which imprisoned women can resist oppression and facilitate social change is by telling their own stories" (17). Johnson not only seeks to break her silence, but also to move beyond a solely Western viewpoint as a means of reclaiming her Indigenous identity, which in turn allows her to assert agency over her life writing to alter her disability story. Her reflective storytelling allows her to situate herself within an Indigenous worldview to generate a sense of cultural pride and

convert what was once her "basic problem" (Wiebe and Johnson 29) into one of her most critical gifts, and nonlinear time plays an essential role in this narration. While Johnson's autobiography primarily follows a chronological rendering of her life from her early childhood to her spiritual re-awakening—aside from conversations with Wiebe and anecdotes on her writing process—her healing journey disrupts this chronology.

In the prefatory note to *Stolen Life*, Wiebe writes of Johnson's narration: "[It was] sometimes confusing, even disorienting, until I recognized that her thinking was often circular, revolving around a given subject, and her writing almost oral in the sense that I had to catch the tone of her inflection to understand exactly how the incidents she was remembering connected" (xi).[10] While much of this narration style is absent from *Stolen Life*, it does appear amid Johnson's depiction of her healing journey, illuminating its essentiality in Johnson's recasting of her disability as a gift. Although Wiebe attempts "to organize" Johnson's life writing in a pattern that will be acceptable to publishers, he acknowledges that Johnson's recollections of her life "are … interwoven and intersnarled" (11). In spite of Wiebe's attempts to present the stories in a straightforward manner, Johnson's narration of her healing journey cannot exist in a chronological time frame. While Wiebe argues that Johnson's storytelling is "circular," I posit that a spiralic narrative structure more accurately captures Johnson's style. When discussing balance within Indigenous communities, Ojibway writer Carl Fernández asserts, "Our path must come to create a spiral, one that turns back to the past while at the same time progressing forward in order to survive in a different world" (254). Although Fernández is speaking specifically

about gender balance here, his ideology can be mapped onto discussions of disability. Cree author Darrel McLeod offers his understanding of his mother's stories as such:

> The timelines are never linear. Instead, they are like spirals. She starts with one element of a story, moves to another and skips to yet a different part. She revisits each theme several times over, providing a bit more information with each pass. At first I find it hard to follow, but I've learned that if I just sit back and listen without interrupting, she will cover everything and make each story complete. (4)

With this spiralic style, stasis is not an option, but neither is the linear progress narrative that plagues curative time and commodified time. For one to "just sit back and listen" resists the efficiency demanded of Western conceptions of time. The listener or reader has a responsibility: to engage with the story, regardless of duration.

Through such spiralic storytelling toward the end of her autobiography, Johnson upends chronological temporality and offers her disability narrative in an alternative timescape to cast her disability as a powerful trait. Johnson's ability to re-story her disability is directly linked to her spiritual transformation, which exists in an achronological timeframe. Mohawk healer Diane Hill asserts,

> When we were born, we knew the reason for why we came. But, for many of us, remembering is difficult because our true selves are covered over by the memories and feelings associated with the painful experiences in our lives. The spiritual task before us requires us to work our way back through all of those experiences to uncover our true selves by remembering who we are and what our gifts are. (qtd. in Anderson 178–79)

During her healing journey, Johnson is confronted with the task of working through her life story to remember her gifts. While the physical "correction" of her disability can be read as a form of rebirth, it does not offer her the holistic rebirth to break the silence imposed upon

her as it does not respond to her spiritual needs; instead, it merely maps onto a curative theorization of time. Like Hill, Johnson acknowledges that the responsibility of rebirth is her own: "How do you give birth to yourself at thirty-one?" (Wiebe and Johnson 35). By illuminating a need to return to the past, specifically one in which she is disabled, Johnson upsets linear progress narratives in order to find healing in the present. Kafer argues that "[f]uturity has often been framed in curative terms, a time frame that casts disabled people (as) out of time, or as obstacles to the arc of progress" (28). Johnson resists such framing by associating how being "cast out of time" is a source of her spiritual strength by connecting her experience to a passage from Carl Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* which reads, "From the very beginning I had a sense of destiny, as though my life was assigned to me by fate and had to be fulfilled. This gave me an inner security, and, though I could never prove it to myself, it proved itself to me. I did not have this certainty it HAD ME [Yvonne's capitals] […]. I was outside time, I belonged to the centuries" and she follows the passage with "Jung was so right" (Wiebe and Johnson 388; ellipses in original). For Johnson, to be "outside time" is not a barrier in her life; it is indeed integral *to* her life.

