Writing the Anishnabe City: Urban Aesthetics in Joseph Boyden's *Through Black Spruce* (2008).

In a recent study of urban Canada, J. Rick Ponting suggests 'although the Constitution recognizes "the existing Aboriginal and treaty rights" of Canadian Aboriginal (Indian, Métis, and Inuit) people, the situation of urban Aboriginals makes it difficult for them to enjoy those rights in practice'.[1] Gesturing towards the 'lack of a land base' in the city, Ponting goes on to underscore the marginalised position of urban Aboriginals. This situation is also reflected in urban Canadian fiction, with relatively few narratives voicing urban Native lives. Only recently, with an increase in Canadian fiction set in the city, has there been a noticeable increase in references to the lives of urban Aboriginals.[2] Taken from a wider study on contemporary literary narratives which represent Toronto, this paper will look at the depiction of the city in Joseph Boyden's *Through Black Spruce* (2008) paying close attention to the style and detail used to articulate Native lives in urban Canada.

Norbert H. Platz is one of many critics who suggest that the idea of the city 'has been given short shrift in Canadian literary criticism'.[3] More recently, in the preface to the edited collection *Downtown Canada* (2005), Douglas Ivison and Justin E. Edwards have reiterated this, stating: 'Canada is an urban country, yet this fact has often been elided from our public discourse, our national mythologies, and critical discussions about

[1] J. Rick Ponting, 'Urban Aboriginal People', in *Urban Canada: Sociological Perspectives*, ed. by Harry H. Hiller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 138-67, (p. 139).
[2] In recent years there have been many Canadian plays which focus on the lives of urban Aboriginals, most notably in the work of Drew Hayden Taylor and Daniel David Moses.
[3] Norbert H. Platz, 'Imaging the City in Confederation Poetry', in *Difference and Community: Canadian and European Cultural Perspectives*, ed. by Peter Easingwood, Konrad Gross and Lynette Hunter (Amsterdam & Atlanta, GA: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 199-212, (p. 199).

Canadian literature and culture'.[4] This lack of critical discussion surrounding the urban in Canadian literature presents a challenge when approaching literary texts which engage deeply with the urban such as Joseph Boyden's *Through Black Spruce*.

Canadian literary theory has, however, been highly engaged with issues of place and space before. In the 1970s, what came to be known as 'thematic criticism', exemplified by Margaret Atwood's *Survival* (1972) and DG Jones's *Butterfly on Rock* (1970), looked at the spatial context of fiction. Atwood marks out her approach to this in *Survival*, suggesting that 'the tendency in Canada, at least in high school and university teaching, has been to emphasize the personal and the universal but to skip the national or cultural'.[5] Taking the national and cultural as forms of fiction's spatial context, Atwood sought to supplement and develop past textual critique by looking at the text for its 'self-knowledge' or mirroring qualities. Frank Davey's 1974 conference paper, and then later essay, 'Surviving the Paraphrase' pointed out some of the flaws in the thematic criticism movement, driving instead for a turn back to the text and away from, as he saw it, 'extra-literary' material.[6] Davey suggested the process of thematic criticism established the very themes it wished to find before tracing them in appropriate examples of Canadian literature. Imre Szeman reiterates these criticisms, suggesting that thematic criticism meant 'the writing produced in the nation must of necessity thematize the conditions of possibility of the nation itself'.[7] Whilst this critical backlash against the broad themes of thematic criticism still seems warranted, there is much to be gained from trying to

[4] Justin D. Edwards and Douglas Ivison, *Downtown Canada: Writing Canadian Cities* (Toronto & London: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 6.
[5] Margaret Eleanor Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1996), p. 15.
[6] Frank Davey, 'Surviving the Paraphrase', *Surviving the Paraphrase: Eleven Essays on Canadian Literature* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1983), pp. 1-12, (p. 2).
[7] Imre Szeman, *Zones of Instability: Literature, Postcolonialism, and the Nation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 156.

renegotiate the spatial engagement of thematic criticism and Davey's critique. Although this is largely beyond the scope of the current paper, I will be using some of this Canadian literary engagement with geography in the thesis at large alongside contemporary discussions of what can be termed 'literary geography'. In turn, my understanding of what a critical literary geography should do is taken from David James, whose recent discussion of contemporary British fiction uses a particular methodology: 'to cultivate an aesthetic sensitivity to spatial representation alongside an evaluation of how writers express personal and social histories of place'.[8] In this sense, there is a balance of what Davey might call 'extra-literary' to be seen alongside the strictly textual reading experience.

