

“Catherine Tekakwitha, who are you?” – The Indigenous Female Body in the Colonial and Post-Colonial Imagination of Leonard Cohen’s *Beautiful Losers*

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ABSTRACT

In 2012, the Mohawk saint Catherine Tekakwitha was finally canonized by the Catholic church. She has been the subject of many accounts and narratives –both historical and fictional–and figures as the main subject of Leonard Cohen’s 1966 novel *Beautiful Losers*. While having been lauded for its post-modernist and presumably postcolonialism stance on Tekakwitha’s figure, Cohen’s novel remains controversial in its depiction and appropriation of Indigenous womanhood. *Beautiful Losers* relies heavily on missionaries’ accounts of Tekakwitha and is entrenched in the male protagonist’s sexual claim and fixation on her character. Given the significant status of women in Indigenous communities, I argue that Cohen’s novel not only participates in an ongoing violation of the Indigenous female body but also denies the integrity of Indigenous family structures and their social as well as narrative authority. It hinders, rather than encourages, a shift in narrative authority pertaining to Canada’s colonial heritage. While Cohen’s text remains a necessary testament to the shortcomings and failures of history and its criticism, what is required in forthcoming scholarship and narratives dealing with Tekakwitha and figures similar to her is a narration originating in Indigenous communities. An emergence of such narratives requires a definite reckoning with Canada’s violent history of mistreating Indigenous womanhood that continues to this day.

Keywords

Leonard Cohen; Catherine Tekakwitha; *Beautiful Losers* (novel); Indigenous studies; post-colonialism; post-modernism; Canadian literature.

Introduction

In his 1966 novel *Beautiful Losers*, the Canadian author Leonard Cohen joins the ranks of writers exploring the short life of the Mohawk saint Catherine Tekakwitha. Tekakwitha (called Kateri before her baptism) is the first Indigenous saint and was canonized as recently as 2012 after a long process of petition (Hogue 26). After an illness had left her scarred and half-blind, she came into contact with Catholic missionaries who were allowed to live in close proximity to the Native communities. Her conversion to Catholicism and subsequent actions performed in the name of spiritual enlightenment left her physical state severely weakened and ultimately caused her death at age 24.

Tekakwitha's life and fate have inspired both veneration and scholarly interest: texts dealing with her person range from the original witness accounts written by the Jesuits Claude Chauchetière and P. Cholenec, categorized as hagiographies, to critical approaches on her life and conversion, formulated by later theologians and historians. Tekakwitha's initial historical presence is thus marked by her encounter with Catholicism and immersed in the colonial imagination and rhetoric prevalent in 17th century French Canada. Her figure emerges first as a colonial subject, secondly, as an Indigenous woman, and lastly, as a revered saint. Hence, all of the Native women depicted in Cohen's novel are subjected to projections made by missionaries, a process of Othering, religious conversion and/or fetishism. Thus, they cannot speak of a narrative authority of their own and can only achieve partial ownership of their own fate through death.

All of these criticisms help inform Tekakwitha's role in the colonial imagination and remain the focus of scholarly interest that has evolved at the hands of historians such as Nancy Shoemaker and Allan Greer (cf. Shoemaker 15). Tekakwitha's rendering by Leonard Cohen, specifically, remains a controversial topic in both academic and popular literature. While articles such as Hogue's "A Saint of Their Own: Native Petitions Supporting the Canonization of Kateria Tekakwitha, 1884-1885," in part based on her doctoral project, have exposed the involvement of Native voices in the process of Tekakwitha's canonization; more recent criticism re-considers Cohen's engagement with colonial texts and representations of Indigenous women in the context of contemporary social

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movements such as #MeToo and the increasingly topical issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Girls and Women (MMIGW).¹

Besides this, representations of Tekakwitha that lie beyond history-writing have varied. While early imitations framed her Christian self-image as the core of her character in an attempt to justify the missionaries' practice, her Indigenous identity has become the focus of post-colonial studies that aim to re-formulate Tekakwitha beyond a strictly Catholic and colonial imagination (Luber 129). On the surface, Cohen's novel appears to continue this very approach. However, as Native writer Thomas King has emphasized in his writings on Native literature, what is required in Indigenous studies is a perspective that leans towards a decidedly anti-colonialist criticism. King formulates the desired approach to Native literature as "associational" (King 185). With this approach, an anti-colonial reading of Tekakwitha's history and corporeality specifically would attempt to locate her expression of womanhood within the Mohawk and Algonquin traditions. And yet, Cohen's novel presents the narrators I. and F. (merging into IF in critical writings on the novel) as explorers of the female figure of Catherine Tekakwitha in their quest for their own spiritual and sexual growth and release.² What Cohen misses, in his attempt to "rescue" Tekakwitha from the Jesuits, is the necessity of allowing her and the other Indigenous women featured in his novel to express themselves and their own corporeality—beyond a colonialist, Christian or Eurocentric perspective and ideology.

The stance that *Beautiful Losers* appears to take has been described as "subversive" in its disruption of sexual norms (Lesk 56). I would argue that that very disruption is simply a continuation of the male- and Euro-centric gaze on Indigenous women in North America. Equally, the novel at times claims to critique history's colonial record which has obscured, obliterated and defamed less privileged groups who have been historically neglected and oppressed. While this criticism informs the novel's post-modern view on the transformation of history and does indeed expose the repressive and oppressive paradigms of (colonial) history-writing, the novel is not immune to that very accusation. Just as the narrators appear complicit in the rendering of their female subject

1. See more recent popular articles by Simon Lewsen ("How Do We Come to Terms with Leonard Cohen's Legacy in the #Metoo Era?" *Sharp Magazine*, November 6, 2018) and Myra Bloom ("The Darker Side of Leonard Cohen." *The Walrus*. April 9, 2018) as well as the homepage of the social movement in Canada: <https://mmiwg-ffada.ca/>. Last Accessed 19 March 2022.