Ironically, it is in prison that Johnson is able to reconnect with her culture and "give birth" to herself again.[11] During her first year at the P4W between 1991 and 1992, more than a decade after her court-ordered surgery, Johnson ceremonially "uncovers" her spiritual self during a sweat ceremony: "In the sweat lodge … it was revealed to me what I have been given … I could not have remembered what I do about my life if the Creator had not come to me in the circle of the sweat lodge" (Wiebe and Johnson 330). Here, Johnson's healing exceeds the strictly physical healing that Judge Olsen viewed as her central need.

Her healing is reliant upon her power to work through her trauma to overcome her shame and silence by remembering who she truly is. "For many Indigenous prisoners," writes Rymhs, "the prison is a place of spiritual recovery. Through the mentoring offered by elders and other individuals in prison, they are re-introduced to Indigenous philosophies and traditions. Sacred circles, sweat lodges, and cultural awareness programs are some of the means by which this personal and cultural recovery takes place" ("Word Warriors" 232). In this carceral space, Johnson has access to the cultural knowledge and ceremonies necessary for her healing journey.[12] During the sweat ceremony, Johnson is offered insight into her spiritual healing, again noting that it is her responsibility to work through the process, though with support: "I was warned: you've made yourself sick, so it's up to you to heal yourself, do it, and in our circle all eyes are watching me invisible in the darkness but they watch" (Wiebe and Johnson 331). Whereas Judge Olsen wanted to see a physical transformation for Johnson as a means of "healing" her, the communal support from those at the ceremony occurs regardless of their inability to witness the transformation occurring before them. Johnson's transformation, although "invisible," is critical to her understanding of not only her disability, but who she is: "I know, and hear, the sound within my silence is a rumbling growl, it grows larger and larger until my body can't hold it, it bursts into growl, roar after roar, a huge animal towering over me, roaring out of me" (Wiebe and Johnson 331). Unlike Judge Olsen's external intervention, Johnson's power comes *from within her* and is supported by the cultural teachings *given to her*. Through her cultural revitalization, the sound of her spirituality begins to break her own silence. Although, as previously noted, Johnson's agency was robbed from her by the perpetuation

of colonial policies and their effects that have impacted her since she was first physically birthed, Johnson becomes empowered through reconnecting with her culture, which provides her with the opportunity to generate the agency necessary to work through her painful experiences and see herself and her disability in a positive light.

Importantly, Johnson's spiritual connection is embedded in her past relationship with her grandmother, the woman from whom she inherited her cleft palate and one of the few people who acknowledges and respects Johnson's integrity. During Johnson's spiritual rebirth, the voice she hears is not that of the Elder conducting the ceremony, but "the voice of [her] grandma Flora Bear who speaks [Johnson's] spirit name … *Muskeke Muskwa Iskwew*" or in English, "Medicine Bear Woman" (Wiebe and Johnson 331–32). Johnson experiences what Laguna Pueblo author Paula Gunn Allen calls "a ceremonial time sense that assumes the individual as a moving event shaped by and shaping human and nonhuman surroundings" (149). Johnson's past, present, and future as Muskeke Muskwa Iskwew—a spirit name given to her as a child—unite to form her identity. Through this alternative temporality, Johnson's spiritual healing—specifically this moment that ruptures her silence—is one that returns to Wahkohtowin. Although Johnson's grandmother "died without advising [her]" about "the special gifts [she] was initiated into as a child" (Wiebe and Johnson 428), this moment collapses linear temporality, granting Johnson access to knowledge she had been actively denied.

Following her description of the sweat ceremony, Johnson shifts back to her past by addressing her childhood experiences with her grandmother through her culturally

informed lens, articulating her story in a manner that distorts curative time.[1] In revisiting memories of her grandmother, Johnson asserts, "[S]he taught me by touch, by eye contact, by miming what I should do" (Wiebe and Johnson 428). In spite of a language barrier between Johnson and her grandmother due to Johnson not knowing Cree, Flora still engages in a respectful relationship of teaching with Johnson. According to Nakoochee, "Regardless … of what type of physical, mental, or clinical disability a person had, they were still all considered equally as functioning members of the community" (36). Instead of framing Johnson's disability as a "deficit," Flora creates a relationship with her granddaughter that permits Johnson to fully participate in both her learning environment and her culture, ultimately illuminating the potential for Johnson to be heard. In connecting with her grandmother in this moment of her spiritual rebirth through achronological temporality, Johnson acknowledges a return to cultural groundedness in which both her former disability and her Indigeneity are uplifted as sources of strength.