Atwood's comments on 'Early People' in *Survival* are also instructive when we think of how such nascent Canadian engagement with place and space in literature treated First Nations subjects. Seeing First Nations and Inuit characters within mainly white Canadian writing, Atwood suggests 'Indians and Eskimos have rarely been considered in and for themselves; they are usually made into projections of something in the white Canadian psyche, a fear or a wish'.[9] Arguably it is this value-ascribing projection that Atwood's literary criticism then goes on to follow, avoiding any discussions of agency that Aboriginal subjects within fiction may have. Perhaps this was in part due to the nationalist aims of the thematic school, and there being no place in the Canadian national image at the time for First Nations citizens. After all, as the term suggests, First Nations people are nations – and often without land. This negotiation of nations within nations further complicates the spatial relationship that Aboriginal peoples have with what is

[8] David James, *Contemporary British Fiction and the Artistry of Space* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 5.

[9] Atwood, *Survival*, p. 91.

recognised as Canadian space. With little scholarship devoted to Canadian literary city space, even less has been devoted to contemporary Canadian urban narratives which deal with Native issues. In looking at *Through Black Spruce*, this paper is an attempt to look at the formal and stylistic choices of a contemporary Canadian urban narrative with significant Native representation.

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Joseph Boyden is a Canadian with Irish, Scottish and Métis heritage.[10] *Through Black Spruce* (2008) is his second novel, and the second in a projected trilogy. Whilst Boyden's first novel, *Three Day Road* (2005), was a historical novel based around a Cree World War One sniper called Xavier, *Through Black Spruce* focuses on two descendants of Xavier, his son 'Uncle Will' and his granddaughter Annie, both of whom take turns narrating the novel. Will's story recounts a dark and painful feud set in Moosonee, Northern Ontario. Meanwhile, Annie's tale recounts her search for her sister in the Urban South, taking in Toronto, Montreal and New York. This paper will examine Annie's experience in Toronto, addressed to her Uncle Will, whilst searching for her sister Suzanne.

Boyden's representation of Native figures deploys markers of difference in the language used. The dialogue in *Through Black Spruce* noticeably evokes dialect, with speakers often using the word 'ever' in multiple contexts. On Annie's arrival in Toronto

[10] This much information is relayed through the paratext in *Through Black Spruce*. However, he has been cited elsewhere as claiming no distinct Native or First Nations status. See Noah Richler, *This Is My Country, What's Yours? : A Literary Atlas of Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2006).

with her friend Eva, the girls encounter a group of what Annie calls 'city *Anishnabes*, the city Indians':

> "You *Anishnabe* Women?" old leather-face calls out to us as we walk by. I nod and smile, know to respect my elders. He calls for us to sit with him and talk.
> "Ewww! Ev*er*!" Eva says back to him, her voice going high at the end. So Moosonee.[11]

Not only does this emphasis on spoken inflection resonate difference, but it is pointed out to be a provincial practice. Furthermore, Annie's observation of this as narrator suggests the environmental change that the urban presents, estranging the familiar through some assumed territory of standard, perhaps formal, speech. For the reader the occasionally italicised Indigenous word also creates fractures in the reading community. Within these brief sections one such word might be Anishnabe – a collective name for First Nations groups who share Algonkian language usage – including Cree and Ojibwe. Although reading the text gives the impression of a grouping, the various interchangeable use of Anishnabe, Cree or Ojibwe as identity markers could complicate perceptions.[12]

Renate Eigenbrod suggests that this strategy of deploying Indigenous words in Native literature written in English, creates an 'emphasis on *essential* differences between Indigenous languages and English […] an important point in the political struggle for decolonization'.[13] Eigenbrod even goes further, suggesting that both inserted words and close approximations of vernacular 'situate the readers: for some they carry more than a metonymic meaning by creating a close, personal link with the text'.[14] These markers are

[11] Joseph Boyden, *Through Black Spruce* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2009), pp. 52/3. All future references to the novel will be to this edition and will be made parenthetically in the text.
[12] To clarify, traditionally the groups who fall under the term Anishnabe (which translates as Human Being) have inhabited the Great Lakes area of North America, and are therefore split across boundaries of modern day America and Canada. The Anishnabe are a collective of First Nations, Cree and Ojibwe. See Jordan D. Paper, *Native North American Religious Traditions : Dancing for Life* (Westport, Conn. & London: Praeger, 2007), p. 82-83.
[13] Renate Eigenbrod, *Travelling Knowledges: Positioning the Im/Migrant Reader of Aboriginal Literatures in Canada* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2005), p. 144.
[14] Eigenbrod, *Travelling Knowledges*, p. 145.

