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From Hurt to Hope: Trauma and Healing in Katherina Vermette's *The Break*

In north Winnipeg a family is forced to come to terms with a vicious sexual assault that takes place in front of a young Metis woman's house. Stella, one of the narrators, discovers later in the novel that the assault she witnessed was of her niece, Emily. Several narrative perspectives are shared involving personal stories of trauma and reflection, relating the to inability to cope emotionally with the historical and new traumas of their lives. Cheryl, Stella's aunt, runs an art shop and copes with the death of her sister through alcoholism. Lou and Paul, Cheryl's daughters deal with their own traumas; Lou with the departure of her boyfriend and Paul with the assault of her daughter. Stella deals with witnessing the assault of her young niece and not going to help, as well as struggling to deal with the death of her mother, Cheryl's sister Rain. The stories of the narrators intermingle to create a web of intergenerational traumas that impact everyone involved.

Vermette presents female protagonists that occupy various positions on the scales of both assimilation and hybridity. Homi Bhabha defines hybridity as "a difference 'within', a subject that inhabits the rim of an 'in-between' reality" (19). Bhabha goes on to describe "in-between" as moving towards "an encounter with the ambivalent process of splitting and hybridity that marks the identification with culture's difference" (321). Hybridity can be explained then as a position within an individual that exists amidst two other realities, these two other realities being two separate cultural identities. This is what Bhabha eventually characterizes as the "borderline culture of hybridity" (322). Albert Memmi states that "colonization is, above all, economic and political exploitation" and that "no one expressly

desire[s] assimilation” (149). Memmi ends with arguing “assimilation is the opposite of colonization” in that it must retain a separation that colonization would have inherent as a function (149). Memmi defines assimilation as an incomplete conversion from the ways of the colonized and to the way of the colonizer. Jean-Paul Sartre, in Memmi’s introduction, also argues that “[colonialism] forbids the assimilation of the natives” (xxiv). These theorists pinpoint the problem with hybridity and assimilation within Vermette’s novel itself. By being pushed from their traditional belief systems and into new ones, the female protagonists struggle to retain their identities, hold on to their traditions and families, and are sometimes forced to harden themselves to their new surroundings for protection. The female protagonists, such as Stella, Emily, Paulina, Cheryl, Phoenix, and Elsie aim for a complete assimilation into contemporary Euro-Canadian society. By repressing or disassociating from their pasts, their traditions, their histories, the women enter unhealthy positions and fail to grow individually until confronted yet again with trauma. This confrontation leads to their resolve to re-establish connections with their Metis culture and its family values of extended kinships and closeness to the land.

Stella has achieved her life’s goals: she has pursued secondary education, has been married, has three children, owns a home with her husband, and has a comfortable life away from her childhood traumas. Yet, despite all of this, Stella is unhappy with her position in life. After witnessing the assault of an unknown woman in “the break” across the street, Stella wishes to return to her family. Though she admits she had distanced herself from them previously, in this moment of trauma Stella need her family more than ever. When Jeff and the officers fail to acknowledge the seriousness of the assault Stella witnessed, she thinks, “what [I] really want to do is call [my] Kookum” (14). Stella thinks too of her aunt Cheryl: “Aunty Cher would have listened” (15). In thinking of her Kookum, Stella enters a state of

guilt due to breaking the connection with the family. “It’s been too long” and “[t]he guilt washes over her” as Stella attempts to deal with the traumatic night (16).

Stella had witnessed a sexual assault in her past as well, the assault on her best friend Elsie Stranger. Elsie closed herself to Stella, even though they were best friends. The night of the assault, Stella is unable to help her friend. Stella “couldn’t move” as she watches “Elsie’s face, still pressed into the pillow, her mouth open, her hair damp” hoping for some sort of conscious movement to show she is okay (202, 203). Stella’s previous trauma is reflected when she views Emily’s assault. When Stella is recollecting seeing the assault, “she takes another painkiller and tries to forget” what she saw (88). Stella convinces herself that the police will be there soon and keeps herself in her home, unable to prevent another assault and unable to look away due to her repressed guilt. When Stella looks in Elsie’s eyes the night of her assault, “her eyes look dead” and she “was just limp” (203, 204). This physical evidence suggests a dissociation of Elsie from her body. Dissociation is used as a coping mechanism by Elsie. It is also triggered by her trauma and is a common result of childhood traumas, be they psychological, physical or sexual¹.