Equipped with the power to voice her story—and overcome the shame associated with her traumatic past—through her spiritual rebirth with the support of the ceremony and her memory with her grandmother, Johnson shifts from acknowledging her disability as a burden to seeing it as a gift. The epigraph to her chapter on re-storying her disability reads, "The old man said, to have been born imperfect was a sign of specialness […]. The old man explained carefully that in the old days, if a child came with a hare-shorn lip, it wasn't a

[1] Importantly, this particular shift to her past differs from Allen's "ceremonial time." Allen argues that flashbacks are part of "chronological, cause-and-effect ordering" that restrict "a reintegration of self within [one's] surroundings" (152).

terrible thing or a harmful thing; it meant the child's soul was still in touch with the Spirit World" (Wiebe and Johnson 423; ellipses in original). As Heather Hodgson writes in her review of *Stolen Life*, "This knowledge has become the salve [Johnson] needed to begin to heal herself" (155). Through applying this Elder's teaching to her past, Johnson overwrites her disability story as a source of empowerment, not something that renders her inferior. While recollecting watching the sunrise with her grandmother, Johnson says, "An Elder has told me that, just as the sun rises, there may be a small slit in time when you can see spirits there, though I wasn't told what kind of spirits. I can't speak about myself, then, but I know I didn't think it through. I just accepted whatever I was given as a child deep within myself: the spirits were there" (Wiebe and Johnson 428–29). In revisiting this moment, Johnson illuminates a connection between herself and the spirits that is enabled by the acquisition of cultural knowledge. Johnson asserts that she is not existing in the past here—she cannot speak on behalf of her former self, but her current self understands that her child self lacked the knowledge to fully comprehend her cleft palate as a gift. Thus, Johnson's narration is spiralic in that it is both past-oriented and forward-looking: Johnson must reflect on her past using the knowledge she acquired later in life, and in understanding her past, she can craft an identity that exceeds the hegemonic view of disability. She places her temporal stories in dialogue with one another, generating a sense of timelessness. In this sense, Johnson generates a "small slit in time" in her own story—a moment where her disability and her spirituality are symbiotic: her cleft palate connects her to the spirit world, and her spirituality informs her empowered understanding of disability.

Such temporal complexity comes to fruition in Johnson's recognition of her disability as a moment that does not restrict futurity but actually strengthens it. According to Kafer, "'illness,' 'defect,' 'deviance,' and disability are positioned as fundamentally damaging to the fabric of the community: polluting the gene pool, or weakening the nation, or destroying a family's quality of life, or draining public services (or, often, some combination of the four). To put it bluntly, disabled people were—and often are—figured as threats to futurity" (31). Within a system that has already threatened and that continues to threaten through genocidal policies and practices, disability "becomes one of many factors which depress Indigenous futurity and self-determination" through the imposition of Western ontology (Ineese-Nash 30), as seen with Cecelia's struggles to support Johnson while also looking after her other children.

Although disability is often viewed as a hindrance to futurity, Johnson's re-storying of her disability illuminates the potential for its alternative rendering through a different epistemological perspective. As she reflects on her cleft palate in a journal entry, she writes, "A bear always has a fold in her upper lip. My grandma, I, my eldest child, have the gift and the legacy of the bear so strong, we have the Bear's Lip" (Wiebe and Johnson 436). Her disability becomes part of an ancestral legacy that connects her to her family and culture—connections which colonial interventions had been designed to sever. Kafer argues that dominant discourse surrounding disability tends to erect a binary of "the 'before disability' self and the 'after disability self'" (42). She asserts, "The 'after' self longs for the time 'before,' but not the other way around; we cannot imagine someone regaining the ability to walk, for example, only to miss the sensation of pushing a wheelchair or

moving with crutches" (43). Johnson's story, though, does exactly that: her physically "cured" self reflects on her disabled self through an alternative worldview that upends colonial aspirations of a "curative future." This longing for a time before challenges notions of disability as an obstacle to overcome and rather frames it as a component of one's identity that should be respected and honoured. Through the employment of a spiralic narration style, Johnson not only breaks her silence, but rejects colonial perceptions of disability, asserting agency over her story and offering a narrative that runs counter to dominant discourse.