2. See Frank Davey. "Beautiful Losers: Leonard Cohen's Postcolonial Novel." *Essays on Canadian Writing* 69 (January 1999): 12-23 and Linda Hutcheon. "Caveat Lector: The Early Postmodernism of Leonard Cohen." *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English Canadian Fiction*, ed. Linda Hutcheon. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1988. 26-44.

as the racialized Other, they perpetuate a decidedly colonialist perspective on the history of Catherine Tekakwitha and her symbolic ancestors in today's Canada in the form of sexual projection and fantasies (Lesk 64). Ultimately, the difficulty lies in expressing Tekakwitha's story apart from her Catholic and colonial narrative. The *Jesuit Relations*, which comprises the only statements written during her lifetime, are fraught with the imperialist ideologies of the Jesuit missionaries and the endeavour to justify the Christian mission in the New World (cf. Holmes 90). Cohen's overt focus on these texts ultimately reveals a state in which the novel criticizes the partiality of imperialist historical writing at the same time that it perpetuates that very phenomenon.

This paper will first focus on the historical accounts mentioned in the novel pertaining to the records of Catherine Tekakwitha's life. *Beautiful Losers*, in its rendition of its main Mohawk female character, relies on accounts written by Jesuit missionaries who claim historical accuracy based on their own personal experience as eyewitnesses. In line with its decidedly Catholic origin, the first chapters will delineate the presentation of these accounts in terms of their religious, as well as imperialist, context and examine the ways in which the novel responds to them. Subsequently, the presumably post-colonial stance of Cohen's narrators will be further questioned in the last chapters, with an added focus on Tekakwitha's corporeality as introduced in the preceding chapters, after having been appropriated to entertain male heterosexuality in Cohen's novel. Given the significant status of women in Indigenous communities, I argue that Cohen's novel not only participates in an ongoing violation of the Indigenous female body but also denies the integrity of Indigenous family structures and social as well as narrative authority. It hinders, rather than encourages, a shift in narrative authority pertaining to Canada's colonial heritage. While Cohen's text remains a necessary testament to the shortcomings and failures of history and its criticism, what is required in forthcoming scholarship and narratives dealing with Tekakwitha and figures similar to her is a narration originating in Indigenous communities. Finally, it would require a definite reckoning with Canada's violent history of mistreating Indigenous womanhood that continues to this day.

The Colonial Gaze of the Indigenous Woman

When tracing the colonial gaze towards Native women, one must consider their position within the Algonquin and Mohawk tribes as opposed to 17th century European ideas of ideal womanhood and its role within the community. As such, Algonquin women are valued as harvesters and provide essential goods and services to the community—and are respected in an appropriate

manner.³ Shoemaker remarks that the arrival of the Europeans and their subsequent encounter with the Natives of the St. Lawrence region brought "these differing conceptions of womanhood" to light and would at times lead to conflict (Shoemaker 15). One such difference lies in the French patriarchal system that historically opposes the Huron and Iroquois tradition of reckoning "descent matrilineally," a tradition that further solidifies women's influence in the latter's culture (Shoemaker 15). Any encounters between these mind-sets would then be coloured by the attempt to "realign the status of First Nations women" to that of European patriarchy (Shoemaker 15).

The highly valued status of women within Iroquois and Huron society becomes apparent in the distribution of their responsibilities for the community (Cohen 45). Their roles appear at binary ends but the nature of womanhood in Iroquois culture is not solely bound to reproductive or domestic duties. Both accounts of First Nations' practices by the Jesuits are products of colonial perspectives, most acutely seen in Cohen's reproduction of Tekakwitha's history in his novel *Beautiful Losers*. His re-telling responds directly to first-hand accounts written by French Jesuits which often vilify the Native population, among them the report that "Le P. Jogues fell under the 'hatchet of the barbarian'" and I.'s pithy response that "the Church loves such details" (Cohen 15). In this, Cohen's narrators cite and contextualize the historical texts in an attempt at criticism through dry iteration, while completely foregoing their own complicity in the colonial framework established by the Jesuits and non-Native sources surrounding Tekakwitha. What is missing in Cohen's historiography of Tekakwitha, essentially, is the inclusion of specifically Native participation and presence within her story. This issue has been considered in part by Hogue and Holmes who each opt for different historical venues in which Tekakwitha has been re-discovered in the name of Native identity. Both critics formulate the Native saint as a positive inspiration and figure of identification and thereby establish a perspective in which Tekakwitha can exist and be partially understood beyond the imperialist paradigms in which Cohen chooses to constrict her. The following article aims to expose the colonial rhetoric of both the historical sources Cohen chose as a basis for *Beautiful Losers* as they represent Native womanhood from a decidedly Eurocentric perspective, and its echoes

3. Many documentaries about the violence enacted towards Indigenous women consciously give Native families the opportunity to speak of the roles of women in their respective communities (see Nick Printup, *Our Sisters in Spirit*, Canada 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdzM6krfaKY&t=572s). Through this medium and form of narrative, they are allowed and asked to express their grief, trauma and daily struggles with discrimination (see Gwenlaouen Le Gouil *Killing the Indian in the Child*, France 2021).

within I.'s and F.'s own appropriation of the imperialist position with regards to the Native community. This reveals the disproportionate narrative dynamic and authority of all of the texts involved in Cohen's novel, including his own.

"Naturellement chrétienne"—The Savage Saint⁴

Just as the characterization and inclusion of Catherine Tekakwitha in the accounts of the Jesuits transpires on the grounds of her sainthood, Cohen frames her exclusively in the context of her spiritual enlightenment. It is therefore necessary to note that most writings dealing with her person revolve around the gradual Christianization of Tekakwitha. Accordingly, Catholic rhetoric of sanctified and virginal womanhood dominates the accounts; focusing on a vilification of Native tradition, the Jesuits' endeavour to spread Christianity through imperialist measures (Shoemaker 17). Tekakwitha's first contact with the French Jesuit missionaries transpired in the early 1670s, before her eventual baptism in 1676 (Luber 126).

When dealing with the act of religious assimilation and conversion, Cohen's narrator I. poses as the judge of the Church's history of oppression and religious re-enforcement. In this antagonistic position towards religious institutions, he accuses "the Church of killing Indians...of refusing to let Edith go down on me properly" (Cohen 47). While his stance is decidedly anti-Catholic, his position towards both Edith and Catherine, two Native women, depends on their sexual availability to him. The previous statement, among many others, marks him as an ambiguously situated voyeur, not entirely unlike that of the 17th century Jesuit missionaries. Furthermore, it denies a form of storytelling situated within and originating from Iroquois communities.