particularly pertinent given that Boyden's fiction has had a wide circulation. Published in Canada, the US and now the UK, Boyden's work won the richest fiction prize in Canada in 2008, the Scotiabank Giller Prize. Therefore, such challenges to the reader's subject position are highly provocative.[15]

Other strategies in the text consider positional perspectives on Toronto. Before Annie arrives in Toronto her conversations with her Uncle suggest some definite prejudgements. For her Toronto is variously 'a real city, a place far south' (32) and 'a true city' (51), in contrast to Moosonee where the notion of downtown is seen as comical:

> Downtown! Ever funny. A dusty street that runs from the train station to the boat docks, the Northern Store and KFC attached, a chip stand that's only open in summer, the bank, Taska's store and Arctic Arts. About it. (35)

Annie's first impressions of Toronto's downtown are distinct from this experience and seemingly highly mediated by television:

> It's just like on TV, Uncle, massive buildings and police sirens screaming and people everywhere. All the people. […] You see people on TV walking downtown like there's some order to it, like they even know where they're going. But the reality? People bump and shove and smell like perfume or body odour and so many look like they don't want to be there. The weirdest thing to me is how most of them never look you in the eye. (52)

Even so, her perceptions of anonymous city-dwellers sound markedly similar to the early twentieth-century comments made by Georg Simmel in his classic essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' where he coolly noted that '[t]he mental attitude of the people of the metropolis to one another may be designated formally as one of reserve'.[16] Just as the absence of a crowd was comedic in Moosonee, the presence of one is also discomforting – illustrating that neither locale is uncomplicatedly comfortable.

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[15] This practice may be fairly well known within circles who set out to read and discuss Native literature written in English, but it may well be alien to those who pick up a mass market, award-winning title like *Through Black Spruce*.

[16] Georg Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', in *Cultural Sociology*, ed. by Lyn Spillman (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), pp. 28-38, (p. 32).

Annie has barely been in Toronto a few days when she encounters the 'city *Anishnabes*' in a notable description:

> Eva and I wander in cold spring rain and grey afternoons, past dreary buildings and budding trees with blackened bark. Even the squirrels are black, and I see my first city *Anishnabes*, the city Indians. They congregate by Queen and Bathurst, sitting or pacing slowly, begging change with blackened fingers. (52)

Pushed alongside the natural imagery of blackened trees and black squirrels, the city Indians are also blackened, presumably from the continual use of city streets. The implication here seems to be that Native lives struggle to exist in the city. Furthermore, the specific location at the intersection of Queen and Bathurst is where the same group are found again later simply 'sitting' and 'watching' (53). This corner in Toronto houses a meeting place for socially-isolated adults (St. Christopher House). From this recurring sighting, and other observed spots of congregation Annie begins to deduce a certain pattern of areas where Native people congregate:

> What I'm amazed by is that the Indian community in this monster city is as tight as our own up north. They all know of each other, and where to meet: a stone friendship centre on Spadina, or else on the corner of Queen and Bathurst. I'm sure there are other places as well, but I haven't found them yet. (67)

This cognitive mapping of the city begins to take shape through Annie's walks across the city. Annie's continued presence in the city, after her friend Eva leaves, leads to further internal responses with specific areas. In one notable passage, Annie appears to be losing anchor on the city. In a curiously distanced reference to official names Annie comments: 'Near the place called Queen's Park, I see a group of Indians sitting on the grass' (69). This description of 'the place called Queen's Park' starts to peel us away from the initial infatuation with precise street names and align us with a personal and disruptive geography. Not only does the park carry the inscription of being a royal possession, it is also the Provincial seat of government and so Annie's description begins to invoke the

contemporary political situation of First Nations land claims. The city is effectively on Native land, as is noted by the Old Man who suggests that Native begging is 'cheap rent for good land' (72).[17] Nevertheless this disconnection from the urban surround develops into a mnemonic trigger for Annie:

> I think one of them is Painted Tongue, but when I get close enough, I see that he is much older and missing teeth. I keep walking. Once when I was thirteen or fourteen, I got separated from you while we were moose hunting near Otter Rapids. I remember the fear of it. Lost. I thought I'd be wandering in the cold woods forever and never see you or my mother and sister again. I thought then that I would die. This is what I feel like now. I'm lost. (69)

The lack of recognition in Annie's surroundings parallels the fear of being lost in the woods – for some a total shift in viewing a highly planned and cultivated park.