Elsie’s dissociation follows through to her adult life, as Stella remembers seeing “her eyes [] as blank as they had been that night. Still dead” (207). Through Phoenix, Elsie’s daughter born from this gang rape, we learn that Elsie relied heavily on drugs, alcohol and several abusive relationships while attempting to parent Phoenix and her younger sisters, Cedar-Sage and Sparrow. Elsie and Rain, Stella’s mother, follow similar patterns of abuse. Stella remembers the day that Rain left and never came back; Stella remembers Rain with repressed anger, frustration, and possibly guilt for not having been good enough to keep her home. In this same way, Phoenix remembers Elsie as having good and bad moments, yet

¹ For more information on psychological dissociation see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dissociation_\(psychology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dissociation_(psychology))

Phoenix retains the anger, frustration and guilt for failing her sisters by letting signs of her physical abuse show.

Phoenix attempts to blend in with the life her mother has shown her; a life of drugs, alcohol, and men. Remembering the abuses she suffered from Elsie's boyfriends, Phoenix believes she has found the perfect man in Clayton due to his kindness. Phoenix displays hope in her attempt to escape her old ways and create a new family with Clayton. Yet, Phoenix has fully assimilated into the criminal groups run by her uncle Bishop, and has attempted to fully repress memories shared with Elsie. Phoenix shares memories instead of the death of her sister Sparrow. Phoenix internalizes her guilt about Sparrow's death, telling herself "[t]hat was [my] fault too" and that "she knew there were bruises there" (234). Phoenix later recalls at the funeral and that she "didn't think [Sparrow] was going to die. . . but she did" (316). Phoenix's memories reveal the children were in foster care due to bruises on her arm she let show at school. Phoenix, in remembering, uses this to fuel her self-hate and blame. Sparrow got sick while in a foster home, something Phoenix could not protect her from. Phoenix had heard from "some worker" that "her littlest sister was sick and had to have treatments" (315). Phoenix convinces herself to deal with her memory with anger, arguing that "[t]hey just didn't want to give her a fucking visit" and then reiterating that "[she] didn't think [sparrow] was going to die" (316). By changing her emotional memories to highlight the anger rather than her raw emotions, such as sorrow for the death of her sister, Phoenix transforms herself through memory into the true warrior she aspires to become; an assimilation into the male warrior role of strength, anger and hate.

Phoenix was abused by Elsie's boyfriend, at a time that she admitted that "Elsie was real good" (234). Her memories go back to the first time she was told she had to be tough. Phoenix and her sisters were separated from each other in the foster system. She recalls crying and reflects, "[I'd] never do that now but [I] was just a little kid" (235). Phoenix also

remembers another kid telling her “[d]on’t be a fucking baby. It don’t make no difference if you cry or not. No one’s fucking coming to get you” (Ibid). Phoenix always remembers herself through a tough exterior. Phoenix thinks of the bruises from Sparrow’s dad and reflects, “[n]ot that she gave a fuck about Sparrow’s fucking dad. He could go to fucking hell” (234). Though she was young, Phoenix refuses to allow herself to feel saddened by her experiences and instead welcomes feelings of anger in their place. This refusal to allow herself to feel anything besides her anger is what holds Phoenix back from her ability to heal and pushes her into her role as an aggressive warrior.

Phoenix uses her anger to become stronger and to assimilate with her cousin’s gang life. Phoenix is constantly building a mask to hide her true emotions under anger and aggression, the way she views Bishop. In Patti LaBoucane-Benson’s graphic novel, *The Outside Circle*, she describes the ways that Indigenous men do this to be “warriors”:

Eventually we had to figure out how to protect ourselves. Instead of feeling scared and vulnerable, we learned to use anger, resentment, hate, and rage to feel powerful. In control. Rage and hate are like masks, covering the people we really are. We’ve worn them to survive. These masks have allowed us to hurt other people and feel nothing. . . This is not natural. Anger should be a tool that motivates us to make changes in our lives. Not a reason to lose control and hurt other people. (47-48).

LaBoucane-Benson aptly describes Phoenix’s chosen coping mechanisms. The monologue provides evidence that Vermette’s work mirrors regarding the internalization of hate, anger and resentment. Phoenix is a victim who copes the same way these male warriors do; she pushes aside fear and uses her anger to hurt others, such as Emily. Phoenix follows the footsteps of her cousin Bishop and the path of anger and hate rather than love and healing. Through this hardening of her external persona, Phoenix hopes to protect her baby and

younger sister. Yet her impulsive anger, caused by all the trauma in her life, causes her to attack Emily and crush her own hopes.