I. positions Catherine Tekakwitha within the view of Christianity as a tradition rooted in Western, patriarchal norms aimed to conquer America (Shoemaker 18). One would thus assume a symbolic binary between Natives and Christians, especially between their respective worldviews and religious philosophies. Luber, however, argues that one should assume "hybrid relations" between the two, as any religious principles formulated by the missionaries would have been interpreted according to the "cultural filters" of the Native tribe (Luber 131). Essentially, one should speak of a process of "adaption and assimilation, as well as appropriation," rather than strict conversion (Luber 131). In his attempt to conceive of religious conversion as an almost positive process of

4. With pride, Le P. Leconte remarks that "Dieu lui avait donné une âme que Tertullien dirait 'naturellement chrétienne'" (qtd. in Cohen 53).

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adaption, Luber here runs the risk of sugar-coating the very real and antagonistic violence exerted on the Native communities. Faced with the threat of near extinction or the compromise of capitulation and assimilation, the Indigenous tribes hardly had a choice in this matter.

Tekakwitha's active and most complete adaption transpired after her relocation to Kahnawake, where she hoped to practise her Christian faith more freely. Shortly after this move, she begins to imitate the lives of Christian virgins, often in the presence of female company (Luber 126). It is this vision of female companionship, formed as an enclave of mutual devotion, which inspires F.'s fantasies in his letter. There, the future saint would build a close friendship with Marie Thérèse, practicing their faith through dedication to Christianity (Shoemaker 20). Despite this intimacy, Tekakwitha's existence is still defined by seclusion and social isolation. The reputation of her holiness, for both I. and F., is based on her chosen solitude. Moving beyond the spiritual connotation and meaning of a secluded emotional and social life, *Beautiful Losers* paints Tekakwitha as firmly uprooted from familial ties, most notably marital ones. This would eventually alienate her from traditional Algonquin womanhood and their value in the community—her figure is thus construed entirely at odds with her Native origin, at once through narrative and corporeal appropriation.

The only resemblance of interpersonal ties is to be found in her relation to Marie Thérèse, who is again framed only in fetishizing terms by F. (Cohen 197). Their conversations are centred solely on the subject of God "and things pertaining to God" (Cohen 197). This initially spiritually minded connection is expanded by F. through a voyeuristic assessment of her body through the eyes of Catherine herself (Cohen 198). Thus, in *Beautiful Losers*, the corporeality of the Indigenous women is intricately linked to their faith. It is crucial to note here that Tekakwitha's sainthood primarily manifests itself through her virginity and the physical abuse of her own body—her means of spiritual elation are thus entirely based on her own corporeality (Shoemaker 21). In the case of Tekakwitha, symbolically representative of Catholic womanhood, the quest for saintliness and earthly holiness must therefore be formulated as a direct attack against the female body. Through burning herself with hot coals, for instance, "she brand[s] herself a slave to Jesus" (Cohen 194). And yet, F. entertains the notion that all of this physical torture and penance in the name of potential sin is undertaken by Tekakwitha "in a poverty of spirit" (Cohen 195). While Luber's argument of assimilation and adoption is perhaps strengthened by Tekakwitha's presumably active choice of self-torture, her true motivation behind this form of flagellation remains unknown.

This focus on corporeality goes well beyond the death of the saint's body and is continued in the accumulation and collection of relics. Shoemaker remarks that it is customary to venerate the saint through relics which range from

any bodily remains of the sanctified person to materials that are believed to have been touched by them (21). I. asks for his own possible saintliness, appearing jealous of his female subject's saintly superiority. In his consideration of her holiness, he ponders if he "should...save [his] fingernails... [and if] matter [is] holy," aware that Tekakwitha's presumed influence is already affecting him (Cohen 6). In his mind, she is not entirely without power or authority. This authority, however, is still limited to his imagination and does not move beyond the confines of his narrative.

The question remains as to what extent she can claim authority within her religious adaption, assimilation and eventual sainthood. Achieving authority would require a manifestation of her faith not only through bodily means but rather through concrete acts and (spiritual) services given to the community so as to avoid a fixation on the corporeal in her religious conversion. In general, women's positions within Catholicism are undermined in their status and authority, given the exclusivity of Catholic priesthood. While sainthood and corresponding spiritual authority has been granted to a number of historical female figures, practices of self-mortification, insistence on virginity and fasting dominate the hagiographies of female saints especially. While this abuse against one's own body has been viewed as an argument for women's self-hatred, historians Rudolph Bell and Caroline Walker Bynum, in their *Holy Anorexia* and *Holy Feast and Holy Famine*, argue that it expresses a form of identity-seeking and "self-assertion" (qtd. in Shoemaker 26). The discipline exerted on their own bodies supposedly represents the only available means of control.

Yet even this assumption of self-assertion or control through bodily means is negated by the narrators of *Beautiful Losers*: any acts performed by Tekakwitha against her own body are viewed through the lens of secondary voyeurs. Even if one were to conceive of her self-abuse as a means of taking back control over her body, it is perpetually framed through the gaze of her historicizing male onlookers. In a striking example, F. likens the image of her body wrapped inside a blanket sewn with thorns to a painting: F. compares this image to "those paintings that bleed.—Like one of those icons that weep" (Cohen 204). Tekakwitha achieves iconic status even when still alive; even on the verge of death, she appears within the spiritual frame imposed by her onlookers. At all times, her figure is aestheticized for the sake of external consumption. This image would thus reject Bell and Bynum's ideas of self-assertion. Furthermore, Tekakwitha's moment of bodily recognition, knowing "for the first time...that she lived in a body, a female body!" coincides with her apprehension over its belonging (Cohen 50). At the same time, she realizes that "it did not belong to her! It was not hers to offer!" (50). While this first appears as an empathetic observance made by I., her self-recognition is quickly formulated in sexual terms. Tekakwitha's flesh is not owned by her, despite her control over it, but is primarily defined

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as "Virgin" (Cohen 51). In the end, she controls the degree and manner of violence acted upon her own body but cannot authorize the manner in which it is viewed, appropriated and aestheticized by others.

Her virginity, in this context, both belongs and does not belong to herself. Paradoxically, she does not own her body but is offered freedom through this knowledge. Her only means of imagined control presents itself through fasting and abstinence (Shoemaker 27). F. and I.'s fantasies surrounding Tekakwitha are thus rooted in her deliberate abstinence from sensual and sexual pleasures. During her fasting, she asks if "our bodies [must] depend on" physical nourishment (Cohen 195-6). F. poses the argument that Edith is also a direct echo of this fasting when he asks I. if he can "remember Edith ever eating?" (Cohen 200). The woman that is to be venerated and worshipped, both by Catholics and apparently male folklorists, is not allowed to seek any pleasure for herself. In short, a holy woman must not consume but only ever be consumed.