Conclusion

Although the world around Johnson does not change—colonial rule and the dominant hegemonic views of both disability and Indigeneity remain in place—Johnson's transformation celebrates her physical and spiritual differences by resisting colonially imposed norms both socially and temporally. In re-casting her disability through a culturally grounded reflection that enriches her integral self and repositions her disability as a powerful trait, Johnson sheds light on the potential for examining disability through Indigenous ontological paradigms. Under the colonial regime in which disability is frequently considered a bodily flaw, Johnson's difference is labeled a "disability" that marks her as "other" and further casts her into the social margins. Johnson's body becomes a cage that seemingly traps her in a space of silence. The assimilationist policies rooted in commodified time disrupt Johnson's family's view of her bodily difference, and the corruption of the family unit by colonizers further contributes to the demonization of

her cleft palate. For Johnson, her oppression and silencing become embedded in not only ableist ideologies, but racist ideologies as well. Judge Olsen's attempt to liberate Johnson from her disabled body to adhere to curative time expectations does not imbue Johnson with the agency to verbalize her thoughts. Since Indigeneity is also pathologized and rendered a "disability" within a colonial framework, the "correction" of Johnson's disability does not grant her access to agency. Johnson is raised in an environment in which she is contained in a static temporality and isolated from the cultural knowledge and support necessary to honour her physical and spiritual differences. To heal, she must confront "a pathological condition, a sickness that requires a cure"—colonialism (Episkenew 72).

Using a spiralic narrative intervention in her storytelling, Johnson illuminates that a *return* to Cree culture is critical to re-visioning her disability as a source of spiritual strength. Through her spiritual "rebirth" and cultural groundedness that she learns during her physical incarceration, she gains access to the knowledge that helps her break her silence and reconceptualize her disability. After her spiritual transformation, Johnson applies newly acquired knowledge from Elders to extrapolate new meaning from her past interactions with her grandmother. She is able to re-story her past disability—cast as a burden under colonial guile—as a gift through Cree spirituality to overcome the enforced silence imposed upon her by colonial ideologies. It is specifically through the acts of remembering and writing that Johnson is able to transcend notions of time that cast her disability as alienating. Her representation of futurity through Indigenous worldviews resists the forward-looking progress narrative of commodified and curative time as she looks to the past, present, and future simultaneously to counter the derogation of her

disability and Indigeneity. By exceeding commodified time and curative time through her spiralic narration, Johnson illuminates how, within spiraling time, her disability is not an obstacle to overcome in a progress narrative; it is a gift to be cherished across centuries and worlds.

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Notes

[1] My use of "mythic" signals that narratives of linear progress are forcibly imposed as truth in settler discourse. This supposed truth, however, differs from alternative conceptualizations of time—ones that respect individuals' life trajectories that do not fit within the confines of Western progress.

[2] Potawatomi scholar Kyle Whyte also uses the term "spiralling time." In his use, he describes that it "refers to the varied experiences of time that [Indigenous peoples] have as participants within living narratives involving [their] ancestors and descendants" (229). My use of the term, however, is intended to describe the narration style of Johnson's autobiography, whereby she moves fluidly across the past, present, and future, to re-story her disability at various points in her life.

[3] Scare quotes are used throughout this paper to signal my unconventional use of some terms. For instance, my use of "deficits" is not intended to suggest that disability is *actually* a deficit; rather, I use this term to illuminate the hegemonic view of disability within the context of Johnson's writing.

[4] Prior to the release of *Stolen Life*, Anishinaabekwe writer Lenore Keeshig-Tobias produced "Stop Stealing Native Stories," which was published in the Globe and Mail in 1990 amid "the voice appropriation debate in Canada" in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Rymhs 92). Keeshig-Tobias criticized non-Indigenous people for their use and commodification of Indigenous stories—which hold significant cultural power—for entertainment purposes (34). In an interview with Hartmut Lutz to which Deena Rymhs draws attention (92–93), Keeshig-Tobias acknowledges her appreciation for Wiebe's promotion of a Native voice, but she also argues that he is not "capable of assuming a Native voice" (80).