Emily is presented as young and innocent, a stark contrast to her assailant Phoenix. Phoenix is aware she is several months pregnant when she comes home to share this moment with her boyfriend, Clayton. Upon discovering him with someone else, Phoenix draws upon her store of anger and assaults Emily to position herself as victorious and stronger. By imitating rape scenarios possibly committed by gang affiliates similar to her cousin, Phoenix completes the assimilation into a life of crime, as her dream has been shattered. The officers, in the beginning, quickly turn aside the idea of a rape occurring in winter due to the cold weather, and even upon discovering a rape, still hope to pin it on a male gang member. Officer Tommy Scott, even when presented with evidence of Phoenix's violent nature, scoffs: "Really? I mean, we're looking for a rapist" (295). Later he even tells his mother, "how can it be a girl, Ma? That's insane. A girl couldn't have done that" (297). This male persona of crime that Phoenix adopts plays into her attempted assimilation into her cousin Bishop's gang. It also shows her strength and her inability to be hurt again as she was with the death of her sister and her disappointment in herself. Unfortunately, playing the role of the male warrior merely isolates her from the love she has hoped for with Clayton and the loving memories she has fabricated about her grandparents.

Emily is also presented as a victim, though she is disgusted with the term, "[a] victim. That's what he called her. She knew what it meant, but still, it sounded ugly" (304). Emily thinks this about herself as she is telling Officer Tommy what happened the night she was assaulted, and all she wants is "him to think she was pretty" so that she can go back to feeling the way she used to feel about life (304). Emily describes herself as being the before and "the After," she describes "the After" as just "sleeping and crying" (305). Though Emily began the same way Paul did, by expressing her emotions openly, she becomes closed off after her

assault and attempts to hide behind a wall. Her shift is different from Phoenix and Lou in that she does not seem to hide behind anger; Emily will still need help to properly heal from her assault and her dissociation. The same way that Elsie dissociated from her body after her rape, Emily attempts to repress her memories of the assault and tries to bury rather than deal with her trauma. Emily feels burdened with her memory and feels as though she cannot escape from the pressures of her own memory:

She hasn't forgotten. She knows everything. She will always know each part, every detail, even though she doesn't want to say any of them out loud. Every time she says them out loud they feel bigger, so she just keeps them here, inside of her and only says what she has to. That way it's different. That way she can keep it away from her mom and everyone. So they don't have to know, not completely. Not all the way. That's the only thing Emily can do to make any of this better. (307)

Emily cannot completely dissociate from her trauma, which is good in terms of healing, but she refuses to open and share her trauma fully with anyone. In her attempts to harden herself, Emily loses touch with her emotional connections. She then tries to convince herself that by repressing the assault and refusing to relive it through healing, she will be protecting her family from the pains she felt herself. In the end, Officer Tommy does find Phoenix and completes the arrest, which would mean the trial would go to court and that Emily's family will have access to the full truth eventually. For Emily to heal, it is important that she shares her traumas instead of repressing them in the ways that Stella, Phoenix, Elsie and Lou have done.

Emily's mother, Paul, pursues hybridity in her profession. Paul goes to school to become a nurse, "finish[ing] school top of her class" (87). By remaining where she grew up,

Paul hopes to use her power and hybrid identity to help people like Elsie Stranger, as Paul was there the night Elsie was assaulted too. Paul has a quiet nature and has shouldered much trauma and pain through her life. Paul becomes a nurse to help those around her and to give a voice to victims in the hospital. When she discovers her daughter as a victim, Paul struggles to cope and tries to separate herself from the situation, not very successfully as when the officers return to interview Emily, Paul feels “useless and exposed” (182). Throughout the novel, Paul offers a fairly stark view of the world she lives in, worrying that her son will join a gang, dealing with the trauma of her daughter’s assault. Near the end, however, Paul goes with the family to a smoke, or smudge, a traditional FNMI way of cleansing the body and the soul. On the drive home, Rita, a friend of her mother, asks “[y]ou gonna give up anything?” and Paul replies after her sister: “I’m going to give up feeling hopeless” (349).

After she hears Paul’s declaration for hope, Cheryl thinks, “hope. . . just the sort of thing they need to keep” (Ibid). This quest for hope echoes back to Maria Campbell’s memoir *Halfbreed*. In her memoir, Campbell addresses hope and the hopelessness her early memories were filled with. The first time Campbell feels hope she describes it as “an emotion that is hard to describe—almost like happiness, pride and hurt all at once” (73-74). Campbell goes on to say that hope “was a feeling [she] would get often in [her] life” (74). The pursuit of hope is a growing theme in stories of Indigenous women. Campbell nurtured her hope and grew into a strong survivor. The same can be hoped for the women at the end of Vermette’s text; hope can build these women up and help them survive past their traumas.