In addition to this external appropriation of both her body and sexuality, Tekakwitha is also subjected to the process of racialized Othering by Cohen's narrators. This is most acutely expressed in the image of a wine stain that is spilled by Tekakwitha in the company of the Marquis and other Europeans. She is "frozen with shame" at the sight of this mishap which spreads as far as to stain "a beautiful lady's" (presumably white) hand (Cohen 97, 98). The spreading stain stands both for her Native Otherness in contrast to the white European company and the bloody hue and violence of imperialism (Cohen 98). In this scene, her presence as the Other is heightened through this intrusion and visual dichotomy between the unblemished tablecloth and the colour of the wine. This Othering is further strengthened by the novel's overall (dis)regard of Native women's sexuality and consent—another violation of their bodily autonomy and authority. In the eyes of her rapists, Edith's Indigenous origin is fetishized due to the very fact of her racialization as exotic Other (Cohen 60).⁵

The only two named women in the novel, Tekakwitha and I.'s deceased wife, are both women of Native origins. Edith's tribe, the unidentified "A-," belongs to the "most abjected of North American Native people" (Davey n.p.).⁶ They are inadvertently history's beautiful (or beautified, even beatified) losers. Within

5. The fetishization of Native womanhood remains an ongoing issue not only in literary or historical depictions. It has seeped through and dominates visual representations of tribal communities (cf. Disney's *Pocahontas*, 1995) and ultimately contextualizes and partly explains the criminal acts done against Native American and First Nations women in the US and Canada (cf. MMIGW, *The Red Justice Project*).

6. Possibly identifiable as the Algonquian-speaking tribe, which forms the focus of studies by Eleanor Leacock and Carol Devens, or the Angiers, called Mohawks by the English settlers (cf. Shoemaker 17 and Cohen 13).

the context of religious assimilation, they are the ones to lose their Native spirituality and adopt the practices introduced by the missionaries. The one who presents himself as being highly aware of history's continuation of enforced conversion is F. In his lengthy letter, he aims to expose a cyclical conception of history in which he sees himself as part of the long line of historical victims and losers: "[T]he English did to us what we did to the Indians, and the Americans did to the English what the English did to us" (Cohen 186). In F's eyes, the colonization and partial destruction of Native communities stands equal with other comparatively milder forms of discrimination. This, again, highlights the narrators' ignorance of their own historical status and privileged standing.

Similarly, these assumed victims must suffer the losses of history, as the history-books accumulated and formulated by the Church neglect to record Mohawk dances and other practices (Cohen 47). Within the *grands récits*, Mohawk traditions largely remain silent or, more accurately, are rendered mute. The early narrative written by Cholenec exposes the two-fold perspective of Tekakwitha's life, first as a construction steeped in Jesuit faith, and second as a hagiography (Shoemaker 20). Through her canonization, Tekakwitha changes sides in the conflicts of history and is at once a loser in the colonial conquest and a winner in the context of veneration. Viewed as such, her narrative history gains in complexity and paradoxical quality which mirrors the dimensions of control and authority as outlined above.

"Like a well-raised French girl!" –The History of Tekakwitha⁷

In the historical writings about Tekakwitha by Chauchetière and Cholenec, Tekakwitha figures as an Indigenous representation of the standards of womanhood in the French colonial imagination. Prior to her contact with the mission, she is pictured "grinding, hauling water, gathering firewood, preparing the pelts for trade—all done in a remarkable spirit of willingness" and productivity (Cohen 45). Her qualities are seen through the lens of industrious and selfless womanhood; someone who is willing to undertake tasks for her community. In a similar vein, Tekakwitha's characterization is written from the perspective of French colonialists who encounter, define and name their focus of interest—namely, the Iroquois tribe. What is missing from these accounts—which form the basis of Cohen's novel—is the importance of Native people and traditions in Tekakwitha's life as well as their significant involvement in the process of

7. Chauchetière characterizes her as being "douce, patiente, chaste, et innocente... Sage comme une fille française bien élevée" (Cohen 45).

her canonisation and contemporary veneration (cf. Hogue, Hebblethwaite). Cohen's narrator is aware of this act of ownership, declaring that "naming food is one thing, naming a people is another" (Cohen 6). He is aware of the most resistant aspects of colonial heritage, which is language. Yet the narrators fail to consider the very language spoken by their scholarly fascination.

In his discussion of colonial texts, he questions Tekakwitha's written origins and definition at the hands of Jesuit writers: can she only be reduced to her life as defined by Chauchetière and others? Is she identifiable only through the records written and kept by those writing her history (Cohen 3)? This questioning marks the narrator as a critic of colonial writing but does not necessarily absolve him of partaking in such a writing himself. In this one instance, I. showcases the one-sidedness of Tekakwitha's written story but does not include the possibility of an oral story transmitted through generations. There are instances in which the writing of history is forcefully critiqued: I., for one, notes that "French Canadian schoolbooks do not encourage respect for the Indians" (Cohen 58). The Jesuits of 17th century New France, in the eyes of I., partake of Canada's Native population in order to reinstate and justify their presumably God-given institution. In this, they feel obligated both to "history...[and] Miracle" –exposing the hypocrisy inherent in their attempt to convert: It is justified both in the name of Christianity and the endeavour of colonialism (Cohen 207). This ambiguity becomes most apparent at the moment of Tekakwitha's death, which exposes the Native's lethal contact with the Jesuits. I. is apt at seeing this two-fold mortality, even in the case of assimilation, when "the French [are] murdering their brethren in the forests, but this dying girl would somehow certify the difficult choices they had made" (Cohen 207). The death of Tekakwitha is formulated as the Jesuits' own absolution when they file "by her mat with their burdens" (Cohen 208). Her life, spent in the name of and in devotion to Christ, is now a vessel for the missionaries' confessions.⁸

In his research, I. develops an emotional tie to "the Mohawk Christian mystic," whose figure presents the core of his scholarly interest" (qtd. in Davey n.p.). The scholarly pursuit done by I. naturally revolves less around qualitative research, such as that by Allan Greer, for example, but rather aims to position himself within the history of the Indigenous saint and thereby create less of an objective history about her but rather a projection of his own desires. Beyond his primarily emotional fascination, the narrator mingles his egregious sexual