The disjunction of place and practice continues later, when Annie meets the first group of city Indians again under the Gardiner expressway, a motorway which cuts across the city. Taking in the scene, Annie describes a mixture of Native themed practises and homelessness: 'Scrap plywood and boards lay about. A small blue tarp teepee sits in the darkness near a pillar. Old Man sits on a cushion on the ground. He's barefoot, and his gnarled feet are nasty' (71). The scene also resonates with the memory of a temporary "tent-city" of homeless people who used to live on private land in this part of Toronto before private security forced them to leave.[18] Further disruption occurs in music that accompanies the gathering:

> Old Man begins humming a tune, something I recognize. At first, by the rhythm, I think this is an old powwow song, but then I hear it. "I Will Always Love You" by Whitney Houston. (71)

Shortly after this, Annie realises they are cooking a goose. The practice of cooking under a motorway overpass seems to transform the surround into a camp and provides the first sense of comfort:

[17] Claims to this effect were made in 2006, see Bob Aaron, "Toronto Subject to Native Land Claim," *Toronto Star*, 10 June 2006.
[18] See Shaughnessy Bishop-Stall, *Down to This: Squalor and Splendour in a Big-City Shantytown* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2004).

> I can smell something over the stink of piss and desperation, something that actually smells good. It reminds me of home. I look around and see smoke coming out from the top of the blue tarp teepee. "You're cooking a goose, aren't you?" I ask, "*Sagabun* style." The old man smiles. (73)

Once again, whilst Annie feels most at home, the insertion of Indigenous language separates the subject position of the reader. Sagabun appears to be an Algonquin word which can mean 'ground nuts' or 'where the ancestors dined'.[19] Without this knowledge, the overlay of a particular Native style of cooking seems to further subvert the harsh concrete overpass and hint at the ways in which the city appears altered to the Native inhabitants. However, with this knowledge, the meal becomes a ritual of ancestral communion. Through these small gatherings in public space and alternative practices, Boyden's writing seems to affirm Dee Horne's suggestion that 'First Nations writers can subvert settler society by playing in slippages – cultural cracks in-between settler and First Nations societies'.[20]

Annie's walk back to her hotel is interrupted by her being violently attacked by a mugger and being called a 'wagon-burner' (76). In the event, the brutal attack is cut short by the arrival of the mute Native, Painted Tongue. Shortly after this event, as Annie is being nursed back to health under the overpass, the Old Man reveals an odd duplicity:

> "Painted Tongue is just his street handle," Old Man explains to me. "His real name is Gordon" (91).

In stark contrast to these specific 'city Indian' practices and community re-mappings of the city, Annie finds that 'Montreal looks a lot like Toronto, a mix of shiny new buildings with old stone buildings squeezed in. And both places look like New York City if only

[19] Evan T. Pritchard, *Native New Yorkers: The Legacy of the Algonquin People of New York* (San Francisco: Council Oak Books, 2002), p. 288.

[20] Dee Alyson Horne, 'Settler Culture under Reconstruction', in *Diverse Landscapes: Re-Reading Place across Cultures in Contemporary Canadian Writing; Selected Proceedings of the Inter-National Regions Conference*, ed. by Karin E. Beeler and Dee Alyson Horne (Prince George, BC: UNBC Press, 1996), pp. 79-98. It is, of course, worth reiterating that technically Boyden is not First Nations himself, being of Métis ancestry, but nevertheless, in voicing First Nations lives and taking on the subject position of Aboriginal people in Canada the invoking of Horne's ideas stands.

there were five times the size and lived in by that many more people' (93). Arguably it is the lack of developed Native communities in these later urban experiences, where Annie is instead drawn into the fashion world that mark out the novel's other urban encounters as less perceptive in their literary space.

Although most of the analysis here has focused on a small section of the novel, interestingly it was the same piece chosen for pre-publication preview in *Macleans* magazine.[21] Perhaps this is down to the unique nature of a 'mainstream' Canadian literature title discussing the place of Native characters in downtown Toronto. It is clear that Horne's idea of slippages can be seen as more literal than metaphorical in the kinds of textual and cultural spaces that Indigenous figures inhabit in the city. In *Through Black Spruce* Boyden deploys interesting textual strategies to articulate this elusive production of Anishnabe cityspace.

[21] Joseph Boyden, '*Through Black Spruce* - an Excerpt from the Novel', *Macleans*, 2008. See <http://www.macleans.ca/culture/media/article.jsp?content=20080828_125951_35976>

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