[5] See Calhoun (88), Egan (10, 12, 19), Jacklin ("Critical Injuries" 20; "Interview" 1; "Some Stories" 57), and Rymhs (96).

[6] In a later article, Jacklin articulates an amendment to his claim about Johnson's silence: "Johnson's inability to communicate was also related to her age and the traumatic impact of the violence inflicted upon her" ("Some Stories" 57). While Jacklin begins to acknowledge the systemic dimensions of Johnson's oppression, he does not explicitly discuss the colonial conditions that operate to restrict her communication.

[7] Johnson's disability is not the only form of containment she experiences. Cree writer Lori Sparling posits that "Aboriginal women who end up in prison grow up in prison, although the prisons in which they grow up are not the ones to which they are sentenced under law" (118). There are numerous forms of carceral containment that hold Johnson and her family—both ancestors and current members—hostage, including police brutality (Wiebe and Johnson 4), the prison system (4), colonial land claims (9), reserves, which she refers to as "prisons of grass" (11), the starvation policies imposed by government officials during the 19th century to coerce Indigenous peoples from their territories (11), and colonially generated shame that keeps many Indigenous peoples silent (13). Each of these oppressive tactics can be described as a tool in what Cree author Michelle Good calls the "colonial toolkit"—implements that "were, and are, employed to remove [Indigenous peoples] from [their] lands, disempower [them] in decisions about [their] lands and resources, dismantle [their] highly effective social institutions, and dismember [their] families and communities" (4). As a colonial construct that operates to "other" an individual based on bodily difference and reduce their value within their community and social institutions, disability joins the ranks of these other social forces.

[8] Lovern acknowledges that her approach risks a pan-Indigenous representation of ontological paradigms in Native American philosophies. She notes, "in an attempt to establish a dialogue, some generalizations will be made based on patterns and similarities" (114). Johnson herself acknowledges that her teachings are not solely Cree, but rather an amalgamation of various Indigenous cultures that

are available to her through the programming. While I include the words of Cree Elder Peter Nakoochee and centre Cree concepts, specifically Wahkohtowin, I also draw on the voices of other Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. I am not advocating a pan-Indigenous approach to disability studies. I attempt to weave together these voices to illuminate the ways I see disability functioning in *Stolen Life* and to generate a discussion of considering disability through non-Western perspectives.

[9] In expressing gratitude, Johnson even writes Judge Olsen a thank-you note in her book: "Judge Olsen, you were one of the good things that happened in my life. You changed me, though you could not change the world in which I lived, and I thank you for trying anyhow" (Wiebe and Johnson 131). My argument here is not intended to diminish Johnson's appreciation of Judge Olsen's action. His intervention grants her access to the dominant form of communication. My intention is to shed light on the solely physical approach to healing that Alison Kafer calls "a *curative imaginary*, an understanding of disability that not only *expects* and *assumes* intervention but also cannot imagine or comprehend anything other than intervention" (27).

[10] Wiebe's insistence on a linear story reflects Western publishing standards of the late 20th century. Laguna Pueblo author Paula Gunn Allen asserts her challenges with publishers for writing her novel using "Indian time" as a structure (152). She notes, "Their distress stemmed from their inability to locate the particle (protagonist) on a background grid (setting). They wanted the hero to be foregrounded and the events, understandings, and other characters to be clearly delineated backdrops" (152).

[11] Although I refer to this one moment as her re-birth, it must be acknowledged that the transformation is not instant: Johnson's rebirth offers her the knowledge *to engage* in the process of "uncovering" who she was meant to be. This moment, then, is a catalyst to propel Johnson *onto* a path of holistic healing.

[12] It is not my intention to suggest that all prisons are places of healing for Indigenous peoples; such a claim negates the colonial conditions that contribute to the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in Canada's prison system. Rather, my point is to illuminate how cultural programs within prisons can offer access to cultural resources from which imprisoned people may have been isolated. As Mohawk author Patricia Monture writes, "No amount of tinkering with prisons can heal the before prison lives of the Aboriginal women who live or have lived within their walls … However, the treatment of Aboriginal women within prisons can begin to recognize that these things are the realities of the lives that Aboriginal women prisoners have led" (27).

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