8. The confessional and redeeming character of the historical texts is especially apparent in the number of chapters dedicated to Tekakwitha's dying and the tone of veneration (cf. Chauchetière 157-179, "Dieu la retire de ce monde" until the concluding "Les Principales Vertus de Catherine Tegakwita Sa Foi").

and erotic fixations with his research. While his discussion of 17th century missions bears criticism of the “oppressive regulation of institutions and systems” within the historical canon and hegemony, I. (and in later chapters, F.) also positions himself as one of the narrative’s authorities (Lesk 57). In this position, they are both possessive of their characters and presume ownership “of all words and meanings” through the very act of writing (Lesk 58). In their treatment of Native women, the use of Aboriginal language is ignored, but instead represented in English (Davey n.p.). Thus, by the very nature of language, any accounts on both Tekakwitha and Edith can only ever exist as a superimposed representation, and not as a version authorized or even formulated by the Native female speaker. Recalling King’s anti-colonial framing of Native literature, a more generous and “associational” account of Tekakwitha would be formulated mostly or entirely by Native people who only then can achieve and reclaim a degree of authority and ownership of her history and their ancestry.

The language Tekakwitha learns to speak in the mission with P. Jacques de Lamberville, as well as that of the accounts written down by her contemporaries, Jesuit Fathers Pierre Cholenec and Claude Chauchetière, is French.⁹ Cohen’s narrators specifically attack the French heritage passed down through these accounts and the policies exposed therein. In a tone of superficial critique, I. pays “homage to the Jesuit” before he lists their moral hypocrisies (Cohen 99). What follows is a long-winded homage to the history of Catholic priests, with their “soiled books” (100). On the surface, the Catholic, and Jesuit narratives are put on trial by the narrator—a narrator who nevertheless relies on them in his own presentation and visualization of the historical figure of Tekakwitha.

In the tradition of hagiography, these narratives look for miracles and are written with a decided focus on Tekakwitha’s chastity and virginity, all bearing traits that justify their inclusion in the list of Catholic female saints (Luber 128). Tekakwitha’s history must therefore always be read as conforming to the established typology of Catholic female sainthood. Among these qualities and traits are her “rejection of forced marriage,” material wealth and a tendency to isolate—all done in the name of faith (Luber 128, my translation). Cohen’s narrators are not the first to question this ideologically charged narrative, of course. As such, their accounts are highlighted in their “paternalistic, Eurocentric and repressive traits” in the novel, yet appear in exuberant number and detail (Luber 143).

9. *Vie de Catherine Tekakwitha, Première Vierge Iroquoise* and *La Vie de la b. Catherine Tegakoüita, dite à présent la Sainte Sauvegesse* are both manuscripts that continuously stress Tekakwitha’s virginal state for their depiction of her as a virtuous and unblemished woman.

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Even then, the presumably rescuing accounts emerging from *Beautiful Losers* are not entirely devoid of these traits, despite the narrators' supposedly lucid understanding of history. Both I. and F. are more aware of history's cyclical nature and its power-distribution in favour of more dominant groups and hegemonies, as seen in their assessment that "history decrees that there are Losers and Winners" (Cohen 119). The protesting crowd which on the preceding page was described as "beautiful" figures as the symbolic continuation of a people dispossessed by history and bereft of national identity (Cohen 118). Thus, the narrators I. and F. position themselves amongst the ranks of history's Losers.

Their relation to history is seen most explicitly in the process of naming and the power imbalance that prevails in it. Language, and naming as an extension and expression of it, remains the primary factor which "bind[s] us to the past" (Cohen 40). In his research, I. attempts to unearth the true and exact meaning of Catherine's name, as the one passed down through history is a necessary relic of colonialism's appropriation of Native names (Cohen 44). This loss of language is further marked by I.'s uses of her various names, one of which is "Kateri...resulting from transpositions of an oral name into a culture that relies on writing" (Siemerling 420). But her name is not the only one subject to misuse or mispronunciation. Even if it transpires on a considerably less consequential level, Tekakwitha mispronounces and stumbles over the names of Jesus and Holy Mary in the last hours of her life. It is emblematic of the colonial narrative's power to subdue and suppress that F. can (imaginatively) pinpoint the only moment of her "talkative" state that would have seen her "ready to undo the world" (Cohen 210). Any possible instance of the Native woman herself appropriating a dominant culture is, therefore, left merely to conjecture, and history denies her a moment of autonomy.

In their characterization within the novel Tekakwitha and other (mostly Native) female characters are hardly distinguishable from one another. As history is perceived as omnipresent and cyclical in nature, characters appear as foils and reliefs, "rather than individual, teleological histories" (Davey n.p.). This forms a striking contrast to Tekakwitha's role amongst contemporary North American Catholics that still venerate her figure and memory. For them, she is listed among a number of Native saints such as Antonio Cuipa, a Native American, and performs a vital role of identification. Today, her figure is venerated by Native American Catholics and her memorable status is kept alive in the area where she lived (cf. Hogue and the *Tekakwitha Conference*, Holmes 89). Here, her history is used as a positive identification that encourages imitation of faith and devoutness (but is still not without ambivalence). This is far from Cohen's narrating I., who presents her religious devotion and spiritually charged acts in terms of its sensationalist attributes, never worthy of imitation or as an exemplary, even empowering, way of living. Ultimately, *Beautiful Losers* chooses to

view Tekakwitha only in relation to sexual projection and fantasy, rather than her far more significant relation to contemporary Indigenous communities.

Within the continuation of representing Tekakwitha solely in relation to her missionary existence, *Beautiful Losers* does not reject the position of a white male narrator imposing a narrative of exploitation onto a Native woman. Even his wife, Edith, does not seem to be exempt from this as she is raped by four Quebecois men as a child (Cohen 57). It is further implied, through the mention of French-Canadian schoolbooks, that it is very much the colonial heritage with-in history-writing that furthers contemporary discrimination and violence against ethnic minorities (Davey n.p.). This is of course most striking and tangible in ongoing conversations surrounding the violence performed against contemporary Indigenous women in Canada and the US, as made evident in the staggering numbers of murder and rape cases of Indigenous women (*The Red Justice Project*, #MMIW on Twitter). This point is exacerbated by the very fact that these issues have not yet been fully addressed and redressed by the Canadian government.