Paul’s sister, Lou, also occupies a trained, helping role as she is a certified social worker. In this novel, it can be considered an act of social criticism to the role that many white social services play in the abduction of Indigenous children and the way that an Indigenous woman is trying to regain that control. Lou helps her Metis community by filling a role, that of the social worker, that would usually be occupied by a white person. This

redistribution of control helps present Lou as the strong, resilient warrior. When telling stories of their childhood traumas, such as sexual assaults and abuses, Lou describes a man showing her his penis (85). In the same way that Phoenix defaults to anger and violence, Lou chooses to say, “I would’ve punched him if I could” (Ibid). Following this, Paul starts crying and Lou does Paul’s telling for her (85-86). Lou “knew Paul wouldn’t” share her traumas in the circle because “Paul always let Lou talk for her” (86). Lou is later mentioned to “never need an arm or anything” compared to Paul who was “the kind of kid you always wanted to hug” (Ibid). Lou has a toughened exterior in many aspects of her life, including her relationships. In her first introduction, Lou is mentioned as an afterthought to the leaving of her boyfriend, Gabe. Lou refuses again to let herself feel authentic, instead choosing to claim “[i]t all felt so anti-climactic” (35).. Lou feels Gabe can leave and that maybe he should because he would be “[s]ick of me and all my bullshit. Sick of my never giving him what he wants. [Lou] [doesn’t] blame him. [She’s] pretty sick of [herself] too” (36). Even as she thinks this, she cannot feel the appropriate emotions. Lou is refusing herself access to her emotions in the same way Phoenix does, Lou is “trying to feel” and can only be “a left woman” (37). In this description of herself, Lou is presenting herself as a victim. This presentation of victim distances herself from her own identity. Lou actively refuses the role of victim, yet in Gabe’s absence she defaults into that role on her own account.

Though she pledges to partner with her best friend Rita to become sober at the end of the novel, Cheryl represses her past and the death of her sister, Rain, using alcoholism. Cheryl relies on alcohol instead of healthy coping mechanisms. Whenever she allows herself to think of her sister or her death, she manages the trauma with alcohol first. When Cheryl remembers her past, she remembers using art as a healing method. Cheryl often remembers trying to perfect her drawing of her sister as a wolf to represent her strength. However, due to Cheryl’s internalization of the death of her sister, she is unable to reconnect with her art and

instead becomes a curator of the art exhibit in north Winnipeg. By attempting to stay close to the art, while acknowledging an inability to partake without pain, Cheryl is admitting her own failed hybridity. After the trial is closed and Cheryl takes the family up to Joe's cabin for a sweat, Cheryl comments to Paul that she is going to give up alcohol. This sacrifice is an attempt for Cheryl to reconnect with a healthier aspect of her life; Cheryl is attempting to rebuild her artistic mediation and therapy practices to cope with her traumas in a healthier way rather than repressing them.

After sharing with her family, "Cheryl's hands soften" while driving home (350). This is a reversal of the hardening portrayed throughout. Paul hardens herself to deal with the assault of her young daughter. Lou hardens herself to deal with the infidelity of her partners and her feelings of failure as a spouse. Emily hardens herself to deal with her assault and refuses to allow herself to share her pain and heal. Phoenix hardens herself to push away Clayton and Elsie to protect herself from being hurt by others. By having Paul pledge to stop feeling helpless, Vermette takes Paul away from her hardened exterior and allows her to start to heal. The presentation of Cheryl as softening allows the shift from the pursuit of a rugged exterior to fend off any outsiders and moves towards an open interaction and a pursuit of change and betterment of the women. In the end, Phoenix is caught by officer Tommy and most likely will serve jail time. Phoenix will be alone with her baby as she wanted. Paul connects with her sister Lou emotionally in the backseat of the car, and will do everything she can to bring Emily back to emotional stability rather than the place of dissociation to which she has fled. By shifting the direction from the past to the future, Vermette shifts the focus from past traumas and into a healing future and a reconnection to the healthy aspects of the past. And lastly, Cheryl ends the novel by thinking about drawing again, imagining drawing her mother as an eagle and says: "[y]es, something entirely new" (349).

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