In a similar vein, while the Canadian Catholic mind is being historically vilified, F. still wishes to be in the same position as the colonizing missionaries (Davey n.p.). Envisioned outside of time's limitations, he desires "to be Jesuit in the cities of the Iroquois," as he is not too radically minded to completely forego the past and still wants the "miracles to demonstrate that the past was joyously prophetic" (Cohen 215). Both I. and F. share a desire for the Catholic past to be justified and justifiable in its future potency and influence. Accordingly, I., in his invocation of various alternating muses and authorities, addresses figures of the Catholic tradition: he cries both for "Mother Mary!" and "Saint Kateri!" (Cohen 60, 61). His use of Catholic rhetoric, even at points of sarcasm, legitimizes its overriding presence and influence.

Catherine Tekakwitha as Muse

In its assumed post-modern, and by extension post-colonial stance, the novel aims to transgress categories of race, sexuality, class and nationality (Davey n.p.). Various critics, however, have exposed its pointed misrepresentation as well as the complicity in perpetuating a decidedly male, white perspective of history—even if a post-colonial viewpoint is given (Lesk 57). What is required, ultimately, is an anti-colonial assessment in which the Eurocentric and imperialist position is absent, ideally. As such, the assessment of Tekakwitha in *Beautiful Losers* relies, still, on the representation of her through the eyes of a Eurocentric and male figure. She becomes the narrator's inspiration and muse, his foil and blank slate upon which I. and F. can both project their own personal and historical misgivings, failures, and emotions.

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The novel's central focus can be found in the figure of Tekakwitha. It is I.'s personal address to her which establishes the novel's focal point. From the beginning, the inscrutability of the historical saint is evoked through I.'s question of who she is (Cohen 3). This speaks both to the lack of historical accounts written by her, potentially revealing who she is, and the far more obscuring testimonies created by her Jesuit contemporaries. Cohen's narrator, throughout the novel, adds another layer to this inscrutability, which renders it less historical, but more precisely a fictional creation (Siemerling 419).

The very first page reveals the split between "la fiction" of *Beautiful Losers* and "les faits historiques" which constitute the novel's recurring themes and characters. In these first lines, the novel establishes the reader and writer's mode of communication with its subject matter. It is reverent in style and can be read more as "une parole de vénération à l'égard de Catherine Tekakwitha," much in line with Christian prayer (Cardinal 116). I.'s address has been likened, due to its effective repetitions and litanies, to "une plainte et d'un appel" (Cardinal 116). I would like to extend this stylistic reference to include the presence of the muse as well, thereby positioning Tekakwitha within a decidedly spiritual, but also symbolic and projective discourse. More accurately, the depiction of her as seen in *Beautiful Losers* relies on her status as an iconic symbol of Indigenous womanhood, as it is viewed by I. and F., and projected onto her. In their eyes, her historical identity remains vulnerable enough to be exposed to projection and appropriation as a muse-like figure.

Within this one-sided dialogue, I. directly pleads with Tekakwitha to imbue him with her sainthood and holiness, asking if she is listening to his invocation. In his first lines, I. expects to be transformed through the very act of musing upon her person, asking for her guidance and imagined presence in his imaginative and academic endeavour. The deliberate lack of her own voice, obscured by the omnipresent narrator, defines her character as only ever existing in his reading, which in itself is an act of creation. This is coupled with her profound silence to his questions and pleas—the only reaction from, or instance of recognising I. appears in the form of yet another imagined dialogue, formally marking her voice through italics at the end of Book One (Cohen 137-142). Her sentences are introduced by the recurring expression of her "lovely italics" and followed by conversational phrases that feature her as a naïve character struggling with every-day errands in various stores in modern Quebec (137). I. consciously imagines her as a helpless girl who is overwhelmed by modern structures and remains vulnerable to his authority and power. Irrespective of her position as a colonial subject, this rendition of Tekakwitha as a passive and vulnerable fantasy solidifies her status as a muse in the imagination of the narrators. Tekakwitha-as-muse remains constricted in a problematic literary trope that sees a woman figure as a catalyst to male

creativity and reduces her to an immobile blank slate that is exposed and vulnerable to projection.

The narrating I. partakes of a deliberate blurring of the three named female characters, namely Catherine Tekakwitha, Edith, and Mary Woolnd (Davey n.p.). Through this, the characters appear less defined and individual in their appearance and characterization, merging into what constitutes as I.'s imaginative idea of muse-womanhood. All of these characters remain exclusively defined by I.'s perceived attraction towards them. In his fantasies of desired womanhood, their profane qualities, habits and appearance must at the same time symbolize an attribute beyond the physical experience. Their existence must be explained outside of themselves and can never merely exist on its own—it must be iconic in the most limiting sense of the word; a woman can never just be a woman but must figure as an embodied idea imagined by the male narrator.

I.'s manner of address towards Tekakwitha is crucial when considering the novel's apparent post-colonial position. It reveals his tendency to liken her to an external image rather than to unearth and define her true nature. She is exclusively set against his own memory, identity and vision, to which F. partly contributes. But F., who at various points is also positioned as the addressee, is allowed his very own chapter. As seen in the beginning of his account, his muse-imagining does not see I. in the position of the artist, but as the writing, even loving, scholar who is "courting with research" (Cohen 35). He addresses his lovers (both real and imagined) in terms of discovery and in search of an underlying "truth about Canada" supposedly embodied by his focus of research (Cohen 35). Cohen's novel from 1966 reveals its initial post-colonial components insofar that it recognises the need to unearth a hidden truth about Canadian history that has largely obscured the nature and histories of oppressed groups.

Similar to a female muse and the colonial subject, Tekakwitha is muted by her death, much like Edith's history is solely mediated through the narrator(s). I. here bemoans the inherent fallacy of history-writing as it aims to document a story whose characters are dead (Cohen 96). In addition, the writing of history in general has always been overwhelmingly masculine in nature and has often denied the authority of female narratives by way of omission. The innate inscrutability and subjectivity of history only further recalls the endeavour of Cohen's researcher who sets out to record a true history of Canadian colonialism. The only instance of a deliberate un-muting can exist in form of retrospective and imaginary dialogue with the historical subject. Thus, the last pages of the first part of *Beautiful Losers* are written as a direct address to "Kateri Tekakwitha" who is being called upon by the narrating I. Throughout these pages, she appears in various imaginary scenes that depict potential encounters between her and I. (Cohen 137).

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These pages also constitute what Cardinal has named the “heterogeneity of the (novel’s) discourses,” ranging in genre, style and language (110). In accordance with Bakhtinian terms, the post-modern novel partakes of a conscious “dialogisme et de polyphonie” with history, thereby revealing the plurality of historical voices (Cardinal 111). I. figures as one of these self-aware voices in history and ponders what his own position within it amounts to. One key identification appears in his writing of a chapter on Indigenous tribes, supposedly characterizing himself as non-francophone (Davey n.p.). According to his own self-identification, he takes his stand on the opposite side of the oppressor, actively distancing himself from the colonizing (French and European) powers that be. He may then stand on the side of the colonized in historical terms, and yet, as the following chapter aims to unravel, follow a decidedly colonising style in his treatment of Native womanhood that is germane to their muse-like and sexualized position.

“Do I have any right?” - Sexualizing the Indigenous Woman¹⁰

The position of the narrating I. in Leonard Cohen’s novel is one of decidedly “male (heterosexual) subjectivity” (Lesk 56). As such, his stance is similar to that of the French Jesuit missionaries writing about First Nations people insofar that he seeks to derive meaning from their respective cultures in order to further his own spiritual growth or mission. In this sense, one could speak of the appropriation of a historically disadvantaged group, as the characters of Tekakwitha and Edith are both “racially marked Aboriginal women” and thus racially set apart from the white, male company of IF and therefore victims of imperialism (Davey n.p.). In terms of the respective positions of narrator and subject matter, *Beautiful Losers*, with its narration from the vantage point of a historical oppressor, could be positioned within the category of colonial history as it continues throughout the centuries. Recent conversation in scholarly and popular articles, namely by Linda Hutcheon, Bloom, Lewsen and Greer have foregrounded the voices of Indigenous women and Tekakwitha’s tribal origins and context. Despite such an attempted scholarly shift in narrative authority with regards to Tekakwitha’s story, there is still ample space to rectify the records of history and storytelling. For one, it is still a rarity to find records of Native voices directly responding to the life of Kateri Tekakwitha and male-centred and Eurocentric perspectives such as the one maintained in *Beautiful Losers* remain the norm

10. “I want to know what goes on under that rosy blanket. Do I have any right? I fell in love with a religious picture of you” (Cohen 3).

in depictions of Indigenous characters in popular media (see also *The New World*, US/UK 2005).

What stands out in Cohen's novel, and could partly qualify as a post-colonial reading, is I.'s particular awareness of his position: he knows that, predator-like, he has "come after you, Catherine Tekakwitha" and asks if he has "any right?" (Cohen 3). He has none, essentially. The only right way of "coming after" her would be to allow her community to speak in her name and recognize the ongoing crisis of Indigenous womanhood. More specifically, this passage already exposes his decidedly sexual fixation on her Native, and saintly, femininity. It marks him as a predator and quasi-rapist who desires to know "what goes on under that rosy blanket" (Cohen 3). This very first paragraph unearths his violation of her chosen virginity and exposes his disrespect towards the founding principles of sainthood, namely asexuality or celibacy (Siemerling 422). His romantic and sexual fantasies, from the beginning, are linked to her religious status and thus constitute a violation of her sainthood and personhood (Siemerling 422).

This violation is further explicated in his endeavour to lift her veil and violate her privacy in order to unearth the unseen, unknown and unrecorded (Cohen 99). While he remains aware of his position as "a well-known folklorist" and a self-proclaimed "authority on the A-s," I. is also concerned with F.'s abuse of his anthropological status in order to explore the women sexually (Cohen 4). Here, he reveals the status of the anthropologist as inherently advantageous and as a (self-imposed) authority, marking them as the wielder of power in the records of history.

And yet, he aims to "rescue [Tekakwitha] from the Jesuits" just as my criticism of Cohen's novel aims to expose his equally possessive tendencies (Cohen 5). He stands in opposition to the colonial records yet perpetuates the tradition "of male subjectivity" (Lesk 58). Essentially, he positions himself directly into the narrative whereas an anti-colonial reading would free the character of Tekakwitha from both the Jesuits and the anthropologist. It is precisely this alleged rescue mission, his stance against imperialism, defined as the motivation of I.'s narrative, which needs to be questioned. For one, his treatment of Tekakwitha is tinged with underlying judgement and comparison. He is "proud that C.T. was or is a Mohawk," thus imposing a value system onto his anthropological research which he categorizes in terms of superiority and inferiority (Cohen 14). This system also supposes that her origin would bear any meaning on his own perceived superiority. Tekakwitha's nature and appearance must be judged and measured according to I.'s own sense of self-worth—which exposes a failure of his academic standards.

This judgement transpires in direct connection with her (desired) appearance. I. hopes that she is "very dark," perpetuating the aestheticization and

sexualisation of her imaged body (Cohen 14). He measures her according to his own attraction, asking if she "is... [his] kind of woman?" (45). This is further strengthened by the disfigurement of her facial features as a result of the Plague in 1660. It appears relevant to I. to note that Tekakwitha "is not pretty" (Cohen 23). Even in her suffering, she is always viewed to the degree of her sexual potential.

This trend also explains F.'s uncontrollable stream of sexual fantasies. In order to comprehend their own worldview, he proposes simply to "Fuck a saint... and...get right into her plastic altar" (Cohen 12). This explicit passage reads like a violent, blasphemous rape of the Native body and history. Similarly, he fixates on the sexual repression of the four teenage members of the A-s, thereby foregrounding the phallic nature of his judgement (Lesk 63).

I.'s projections continue in his presentation of the living arrangements of the Iroquois as seen in their long house. As his historical foundation he uses the description by Le P. Edouard Lecompte, who "whet[s] our sexual appetite" when he writes about "la manière dont les familles se groupent...n'est pas pour entraver le libertinage" (Cohen 21). Their habitual livelihood is sexualized to the point of projecting sexual implications onto documents writing about this historical fact. The narrator I.'s historical lens is already imbued with eroticized fixations. In this particular paragraph, this fixation is directly linked to I.'s first meeting with Edith. Her appearance, particularly her hair texture and colour, is highly racialized and exoticized: "Her hair was black, long and smooth, the softness of cotton rather than silk. Her eyes were black, a solid depthless black that gave nothing away" (Cohen 23). Tekakwitha's envisioned ugliness aims to be surpassed by Edith's remembered Native beauty.

In the midst of the novel's historicizing perspective stands the racialized Other, most importantly the Native woman, saint and wife. The language that surrounds depictions of violence or oppression towards this marked Other partakes in decidedly referential terms of colonial style, such as Edith's rapists who "laughed and called her *sauvagesse*" (Cohen 60). Edith's cries are described as "the pure sound of impregnable nature," actively linking the (ravaged) Indigenous female body to its inextricable ties to the natural world (Cohen 61).

Indeed, the most explicit expression of the violation of the two women's femininity and sexuality appears in the form of Edith's rape, originally told by the character herself, but transmitted through the narrator. In his remembrance of the event, I. positions himself in the role of the rapists and, like them, pursues "her little body through the forest," admitting that "it was the thirteen-year-old victim [he] always fucked" (Cohen 57). In this case, his status is decidedly colonial and complicit in the violation and oppression of the bodies of Native women. Strikingly, such an intrusion into the imagined Otherness of the Native woman, at least in the eyes of the rapists, renders her closer to them

and unmakes her foreignness, becoming “indeed, Sister” (Cohen 61). In the context of her relation to I. and F. and as a consequence of her Native origin, she remains vulnerable and exposed to sexual and narrative colonization. Even the story of her own rape is not allowed to be written in her own words but is again appropriated by the narrator. This active silencing is imposed on both main Indigenous characters, heightened at the moment of their early deaths which ultimately transpire as acts of self-violation. Sadly, this literary motif in Cohen is continued in today’s reality in which the Indigenous body and voice is forcefully silenced and appropriated through active violation and suppression. Few and ongoing attempts at reclamation can be found in projects such as *The Red Justice Podcast*. As long as their voices continue to be silenced—both in the literary and real world—Native communities and their history will be told and formulated by the hands of others.

Yet even in their death-state, their bodies and spirits remain “a site of imperialist contentions” (Davey n.p.). While I. and F. vie over the memory of Edith’s sex-life, I. can only formulate the circumstances of Tekakwitha’s death in the terms of Jesuit writing. Even in her death, Tekakwitha remains an object to be judged, measured by the writer’s own preference. This judgement begins in the Jesuits’ historical account, writing about the morning of her death: shortly after her demise, “the face of C.T. had turned white,” thus shedding her perceived foreignness once she is accepted into heaven (Cohen 210). She attains more beauty after her death once her face is relieved of her scars—what Chauchetière recalls as a sign of her devotion that is revealed once her soul had left her body and became more beautiful in death than when still alive (167). At this point, when she “became so beautiful and so white,” the narrator F. concedes to criticism of the Church, actively calling out their reverence of “the White Race” and their love of “pure flags” (Cohen 211). Strikingly, the holy Native female body can only achieve absolute purity in spiritual salvation after death and is then rid of her perceived Otherness due to the whitening of her features. It is her physical beauty and virginity that is explicitly linked to her devotion and saintliness in these historical accounts—a feature which ultimately persists in female saints as well as the fetishization of Indigenous bodies.

The appropriation of Tekakwitha, then, uses her Otherness as a means to dominate and project onto, while the goal of her glorification and hagiography ultimately lies in the purification and eradication of this foreignness and her status as the colonial subject. The novel here legislates the white, “phallic law... [that is] unable to understand the Other’s difference” (Lesk 59). In the same vein, “the (hetero)normative order...is reinscribed and reaffirmed” (Lesk 56). IF’s dialogue with history, and with it Leonard Cohen’s own post-modern participation, is marked by his simultaneous complicity, perpetuation, recognition and criticism of Canada’s colonial heritage. This paradoxical position reveals

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the crux of contemporary post-colonial systems: how can the colonial heritage be rejected and criticized without the risk of its symbolic, ideological and systematic perpetuation?

Conclusion

Leonard Cohen’s novel primarily deals with the pervading presence and influence of selected hagiography in colonial writing and history as a whole—specifically in the context of Catholicism and explorations of womanhood within both the Catholic and colonial framework. While *Beautiful Losers* joins the historical presentation of the chosen character of Catherine Tekakwitha on its own terms, it aims to disrupt its paradigms through criticism and possible subversions of its perspective. An exploration of Jesuit writing on Tekakwitha has revealed a decided focus on the corporeality of the saint and, by extension, the Native female body. This focus is explicitly mirrored in the narrations by both I. and F. who further expand the picture of Tekakwitha to include their sexual fantasies and projections of spiritual growth. The Indigenous female body thus remains the spectacle of both colonial and supposed post-colonial writings, despite the latter’s desired subversion. Paired with the appropriation of the woman’s sexuality (or, arguably, asexuality), the violation of her virginal state and bodily autonomy, both Edith and Catherine remain subject to the male gaze in both their colonial and post-colonial states.

In her holiness, Tekakwitha undergoes the purification of the spirit through self-mutilation and appears to have some semblance of authority, while Edith’s only means of expressing herself is similarly self-destructive—both to deadly ends. Even after their respective deaths, both the colonial and post-colonial narrators I. and F. are free to formulate both Tekakwitha and Edith as holy vessels of their own sexual fantasies and projections.

The trends and rhetoric that were harshly and carefully critiqued and vilified in the writings of the Jesuits and the history of the Church are themselves thus perpetuated. This perhaps exposes IF as an equally oppressive authority on the historical colonial subject, despite their enlightened contemporary status. As long as colonial heritage is merely criticized but not actively subverted and disrupted, its underlying presumptions and judgements of inferiority and superiority, subjugator and subjugated, will remain intact. It is not enough, as Cohen’s novel shows, to merely identify the historical perpetrator. It is still more crucial to extract the remaining traces of that very oppression within the present and identify today’s perpetrators.

This last point is particularly indispensable in the use of Tekakwitha as a means of positive reclamation of Indigenous history and heritage (as has been

documented in part by critics such as Hogue and Holmes). Her iconic status can serve both for the Catholic imagination, or all of Christianity for that matter, and North America's Indigenous population. As such, her figure should be used as inspiration for contemporary spiritual and societal growth, rather than as subject matter serving a perpetuation of the very colonial power-structures she was confronted with during her own lifetime. In 21st century identity politics, historically obscured and marginalized, particularly silenced, voices must gain in volume in order to actively disrupt systematic oppression. Tekakwitha belongs less to the confines of a post-modern literary phenomenon, but rather to her cultural descendants of Native origin keeping her memory alive.

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